

A CARAVAN FOR MERTON

Review of

J. S. Porter

*THE THOMAS MERTON POEMS:
A CARAVAN OF POEMS*

Goderich, Ontario, Canada: Moonstone Press, 1988
84 pages / \$8.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

Few if any contemporary literary figures have inspired as much creative activity by others as has Thomas Merton. In addition to the contributions of more than thirty poets collected by Deba Patnaik in *A Merton Concelebration* (1981), further work by J. T. Ledbetter, Joe Pounder, Ron Seitz and others continues to appear, much of it in *The Merton Seasonal*. Among the more recent, longest and most ambitious verse tributes to the monk-poet is *The Thomas Merton Poems* by the Ulster-born Canadian writer J. S. Porter.

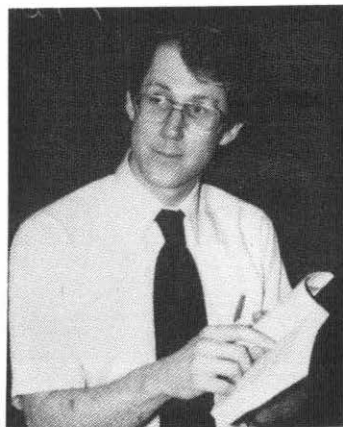
Subtitled *A Caravan of Poems*, Porter's volume is a sequence of 68 poems, in a variety of forms, each occupying a single page, divided almost evenly into three sections, "Body" (21 entries), "Mind" (25), and "Spirit" (22). The overall impact of the book is enhanced by its fine layout, with its variety of typefaces pointing up changes of mood and tempo, and its reproductions of three neoprimitive sculptures (by Wayne Allan) as frontispieces to the three parts and as running heads, with the appropriate figure highlighted and the other two in silhouette.

The author has adopted the daring and risky strategy of making Merton himself the speaker of each of the poems. The blurb on the back cover claims, "this is his voice, reincarnated. . . to speak as he might have spoken today." It isn't; it doesn't. But the collection does provide flashes of insight which are genuine, even if not genuinely Merton, and offers an angle of vision on its subject which is consistently interesting and challenging, if not totally convincing or satisfying.

The difficulties with Porter's "Merton" can be pinpointed quite readily. The fourth entry reads:

Mother:
She recorded everything
When I smiled

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PATRICK F. O'CONNELL

How I laughed
 When I rolled over
 My first tooth
 My first lock of hair
 Maybe my narcissism began with hers. (p. 17)

Aside from the problem of how Ruth Merton's own narcissism could be expressed in her obsessive recording of her son's every move, the concluding line here points to the limitation of perspective present throughout the sequence. The voice impresses us as being indeed more narcissistic, more consistently fixated on self, than Merton ever was, for all his introspection. It's impossible to imagine him saying, after noting his resemblance to Henry Miller and Pablo Picasso, "Lordie, / Maybe once, just once, / people would see Merton and recognize him" (p. 28). What is missing here is the complementary focus on the world, the public, prophetic voice, the concern for a broader "geography" so evident in Merton's own long poems. Porter's Merton says, "I'm at the point where I look through the keyhole of language to make my judgements. If I like the keyhole, I like what I see" (p. 50). This circumscribed vision (with its suggestion of the voyeur) is precisely what we don't find in Merton himself.

Probably the least successful (and most annoying) entries are attempts to extrapolate from Merton's own opinions to those Porter makes for him. For example, on a page headed, "Naomi, a booklist for you" (p. 46), Max Picard's *The World of Silence*, a book Merton valued highly (see *Thoughts in Solitude*) is included along with some not even written during Merton's lifetime, like I. B. Singer's *Shosha* (listed as one of "Two good books") and Hannah Tillich's *From Time to Time* ("One mad book"). The reader is left wondering if Merton himself really considered Fowles' *The Collector* and Moravia's *The Lie* to be "evil books" (!) and thought "The Gods" by Dennis Lee was "One great poem" — or if Porter is foisting his own antipathies and enthusiasms on Merton.

