

Reviews

In the Dark Before Dawn[;] *New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Lynn R. Szabo. Preface by Kathleen Norris (New York: New Directions, 2005) 253 pages with Index. ISBN 0-8112-1613-6. \$16.95. (Paperback).

This completely reconceived New Directions selection of Thomas Merton's poems will eventually replace the earlier *Selected Poems* (1959, Enlarged Edition 1967) edited with an introduction by Mark Van Doren. The editor of these newly "selected" poems, Lynn R. Szabo, has done a very successful job by choosing and arranging Merton's poems thematically, and while to some degree chronologically, above all aesthetically. To do such a job well is to write a variety of literary criticism. To do such a job with complete approbation from all the different Merton circles of readers would be impossible. It should therefore be understood that this review is designed not to imagine what other kinds of "selected" Merton poetry books might have been fashioned. This book is valuable.

In the Dark Before Dawn will inevitably be compared to the preceding *Selected Poems* yet that is not the purpose of this analysis. Szabo has sought a new way to present Merton for a 21st century audience. Thus, we do not have here just an historical document (an anthology) but a new reading too.

The "Preface" by Kathleen Norris is graceful. It is attentive to the listening of Benedict and to the work of the monk-artist who must learn to listen "with the ear of the heart (RB Prologue; 1)" (p. xv). Hospitality, Plenitude, Worship, yet an attitude of no nonsense are the elements of Merton which Norris isolates and comments upon.

Szabo's "Introduction" places Merton among his poetic contemporaries. One of her criteria for choosing these particular poems is revealed in her argument that in Merton's best poetry there is always a

refusal to dichotomize the secular and the sacred.... His identity became grounded in his vocation, engendering the language by which to represent his experience beyond the realm of empiricism and metaphysics and birthing a sophisticated

and penetrating wisdom arising from the analogous world of the poet and mystic (p. xxvii).

To choose poems which best demonstrate this accomplishment is a tall order, and, of course, another editor would have chosen differently. Some examples clearly had to be omitted. Arranged thematically, these few selections, about 125, in relation to the bulk of the 1,046 pages in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* are less than a quarter of what Merton has written. (And we might also remember sometimes his journal entries or parts of his essays also scan like poems.)

Szabo has arranged the book in this order: 1) Geography's landscapes; 2) Poems from the Monastery; 3) Poems of the Sacred; 4) Songs of Contemplation; 5) History's Voices; 6) Engaging the World; 7) On Being Human; 8) Other Languages. Each of these groupings gives us a different variety of Merton, as a seeker. Each of the themes which the editor has chosen for this collection could, I am sure, have been expanded by the addition of other poems, yet we realize that publishing constraints of space made it necessary to limit the number of pages in this book.

The title *In the Dark Before Dawn* establishes a tone present throughout the book. The book's title suggests how in maturity Merton came to honor the earliest hours of the day when clarity, in and with God, seemed to be nearest. Szabo's title is meant to reflect "Merton's love of the predawn hours, after the night vigils monastic office, in which he found the silent darkness to be the ground of his creative energies..." (p. xxxiii).

Each section gives a feeling, usually chronologically early and late, for Merton's loves. In part one, "Geography's Landscapes," we find Merton's speaker rejoicing and lamenting. Poems from "Figures for An Apocalypse" (p. 9) and "Darjeeling" (p. 19) are included. The "Monastery" section selects from the first volume (1944) and includes the late ironic, "A Practical Program for Monks," which did not become available until 1977.

To put together a new and selected volume of Thomas Merton poems had been necessary for decades and this new selection is welcome. It is a totally different kind of book than the earlier "Selected" which has been in existence for approximately 40 years. In this arrangement as devised by Lynn Szabo, we have a new concept which gives us a more comprehensive view of the multi-faceted Merton. Instead of a chronological record, we have a mosaic produced by its overlapping and interrelated themes.

