

Review of
Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things

By J. S. Porter

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

This is a book that creates and evokes contexts. J. S. Porter offers us what he calls a “series of window frames” (162) through which to observe Thomas Merton, primarily in the years 1960-68. Yet each of these frames also allows us to see how deeply Canadian poet and literary scholar Porter knows and respects the whole Merton whom he has “hung around with for the last thirty years” (162). Chapter titles may appear a bit quixotic – “Tone Meister,” “Public Intellectual,” “Always a Synthesizer,” “Hello, Goodbye, Hello Again” – yet Porter’s comprehensive knowledge validates our own quirky perceptions of Merton, affirms our preoccupation with this Trappist monk, and stretches our understanding of the spiritual journey. This little book, charmingly printed by Novalis, is not a sustained argument, but rather a series of forays into various aspects of Merton’s career that intrigue the author. The reader is privy to Porter’s perceptions, ruminations, insights, and praise for this writer-monk. And while Porter’s conversational tone may appear to be meandering, it is grounded in serious and long study of Merton’s writing and thought. Instead of probing one hypothesis from multiple angles, Porter casts his net wide and deep. Insights, supported by references to thinkers from a variety of disciplines, are academic-quality without the academic voice. I would recommend reading the final chapter first and then again in its intended position. “Hello, Goodbye, Hello Again” provides the reader with the *raison d’être* for this accessible little book. Porter intends to give us his personal “memory vision” (Ron Seitz’s phrase, quoted on page 164) of the man he has been reading and responding to for many years and in doing so to position Merton in an historical and literary context meaningful to Porter. Hence the multiple references to other writers and thinkers and his final parallel between Merton and Jack Kerouac, “two good old Catholic boys who went a little ‘Zeny’” (167).

The Preface, for example, juxtaposes Merton and Henri Nouwen, two luminaries on our common spiritual journey. Porter is clearly fascinated by each of these spiritual giants who “chortle their way into our century” (10), paying tribute to both as “catalysts for transformation” (10). “Both live purpose-driven lives, and their purpose is to share their lives with

the world” (13). For both, “writing is a way of loving, of expressing love” (15). This preface might make the reader wonder if the book is about Merton or about Nouwen. But this is Porter’s way of creating contexts. In Chapter I, “Always a Beginner,” Porter offers us a view of Merton as “Zorba monk” through the eyes of various biographers, primarily those of Jim Forest and Ed Rice, interspersed with conversation with his own mother. In Chapter IX, “Journal Keeper,” Porter compares Merton’s personal writing to the journals kept for many years by Anaïs Nin. In Chapter III, “Poet, Reader, Translator,” he explores Merton’s poetic writing against the backdrop of two specific poets: the Nicaraguan Alfonso Cortés, whom Merton translated, and Louis Zukofsky, a contemporary Jewish poet with whom Merton corresponded. Porter offers us a favorable critique of Merton’s translating ability that we readily accept because by now we have readily accepted Porter’s sincerity. His comments about Merton’s essay on Zukofsky’s poetry become a virtual tri-alogue of Porter-Merton-Zukofsky: poetic heart speaking to poetic heart and discovering how, as Merton phrased it, “Talk is a form of love” that helps re-create the edenic experience (63-64).

Chapter VI, “Public Intellectual,” is also set within two contexts: Merton’s Columbia University days when he experiences reading as a transformative act, and his three political writings about Adolf Eichmann. This is a somewhat choppy section, however, because of occasional references to Jonathan Swift, Hannah Arendt, Denise Levertov, and Edward Said. Porter’s comparison of Merton to Said, another Columbia intellectual, is a bit of a stretch, except for Said’s pointed definition of an intellectual as a man on the margin (103).

Yet it is the context of Porter’s language that most delights. As a published poet with a finely honed ability to create mind-awakening images, Porter keeps the reader eager to experience new insights into Merton. If, as Porter posits, Merton is a “tone meister” like Whitman, Emerson, and Wendell Berry (33, 71-76), Porter too, is deft at engineering sentences to pique the reader’s spiritual ear: Merton’s *Asian Journal* is akin “to his Zen drawings, a kind of word jazz in which the quick of life is caught in the quick of writing” (154). In Porter’s view, Merton has long since lost “the baby fat of cocksureness” and learned to live with the “hives of desire” and the “gourful of tension” (174). Ed Rice’s biography is seen as a “tapas” of tasty vignettes (29); and Merton, that recognized man of paradox, is at once “shy exhibitionist and conservative revolutionary” (43). Porter’s description of Merton’s correspondence with Bob Lax – “physically a male Modigliani” (171) – is a free-wheeling game of “[t]wo boys on the playground of the page toss[ing] Frisbees back and forth, each one trying to go a little higher or shine a little brighter. The letters tickle and tease” (85). For sheer delight in language, the chapter on Merton as “Letter Writer” captures the magic of sound, as well as offering myriad ideas for further reading.

The overarching context for this personal tribute to Merton is Porter’s perception of Merton’s hidden wholeness and the author’s recognition that he himself is on a parallel spiritual journey. Porter is a seasoned writer reflecting on the grip Merton has on his emotions and thinking. That being said, cozy up to J. S. Porter, acknowledge the presence of his mother,

Henri Nouwen, Louis Zukofsky, Edward Said, Anaïs Nin, and all the others as context for knowing Merton more deeply. Although Porter claims to be finished with Merton studies, I suspect he has at least one more Merton poem in him. I invite him to pick up his pencil.