More serious, and more disturbing, are Porter's attempts to flesh out, or flush out, Merton's reticences, as in the prose poem on Merton's putative child, which begins: "My born son is my unborn son. I know neither his name nor his whereabouts. Yet I christen him Aaron, and have him living in Paris" (P. 25). Besides bordering, at least, on the presumptuous, the arbitrariness of Porter speculating on Merton speculating draws attention to the artifice of the whole collection, which distances us from Merton in a way that is not simply aesthetic. The conclusion of this entry ("I want Aaron to know my voice and know that in orphaning him I too have become an orphan so that he and I might be one. A monk is an orphan. A monk is always seeking the Father through the abandoned Son"), besides its dubious psychobiography, indicates Porter is no match for Merton as a monastic theologian either. A similar judgment could be made about the three poems supposedly addressed to "S," the student nurse, particularly the one beginning "I am he / You are she / It's crush or be crushed," possibly the weakest poem in the volume.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Thomas Merton Poems* does have considerable strengths, and reveals Porter to be a genuine poet. He has a gift for aphorism, and many of the poems conclude with a trenchant epigrammatic twist. For instance, following a list of Merton's effects, a \$10 Timex watch plus two pair of glasses and various religious items, valued "nil," comes the comment, "The next time I die I'll make sure I'm not wearing a watch" (p. 66). One entry consists entirely of epigrams, such as: "On Judgement Day there will be two questions: how much death have you made living? how much life have you made dead?" (p. 47).

Porter also has a feel for the basic, the elemental, which runs throughout the book and is suggestive of Merton. Wood and rock, fire and water recur as images binding the sequence together, as in the beautiful poem on stones, which concludes:

Stones keep the universe from liquefaction.

Fire is fire
but stone is rock and boulder,
granite and shale.
Only the trees have more names. (p. 75)

This focus culminates in one of the most successful poems, near the book's end:

At Polonnaruwa
sleeping buddhas
look so restful,
sleeping to awake
from water to land
— moving on to air.

Touch the elements
each and all
water, earth and air
the last journey —
fire. (p. 80)

Here the suggestive link between Merton's Sri Lankan vision and his death is all the more effective for being expressed in terms of the elements, already familiar from earlier poems. Likewise successful is the closing poem of the "Body" section:

All sculptures are amphibious
stone and something else
wood and something else

All men are amphibious
flesh and something else
bone and something else

What is the something else? (p. 34)

Amphibiousness, another of Porter's master images, continues to run beneath the surface of the next section, emerging again near the beginning (p. 63: in reference to God!) and toward the end (p. 74) of the "Spirit" section:

Of monks and men:
Amphibious creatures of double form . . .
. . . creatures of the between
Between enclosure and transcendence . . .

The answer to the question "What is the something else?" is, of course, found in the titles as in the contents of the two succeeding sections, "Mind" and "Spirit," but in particular for Porter — and here again he is close to Merton — the answer is especially "the word / Word," which continues to be the main subject, in its varied forms and manifestations, throughout the rest of the volume. Here the sequence comes alive, whether the tone be satiric ("Smooth is a key word / vodka, athletes, announcers / must be smooth" [p. 40]), or humorous ("Only a loving God could tolerate such a loquacious son!" [p. 54]), or contemplative:

words
words
words
end

in
the
Word,
or
end
Nowhere
in
Nothing (p. 480)

In these images and themes the reader is able to recognize a convergence of Porter's vision with that of Merton, and also to appreciate the author's architectonic skill. For finally *The Thomas Merton Poems* must be evaluated not simply as a collection of disparate poems but as an ordered sequence, with its tripartite organization skillfully arranged and developed. If some of the notes along the way have rung somewhat hollow, the full arrangement possesses a definite harmony, and certainly the concluding entry has "the true legendary sound":

My Lord is a hidden Lord
yet in the dark
I'll look for Him
in the silence
I'll speak to Him
in my lostness
I'll find Him (p. 83)

HOURS: GETHSEMANI

(for Robert Lax)

by **Arthur W. Biddle**

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Sext and none will not be sung this summer
during the reconstruction of our guesthouse.
Guestmaster