



THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON
BY JOHN LEAX



The number of Thomas Merton's prose works and the general interest in his social commentary and spiritual writings has frequently resulted in a too casual approach to his poetry. The publication of THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON, however, demonstrates the extent of his faithfulness to his poetic vocation.

During his nearly thirty year poetic career, Merton published eight volumes of poetry. Two more volumes, the book-length THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOGRAIRE (1969) and the Anvil Press edition of EARLY POEMS: 1940-1942 (1971), were published posthumously. These ten collections reprinted in chronological order make up the main body of the COLLECTED POEMS. Read consecutively, they allow the reader to trace Merton's changes as he progressed from the relative traditionalism of THIRTY POEMS through the anti-worldly FIGURES FOR AN APOCALYPSE, the anti-poetry of CABLES TO THE ACE, and the "urbane structuralism" of THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOGRAIRE.

Exactly what motivated Merton to make such dramatic changes in his poetry will probably never be known. But the eight appendices following the main text make clear that Merton was deliberately experimenting and selecting from these experiments the poems he found suited to his purposes.

Appendix I, SENSATION TIME AT THE HOME, contains poems Merton had published between 1963 and 1967 and had gathered for publication before he left for Asia. It includes anti-poems, "Plessy vs. Ferguson: Theme and Variation;" meditations, "With the World in my Blood Stream;" satires, "First Lesson about Man;" and prose poems, "Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper." In short it shows that Merton in his last years had abandoned none of his earlier modes but rather had added new techniques and ways of looking at the world to them.

The poems collected in Appendix II support this view. Though their composition dates range from 1939 to 1968, most date from the late sixties and have not been previously published. Like those in SENSATION TIME AT THE HOME, the techniques used in their composition varied. There are, however, a greater number of traditional religious meditations than one would expect. That Merton continued to write such poems but did not collect them suggests he was consciously adopting a stance toward his audience when he published. The stance he most consistently chose shows him as interested in speaking prophetically to his age through his poetry as through his prose. His attitude may be reflected in a note he made while reading William Carlos Williams in 1967, "on the poet devolves the most vital function of society: to recreate it -- the collective world-- in times of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part, and so set the world working or dancing or murdering each other again, as it may be."

Other appendixes include concrete poems, nearly 200 pages of translations, and a selection of humorous verse.

Fat, bulky, 1030 pages long, THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON are with us. So is the task of confronting them, interpreting them, and thereby participating in the recreation of the world.