

Explications of Explorations

Review of

Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices

By Malgorzata Poks

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Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

Some years ago I was startled to notice a bookstore in the center of Madrid that dealt exclusively in books about philosophy and theology. I was further startled to see given pride of place in the window a book by Thomas Merton, a Spanish translation, as I seem to recall, of *The Ascent to Truth*. I had known that these translations were out there, of course, but somehow seeing the book gave me a sense of how present Merton has become in the cultures of countries outside of North America. While acknowledging the considerable translation of Merton into other languages, including Spanish and Portuguese, Malgorzata Poks concentrates her study on Merton's own translations of the work of Latin American poets with whom he had come into contact in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically Ernesto Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Alfonso Cortés, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Nicanor Parra, and Cesar Vallejo.

Poks structures her study of Merton and Latin American poets by relating how Merton came to know the work of these particular poets and she then very capably explicates the poems that Merton had translated. In the midst of this explication Poks attempts to show the overlapping interests of Merton and these Latin American poets. She begins with a detailed overview of Merton's positive attitude towards Latin American poetry and culture and his equally noticeable distancing of himself from North American culture and poetry. The author's encompassing approach leads her to include distinct threads of Merton's thinking at relevant junctures in her analysis, as in her reference to Merton's 1953 article on "Poetry, Symbolism and Typology," which she cites in order to throw light on Ernesto Cardenal's use of cosmic symbolism in his poetic sequence *Gethsemani, Ky*. While this strategy makes the text meander somewhat at times, it is also attractively open-ended in its ability to gather up precious materials as the book goes along. Overall, this study is densely detailed and yet lucid, complex and yet driven by boldly visualized central themes.

Merton's attraction to Latin-American culture can be traced back to his momentous visit to Cuba as a young man in 1940, and his attraction to Spanish culture can be seen in his early love of Lorca's poetry. While he increasingly regretted what he considered the academic formalism of North American poetry, he turned with relief to Latin-American writing for what he felt was its greater spiritual and ontological awareness. Moreover, in the very styles of Latin American poets, Merton perceived the thematic importance of unity, a subject close to his own heart. Unity, Poks points out, he could see in the unexpected but otherwise rationally convincing poetic analogies created by Jorge Carrera Andrade or by the surrealist poems of Alfonso Cortés. Merton valued the ability of Latin American poets like

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Cortés to bring the subconscious within the orbit of the whole mind and to point to the presence of other, more ontological yearnings within the depths of the mind.

What I particularly like about this book is its tendency to draw the reader into thoughtful excursions about its central claims and particular points. Never have I felt so far from mere summary. Thus, although I do not think that Poks proceeds so synoptically, I find myself thinking, after digesting her analysis and argument, about the underlying primitivism in Merton's thought. Set within such a matrix was Merton's intense interest in the indigenous peoples of the Americas with their apparent unselfconsciousness, itself a kind of ontological innocence. Such innocence Poks locates as well in Merton's celebration of childhood in the poem "Grace's House" and in the figure of Clara in Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poetry. Like Rousseau, Merton exhibits primitivism in his anger at the effects of a vanity-fed socialization driven by what Rousseau calls *amour propre*, an inevitable fall from innocence in human history in both Merton's and Rousseau's view of things. What is needed, then, at regular intervals is a re-visiting by human beings of their primal, creaturely reality, a reality that in Merton, if not in Rousseau, is shot through with a saving shaft of divine wisdom. It is Merton's transcendentalism, in contrast to Rousseau's immanence, that distinguishes his particular primitivism and that gives it its particular hue of long-term hope.

Another occasion, one of many, in which I found myself set afoot, as it were, by Poks' book was in connection with her discussion of the effect of Ernesto Cardenal on Merton, particularly in moving him in the late 1950s away from a cloistered spirituality towards an engagement with the world's problems and anxieties. Poks traces the development of Merton's thinking about issues like war and peace through the 1960s and concludes that, finally, it might be questioned as to whether or not passive resistance or nonviolent protest did not amount to a "collaboration in destruction." Merton lived, though, in the no-man's land between passivity as an invitation to tyranny and his indelible belief that violence, even if undertaken for morally justifiable reasons, would taint and possibly eventually destroy us. He addressed this dilemma in practice in the late 1960s in suspending his unqualified support for the Berrigans over the draft-card burning incident in which some innocent government employees were mildly subjected to rough handling. Even in the late 1960s, then, Merton, who like the Berrigans saw the Vietnam War as a tyranny imposed upon the world by the U.S., was not yet ready to give up on nonviolence.

One of the most interesting parts of this study is an appendix in which, in a contrarian mood, as it were, Poks attempts to estimate the significance of North American poets on Merton. Poks is well versed in the history of modern American poetry and appears to feel that, Merton's reservations about twentieth-century American poetry notwithstanding, he was late in coming to appreciate what North American poets had to offer. I couldn't agree more. Even if Merton was right in feeling, finally, that T. S. Eliot's poetry, in spite of that poet's eloquent interest in religion, was overly rational and a trifle dry, nevertheless there were other American poets who should have attracted him in a more particular way than they did. William Carlos Williams, for example, had in the 1920s expressed the sort of reservations about Eliot that Merton registered in the 1960s. Poks might have been helpful here in distinguishing high modernism (Eliot and Pound) from low modernism, which included people like Williams. As a low modernist, as it were, Williams was experimental and yet not academically stuffy as Eliot and Pound were. With Williams' strong interest in the luminous innocence of the human and natural world and with his strong interest in social justice, he in many ways was a figure who would have grown in Merton's estimation even beyond the respect with which Merton held him in the late 1960s. The same might be said of e. e. cummings, another low modernist whose experimentalism with language, outrage at institutionalism, and Whitmanesque passion for a hidden and unrecognized America would have

appealed to Merton. Had he lived longer, Merton would no doubt have dipped deeper into the work of Williams and Cummings and modified his views about North American poets – and yes, there's the pity of it.