

Peacemaking and Poetics

Review of

Pax Intransigentibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton

By Frederick Smock

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Reviewed by **Lynn R. Szabo**

In his jacket cover endorsement of this beautifully bound small volume of conversational reflections on Thomas Merton's poetry, Paul Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center, writes that Frederick Smock "explores, as only a fellow poet can, the major themes of Thomas Merton's thought . . . as Merton expressed them throughout the course of his life in his poetry." To this, I would add that Smock also proposes his own aesthetics as the contours by which we might read Merton's poetry. In doing so, Smock offers readers a gift in that he takes up the questions which interrogate the *raison d'être* of poetry-making. Smock explains in his short preface that his discussions take "*the shape of an extended inquiry into [Merton's] methods and ideas, chiefly, his ideas about peace*" (11). Smock's choice of the words inscribed above the gate to the Abbey of Gethsemani as his title, is a fine play on words invoking "peace to all who enter" for his readers, as well.

A number of Smock's meditations begin with his own memories and experiences of life as a Kentuckian, having spent his early life in Louisville. One such vignette describes one of his first literary purchases, the *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (1959) – thus his "first and abiding sense of Merton is as a poet" (19). Subsequently, Smock rightly claims that the studies of Merton's prose overwhelmingly outnumber those about his poetry, thereby giving reason for this undertaking.

In the twenty-eight short sections comprising this collection, Smock traces lines of thought that offer his insightful personal and eclectic musings about Merton's poems and poetics, although at times somewhat oversimplifying Merton's hard-won theological, political, economic, and artistic commitments. The bibliography concluding this volume offers a short reading list by which to begin to address this limitation.

From his musings, Smock offers a plenitude of determinations about the form and content of Merton's poetics, one of which draws on ancient Chinese wisdom telling us that "an event . . . was not complete until a poem had been written about it" (56) – that we write poetry in order to make things real. In his adoption of Zen practices as poetic instincts, Merton's poetry thus engaged this form of reality-making. Smock cites from Merton's translation of Chuang Tzu in relation to this notion:

The man in whom Tao
Acts without impediment
Harms no other being
By his actions
Yet he does not know himself
To be "kind," to be "gentle." (57)

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Smock's own extensive reading of American and British poetry forms a rich literacy by which he chooses to navigate Merton's poems. He attempts to establish writerly connections between Merton and his literary mentors and peers. We are reminded of the most obvious and well-documented associations: Rumi, William Blake, T. S. Eliot, Albert Camus, Czeslaw Milosz, Boris Pasternak, Robert Lax, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg and the many writers who contributed to the short-lived literary journal, *Monks Pond*, that Merton edited from the abbey in the last year of his life. In this short list, one sees not only Merton's immense resources as a reader and writer, but Smock's as well. (In reading *Pax Intransigentibus*, I was struck by the riches Smock's students might enjoy while taking his classes at Bellarmine University in Louisville, where he is poet in residence. To this was added my own pleasure at having heard him read from his work at the "Jazz Factory" in Louisville in October, 2007.)

As is often the manner of literary conversations, Smock makes assertions, following them with citations, observations, declarations, and tentative conclusions. In this conversational mode, one does not expect academic argumentation and discourse. Rather, the reader is exposed to a series of thoughts and ideas about the relationship between the writer's contexts, life experience, writings, and encounters. In this way, Smock approaches the central aspects of Merton's thought and writing, particularly emphasizing his poems and his devotion to peacemaking. Each short treatment of these begins with an arguable statement by which to engage the reader, such as: "Merton came to his God through poetry" (32); "Writers and artists inhabit a kind of imaginary society" (74); "Merton's last book . . . , *The Geography of Lograire*, references the pine forests around his hermitage" (77). Although captivating, these observations are not followed by rigorous inquiry but rather spawn further spontaneous statements drawn from Merton's writings and Smock's own observations about Merton's existence as a religious, a writer, a human being. Such an approach can be both appealing and frustrating for a reader intent on a meatier understanding of Merton's poetics.

Calling on poet Charles Simic as his apologist, Smock claims that "one cannot approach the achievement of poetry with the language of criticism" (77). On the basis of such a claim, Smock is given the liberty to make assessments of Merton's poetry that honor both its meaning and its mystery. Smock furthers this claim by citing Merton's definition of meaning not as "something we impose but a mystery which we can discover" (58). The "dark clarity" of apophatic wisdom so fundamental to Merton's poetics is explained as a method that proposes the imagination as a third way to God – reason and theology being the other two. As with Rumi, Merton's poetry "navigates the middle path between silence and speech" (67), reflecting the bridging of dichotomies so often the mandate that Merton took upon himself as a monk and a writer.

Smock's own experience of the Abbey of Gethsemani and Merton's hermitage grounds a number of his reflections on Merton's poetry. He wisely paints them as settings for his further explorations rather than offering readers the usual self-indulgent exposés of private revelations from their Mertonian encounters. What many of us have experienced in our visits to these sites of Merton's most profound and fecund mystical poetics is well-stated by Smock's literary and spiritual sensibilities. The exquisite silence of these sacred places renders to Smock his understanding that in his poetry, Merton "sought a literary equivalent to ecstatic spiritual mysticism" (78), "an intensity of language to match an intensity of feeling" (79). His poetic thus give genesis to a "burst[ing] of the bonds of liturgy" (77) in *The Geography of Lograire*; the proclamation of a "new ecumenism" in his poems of inter-religious dialogue; the prospects for peace in his *Cables to the Ace*. Along with Smock, the reader wants to have the words to say that "in his poetry, [Merton] achieved a kind of literary grace, balancing his artistic and devotional sensibilities" (35) and in so doing, calls us to the human hope of making peace in our own worlds.