

abilities, though. Generally, he takes a “I-am-not-worthy” attitude toward Merton’s poetic output.

But, in fairness to Smock, his book is a mediation, not a critique. It is filled with insights to ponder. Merton’s forays into Islam and his attempts to achieve a “radical ecumenism” (69); his disparagement of the materialism of the United States; his ceaseless humility as he became an important world figure—all are worthy of our consideration as we head into a century that looks to be marked by hardship, a century where superficial spirituality and mindless consumerism will not provide us with the answers we need. *Pax Intransigentibus* is the kind of book that tries to provide some answers we do need and, perhaps, are too afraid to confront. It is well worth reading.

Kevin Griffith

PORTER, J.S. *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* (Ottawa, Canada: Novalis, 2008), PP. 215. ISBN 978-2-89646-008-3. \$24.95.

This isn’t the book for those who like linear and analytical studies. It is more likely the sort of book for those who like personal and impressionistic accounts of writers who reach deep into the impressionist’s psyche and won’t let go. Dionysian rather than Apollonian if you like. On the one hand you are never quite sure, in spite of the table of contents, where you will be taken next. On the other hand there are fine moments of illumination as you journey through the book. The journey is Merton’s in the first instance, but it is also Porter’s as he retrospectively charts his own course from a family background in Ulster Protestantism to the universally human, spiritual consciousness that in Merton, the Roman Catholic monk, comes to engage him. The labels of course slip away as both Porter and Merton are depicted moving towards an inclusive but certainly not a reductive spirituality.

Here are a few examples of the gold in the ore. Writing about Merton’s handwriting, Porter observes that the early script is “tight,” reflective of a “linear, moralistic, serious,” monk and writer. Later, in the case of the *Asian Journal*, for example, the writing becomes a “hen-scratch,” reflective of a man who had become “looser, more tolerant, funnier, less sure of himself.” Another point of illumination occurs when Porter brings out the precise influence of Hannah Arendt on Merton’s writing about Eichmann. There is a spray of light too when Porter notices the unexpected and

yet convincing similarities in the journal keeping of Merton and Anais Nin, whom Merton happened to be reading on his Asian journey in 1968. Or sometimes Porter, who inveterately remembers and praises those who have influenced his thinking, recalls the penetrating thoughts of others as in his recalling of John Howard Griffin's observation about Merton's love affair in 1966 that to be "moderate in matters of love is simply not to love."

In some ways this is a study of self-imposed exorcism in which Porter attempts, unsuccessfully one may conclude, to free himself at last from Merton's haunting of him. And here is where the insights into Merton offered by Porter correspond to the personal narrative in which Porter shadowboxes with his ubiquitous Trappist demon. It is in fact Merton's gifts as a writer that enable this possession to occur, especially Merton's openness about himself that so contagiously opens the selves of those who read him. This was the same openness that led Merton to identify almost completely with those he was reading. Merton speaks to the reader, Porter suggests, as if "he were you or you were he or you and he were one." Furthermore, Porter adds, one is stuck by the apparent ease with which Merton as a letter writer reveals himself to strangers." To Boris Pasternak, he reveals his fantasy life; to a Sufi scholar, his working day. . . . and to a girl in grade six, some of his deepest convictions concerning monastic life."

While Porter explores the many Mertons—the monk, poet, social critic, letter writer, and journal keeper—in an effort to show the unifying presence underlying these various kinds of writing, his focus is on Merton's approach to the reader. For Porter, Merton is a writer whose presence and intimacy cause those at conferences to tell each other stories about their first encounters with him. Porter does not go in for stylistic or rhetorical analysis and, indeed, one would like to see a closer reading of Merton's prose and poetry than one finds in the book although he does pay some attention to a few of Merton's major symbols. Porter is more concerned, though, and rightly so perhaps, with Merton's voice. It is of course voice that we hear in important artists, whether literary, musical or otherwise. Who can mistake Mozart's voice, for example, for say, that of Brahms? Through voice, Porter suggests, when you meet Merton on the page, you feel as if you have met him "in the flesh." In an effort to develop his discussion of voice in writing, Porter pursues the topic of tone. Here, although the discussion is somewhat tenuous, Porter shows an unerring sense of what allows us

to recognize the voice of a particular writer. Part of Merton's voice and tone is his way, Porter points out, of always presenting himself as a beginner, someone "who comes to life as if he were a stranger to it and is beginning to find his way in it for the first time."

Another of Porter's themes, although one not articulated as explicitly as one perhaps might have liked, is Merton's existentialism, which Porter cites in concrete instances rather than in abstract commentary. Merton's way of dealing with questions or problems, Porter maintains, is to "live them." In this way Merton came to an awareness of the value of Latin American writing through his contact with Latin American poets. Similarly, in his quest to understand Buddhism he made contact with those like D.T. Suzuki, who lived Buddhism.

As I have intimated, while this book is about Merton, it is also about Porter, and this is especially evident in the last chapter which is entitled "Hello, Goodbye, Hello Again." Perhaps surprising, given Merton's hold on Porter's imagination, are the trailing thoughts about Merton. Porter confesses to being "dumbfounded" by his loss of interest in the prominent biographical issues about Merton. These include the romance with M., the fathering of an illegitimate child in the U.K. prior to his Columbia and Gethsemani years, and the so-called epiphanies that occurred at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville and at Polonnarawa in what was then Ceylon. I couldn't agree more. Although these matters have preoccupied critics and biographers for some time, somehow they seem secondary at last, rather like those "inessential houses" on Long Island mentioned by the narrator at the ending of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*. What remains behind is the presence of Merton *essentially* to be encountered in the narratives, poems, essays, journals, and letters in which he lives as vividly as ever. Although the experiences that went into the making of Merton shaped the man, they do not equal him.

Ross Labrie

PALMER, Parker J., *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980, 2008), pp. 175. ISBN 9780787996963 (cloth). \$18.95.

Reviewing a book can sometimes lead to reviewing one's own life. This may be most apt to happen, I suppose, when the book under review has been crafted by its author from an intense review of