What other themes might have been included? All of the following: 1) Vocation; 2) Simplicity; 3) Saints; 4) Sinners; 5) Mercy; 6) Anger. My point is simply that Szabo had a tremendous editing job to do and lots of material was excluded. To me, a surprising yet understandable thing does occur in the selections included in the section called "On Being Human." Most of those poems (13 of 19) are from the heretofore more or less hidden *Eighteen Poems*. Such a large selection from these *Eighteen*, sometimes called "Love Poems," is justifiable because while they are late and interesting poems which allude to romance, they are more than poems about being human. Rather, it seems to me these poems are very much about the Mystical Body of Christ as well as human love. Many others in the *Complete* (or indeed within other sections of this *New*) could have been introduced in this section. Perhaps the first poem in the book "Geography's Landscapes," "The Night Train" could have been utilized in this section. Certainly other categories or selections might well have been made. Much was available after Merton's earlier *Selected Poems* appeared. In fact, if we count pages from *Cables to the Ace*, *Lograire* and the other materials in the *Collected Poems*, the editor had perhaps 500 pages from which to choose. We can, therefore, well imagine "selected" early and "selected" late volumes of Merton such as *New Directions* once did for William Carlos Williams. One more peculiarity is the limited batch of translations—ten poems only.

Also it appears in the desire to include "new" poems, a few of those chosen are not so polished. "Songs of Experience" (echoing William Blake) jars, yet it clearly demonstrates Szabo's point about sacred and secular. It seems a "found" observation, not yet made into a finished poem—closer to a journal entry. It is interesting but does not seem finished. On the other hand, the poem "[untitled]" at p. 73 "Fire, breath..." is excellent. Both of these selections stand as proof of Szabo's conviction that for Merton the holy and ordinary are here merged.

This thematic arrangement or the grouping of these selections is an excellent choice. The editor has accomplished several things by this imposition of limitations. Clearly we are allowed to see how earlier themes remained fundamental to Merton's development and as well we are able to trace these themes into maturity. *In the Dark Before Dawn* is a success. It makes us want to find our quiet times and places so we can make poetry of contemplation.

Szabo's editing does Merton a service. She treats his poetry as if it were part of the American canon. It should be. From these

careful selections we see a "vastness in God's mercy" and an ambitiousness in Merton the poet which is as every bit as valuable as the contributions of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Denise Levertov or Charles Olson. Organizers of American literature courses and anthologies would do well to digest what Szabo has given us in her thoughtful editorial arrangement. Then, more readers would come to Merton.

Victor A. Kramer

MONTALDO, Jonathan, editor. *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. xv + 381. ISBN 0-06-075472-9 \$19.95 (hardcover).

The HarperCollins publishing company is apparently getting its money's worth from its exclusive rights to Thomas Merton's complete journals. After the publication of the seven volumes of journal (1995-1998), it has issued the one-volume compilation *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals* (1999), followed by *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings* (2001), which matched journal excerpts with examples of Merton's line drawings, and now *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals*. The principal guiding spirit behind all the recent volumes is Jonathan Montaldo, former director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and past president of the International Thomas Merton Society, who probably knows the Merton journals better than any other person alive. After editing *Entering the Silence*, the second volume of the complete journals, he co-edited *The Intimate Merton* with Brother Patrick Hart and was sole editor of *Dialogues with Silence* and now of *A Year with Thomas Merton*. His long familiarity with the material has produced in this most recent volume a wonderful collection of excerpts for daily reading and reflection.

The title *A Year with Thomas Merton* is appropriate not only because it includes a selection for each day (except for February 29!), but because the nature of the journal material lends itself so naturally to the temporal pattern of a daybook. Unlike previous compilations of this type, Thomas P. McDonnell's *Blaze of Recognition: Through the Year with Thomas Merton* (1983) and Naomi Burton Stone's *Keeping a Spiritual Journal with Thomas Merton* (1987), which draw on a broad range of Merton's published writing (and of course appeared before the complete journals were available),