

NO NEED FOR VERBS

Review of

Ron Seitz

MONKS POND, OLD HERMIT, HAI!
A HAIKU HOMAGE TO THOMAS MERTON
 Monterey, Kentucky: Larkspur Press, 1988
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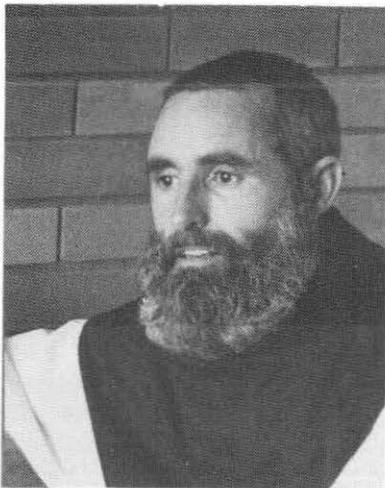
Reviewed by **Paul Quenon**, O.C.S.O.

For all his interest in Japanese culture, one wonders why Thomas Merton never attempted to write haiku. Perhaps his imagination was too rich, as Mark Van Doren once complained, too rich "for the thin blood outside those walls." In the logic of that remark, one might expect a layperson to write readily in the spare lines of haiku. Poetry often serves as a compliment to life, as a way of realizing what cannot be realized in everyday life.

If that logic be true, Ron Seitz is definitely unascetical, for his poems certainly are, at least in this trim and handsome volume. He give us no other excuse for writing haiku than that he thinks that way — something a monk might envy, living as he sometimes does with a mind buzzing with thoughts and images.

What we have here, then, is not an imitation of haiku, which possibly cannot be "imitated" in a language other than Japanese, but the form in which one person expresses experience. Seitz disclaims writing more than a very few haiku, if at all. Be that as it may, every verse conforms to the syllabic numbering of haiku, and more significantly, one finds many of the aesthetic values of haiku: the fragility of life in the midst of nature's immensity, the evocation through ordinary details of a whole unspoken context of nature:

on winter dead grass
 the bird's skinny little legs
 — far off a dog barks



PAUL QUENON

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the exquisite joined with the droll (as it always is)

so quiet the raindrops
 slowly tap ping down through the leaves
 onto his bald head

the insignificant gesture that renders some passing action timeless

waiting for two monks
 to drag a log up the hill
 he removed his hat

This sense of the ephemeral is aided by the spare ink engravings which suggest brushwork but are actually photoengravings from photographs of natural objects taken by the author. In this genre more must be contained in what is left unsaid than in what is said, what is suggested be more present than what is explicit, the fleeting moment bring recognition of perennial rhythms:

raindrops from the tree
 break the puddle in circles —
 the shower over

For an instant we catch our breath and are restored to the unbroken cycles of earth

opening windows
 to a summer night of stars
 listen! cicadas

In such a vast environment human life seems of small significance, and death scarcely bears a name. Yet this is where Seitz stretches his form. As always with Ron Seitz, death becomes thematic, and all the glimpses of the transitory prove to be preparation for the snuffing out of one human lamp. We are carried into a dirge without drumbeat, into absence, silence, loss stripped of lamentation. Things, actions, signs close in on someone not there: “no ‘I’ — just AM, anonymous.” We are left with verses without a verb, feeling something is missing, until we realize there is no need for verbs in a universe flooded by being:

neither bright nor dim
 a light in the low window —
 simply so, his hut.