Legions of Merton’s readers wax rhapsodic not only about what Merton says but how he says it, as they are privy to his love affair with the English language (how else could one explain the use of words like “hugger-mugger”). But the layreader need be warned. Merton digests multi-volumed dictionaries like other people read novels. In order to read his books, therefore, one must be equipped with at least an unabridged dictionary. Accumulating uninterrupted blocks of time for rereading and thought-mulling is a necessity. And, because he makes so many references to literary figures and their works, along with historians, philosophers, economists and scientists of every stripe, one must also keep at the ready an over-populated biographical dictionary. The truth is that Robert Merton speaks to an audience of his peers. And among that audience he has his detractors as well as his fans.

Detractors question whether his work is too slick and express dismay about his seeming indifference to women’s issues. His fans call him accessible, brilliant, “a Nobel-class thinker.”

Retiring from the classroom in 1979 did not mean that he curtailed his writing or what Simpson calls his “indefatigable pursuit of knowledge.” Now the Foundation Fellow at the Russell Sage Foundation, a New York-based social research institute committed to the improvement of social conditions, he says his quasi-retirement means he is free from the “tyranny of schedules” set by others. Free of publishing deadlines, editing obligations, book-review commitments, he has more time to be with his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Son Robert C. Merton is a mathematical economist at Harvard, daughter Stephanie Tombrello runs a non-profit organization which she founded to promote automobile safety devices for children, and a second daughter, Vanessa Merton, is associate dean at Pace University Law School and limits her practice to pro bono law. “Idealists,” he comments.

Is he an idealist?

Not necessarily. Even though he acts as citizen as well as scientist, and his work has influenced city planning commissions, legislation, public housing, and parole boards, he does not attempt to address these ends directly. He sees himself, instead, as a cultivator and synthesizer of the knowledge which can empower those who put public policy in place.

His “pure” research goes on. The continuing relevancy of his work is not only that he analyzes social problems, but that he explains why those problems exist and thereby stimulates the public debate that helps to break down fallacious beliefs and generalizations.

Despite the vast range in which he orbits, Robert Merton can be whittled down to a basic ethos — that the “enlargement of understanding has significance beyond utility.” He asks rhetorically, even crankily, “In the narrow sense of having a practical function, is art useful? Is music useful? Is literature useful? And if not, should we do away with them? What a narrow, subversive notion of what life is about.

“No, no. For me the meaning of life is the pursuit of fundamental knowledge — wherever it leads.”

A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE IN ACTION

Robert Merton once observed that there is a difference between graduates and alumni. “Alumni,” he said, “are graduates who remember how much they owe to the university from which they were graduated. And they testify to their remembrance of past benefits by their present actions.”

Merton has lived up to his definition of an alumnum by continuing to identify himself with Temple and by acting to advance the University’s development.

In 1956, he returned to Temple to receive an honorary doctor of laws degree. In 1962, he spoke at the forum of the Liberal Arts Alumni Association on “Multiple Discoveries in Science.” From 1964 to ’68, he served as a member of the Board of Trustees. In 1981, he spent two days on campus talking privately with faculty and graduate students and participating in a Temple forum on the complex subject of progress in science. And, in that same year, he was named the first Alumni Fellow by the GAA. He has consistently supported the University financially, and in 1989, in recognition of his accomplishments, immediate GAA past president Leonard Mellman endowed the annual Robert Merton Prize for Temple’s most accomplished graduate majoring in sociology.

The legacy lives on. ◆