
J. S. Porter
THE THOMAS MERTON POEMS:
A Caravan of Poems

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

Ron Seitz
MONKS POND, OLD HERMIT, HAI!:
A Haiku Homage to Thomas Merton

Monterey, Kentucky: Larkspur Press, 1988
 92 pages — \$15.00 paperback / \$65.00 special

Reviewed by **John Leax**

Though these two works are as unlike as one could imagine, pairing them raises an interesting question. Is it possible successfully to derive literature from literature? These books suggest that it is, but that success may depend on choices made before a writer begins.

Both of these works take the life of Thomas Merton as their subject matter. Porter chooses to build a narrative opening his poems with the line, "I, Thomas Merton." From there he proceeds, in a re-creation of Merton's voice, to meditate on some of the better known incidents in Merton's life and themes in his work. Seitz chooses to shun narrative. He instead assembles a sequence of fifty haiku, fifty moments of insight. While some of them can be placed in direct relation to events in Merton's life, most cannot. All of them, however, are related to the hermit life lived by Merton and can be read as an intuitive commentary on or identification with that life.

Porter's book is obviously ambitious. He seeks to interpret Merton, to make him speak clarities he refused to speak himself. But where Merton's voice was subtle and elusive, the voice Porter gives his Merton is pedestrian. This is nowhere clearer than in the lines recording Merton's vision at Polonnaruwa. Porter writes:

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

touch the elements
 each and all
 water, earth and air
 the last journey —
 fire.

Compare these to Merton's account, quoted by Porter in his introduction:

The silence of the extraordinary faces, the great smiles. Huge and yet subtle . . . I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness . . . jerked clean out of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner cleanness . . . as if exploding from the rocks themselves. . . .

Merton's words have energy, and they have a natural restraint, for Merton knew when he was reaching the discursive limits of his words and accepted them. Finally, Merton's voice, well established in the reader's ear, is too strong for Porter. The illusion that Merton is speaking, necessary to the success of the poems, fails.

Ron Seitz, writing from a closer relationship to Merton, is more aware of the danger in deriving literature from literature. Without sidestepping the debt of his poems to Merton, he evokes the spirit of Merton by choosing a form that is complementary rather than derivative. The tradition of the haiku is older and larger than Merton. Consequently Merton's presence hovering over the work cannot overwhelm it. What is more, Seitz evokes the spirit, not so much of Merton's poems and voice, but of his photographs:

maybe the year's last —
 that snowflake on the dog's ear
 quickly melting now.

Small objects, distant voices of children, clouds, the moon, bells, the cold, the ordinary surroundings of the hermit's life are, in themselves, filled with meaning. They become revelatory when the hermit (and the poet) has eyes to see and words to say. When Merton appears in these poems, he is observed in some small act that opens into significance:

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

Monks Pond, Old Hermit, Hai! is a beautiful book. It is beautiful to read. Slowly. One haiku at a time over many days. It is also, as book lovers have come to expect from Larkspur Press, beautiful to look at and beautiful to touch.

Patrick G. Henry & Donald K. Swearer

FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD:

The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism

Minneapolis: Fortress Press / Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989
 256 pages — \$10.95 paperback

Reviewed by **William H. Slavick**

With the richness of the Christian contemplative tradition still so largely unexplored in our time, the growing interest of Christians in Eastern spiritual experience may suggest, in some quarters anyway, curiosity, in others a departure from Christian prayer life. Concern about the latter occasioned Cardinal Ratzinger's letter in October 1989 on aspects of Christian meditation, reminding Christians of the personal and communitarian nature of Christian prayer — focused on God as revealed in the Scriptures as against impersonal techniques and preoccupation with self, and of the Christian's prayer as participating in the Church at prayer.

Ratzinger's concern about efforts to overcome the distinction between creature and Creator as if the gap is inappropriate and to reduce pure grace to the level of natural psychology suggest that Eastern methods are not always being used "solely as a psychophysical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation" but put the "absolute without images or concepts" of Buddhism "on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ" — or obscure the divinity. The letter identifies the Christian way to Christ as doing His will, not dissolving the personal self in the absolute, so