

“AND CALLED IT MACARONIC”: AN UNPUBLISHED EARLY POEM OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Patrick F. O’Connell**

On May 5, 1941, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal, “What is one recreation I am happy about, and the only one? Writing — not this, but a letter in a crazy new language to Gibney yesterday, and a macaronic poem.”¹ Merton’s interest in writing in a mixture of languages, not surprising in someone with such a cosmopolitan upbringing, is evident throughout the pre-monastic journals, and is closely associated with his enthusiasm for James Joyce in general and for *Finnegan’s Wake* (first mentioned on May 11, 1939, the fourth entry of the “Perry Street Journal”) in particular (*Run*, p. 4). In a journal passage from January 25, 1941 that became separated from the manuscript journal and does not appear in *Run to the Mountain*, but will be in the revised paperback edition, which will be published in September 1996 [Editor’s Note], he comments, “Joyce language; that’s what I like writing. I’d like to write that all the time,” and he continues, “I wrote three pages of it in a letter to Lax. And I liked writing it, too. That’s the way I want to write.” He realizes “it can’t be sold” but speculates about mimeographing it and sending it around to his friends.² In this fascination for “made-up” language lie the roots of the letters he wrote to Robert Lax throughout his life (many of them published in *A Catch of Anti-Letters* and more immediately of the novel he would write in the summer of 1941, “Journal of My Escape from the Nazis,” finally published in 1969 as *My Argument with the Gestapo* and subtitled, “A Macaronic Journal.”) (It is also interesting to note here a foreshadowing of Merton’s later strategy of sending his friends mimeographed copies of material that also could not be published, though for different reasons!)

The “macaronic poem” mentioned in the May 5 passage is evidently a product of this same attraction, but as no poem in *The Collected Poems* seems to fit the description “macaronic” it has been impossible to know how the poem actually merited this description. There is a genuinely macaronic poem earlier in the journal itself, the lovely lyric “Silet mons / Silent arva” which concludes the description of a projected short story about a hermit in the December 19, 1939 entry (*Run*, pp. 114-117), but obviously Merton can’t be referring to this poem almost a year and a half later. There is extant, however, a previously unpublished poem that is almost certainly the “macaronic poem” referred to here. Included in the collection of material which Merton had given seminarian Richard Fitzgerald just before leaving for Gethsemani in December, 1941 (now in the archives of the St. Bonaventure University Library) is a group of sixteen poems. Seven of these appeared in Merton’s first published work, *Thirty Poems* (1944), six more in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), and two in *Early Poems: 1940-1942* (1971). The only poem that has not appeared in print is titled “Mens Sana In Corpore Sano,” and is subtitled “Macaronic Lyric.” Whether inadvertently or deliberately, Merton evidently did not want this poem in the collection (which was the source for the eventual publication of all the pre-monastic poetry) that he sent to Mark Van Doren before entering the monastery. It survived, unnoticed, in the “Fitzgerald File.”

With its clever (but for Merton, uncharacteristic) rhymes and catchy rhythm, “Mens Sana” is an exuberant piece, ringing changes on the familiar Latin proverb in French, Spanish, German and Italian (all readily translatable with minimal knowledge of the languages) as well as English. It contains just a hint of seriousness, as

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the advice to keep a sound mind in a sound body by “living it up” gives way in the final section to a rueful reflection that perhaps this philosophy has its shortcomings. While “Mens Sana” is hardly a major addition to the Merton corpus, it is a delightful *jeu d’esprit*, which Merton might well have been “happy about” writing, and which we can be happy, at long last, about having the opportunity to read:

MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANO

Macaronic Lyric

Mens sana (nerfs de cafe)
 Corpore sano (defense de fumer!)
 “What are ces mots of advice you have sung us!
 Mens feeble in corpore fungus?”

Mens grandma in corpore grandpa
 Comes never to lovers of rhumba and samba:
 La vie carries on plus heureuse, also longer
 With mens sana in corpore conga!

These are palabras far besser to teach:
 “Mens happy in corpo felice!”

No! Joys of the sense
 Ruin corpus and mens!
 Your corpus is drunk and reason is dense!
 So please to pensare some thoughts of demain:
 Mente di coucou in corpo migraine!

Thomas James Merton
 St Bonaventure,
 New York

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation/ The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939-1941*; edited by Patrick Hart, OCSO (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 361. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Run*.
2. While the whereabouts of these pages is presently unknown, a reduced size white-on-black photocopy has been inserted at the appropriate places in one of the copies of the St. Bonaventure Journal now in the Merton-Lax Room at the Friedsam Memorial Library of St. Bonaventure University.