

Finding the Right Words: Mercy for Merton

Review of

Spirit Book Word: An Inquiry into Literature and Spirituality

By J. S. Porter

Ottawa: Novalis, 2001

208 pages / \$19.95[CAN] paperback

Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

What a strange, energetic book this is! It is written with fierce enthusiasm, full of insights, confessions, focused comments and trivia. It is, surely, worth reading, yet this is not a book which helps me to get to the core of Merton's life-long love of spirituality.

This is a meditation about words. But as contrasted with the intense focus of Bob Lax, for example, the book slips, then runs about all at once (if I may mix metaphors). This is a book of promotion of ten writers, and also a bit of self-indulgence. One might even argue it is a work of self-promotion! Porter has many scattered yet excellent insights. I am reminded of Emerson's poem about sea-shells found on their beach, then inappropriately placed in view, lovely on shore, then sad plucked out of context.

Merton is the culmination of these notes (perhaps radio talks?). His word is "mercy." Working backward we have labors of love for George Grant and "Obedience"; Dennis Lee and "Tremendum"; Martin Heidegger and "Being"; Emily Dickinson and "Zero"; Clarice Lispector and "Strange"; D.H. Lawrence and "Quick"; Flannery O'Connor and "Revelation"; Kristjana Gunnars and "Small"; and finally, Raymond Carver and "Love." These meditations are fun, but are for me (for most readers?) strange. This is as strange a grouping as Merton's joking about the index to *The Seven Storey Mountain* in *The Sign of Jonas*. What we have is a listing and running commentary of Porter's word choices and mood: "Spiritbookword: the breath of the word in the book" (32). He's right – some words are *the* words: Wholeness for Melville and Darkness for the Marquis de Sade. These staccato essays are records of Porter's falling in love when he reads: "Am I falling in love?" (60). Yes he does! Can a word thunder? Yes, "It quietly thunders from a distance" (77).

Much is good here. It won't help you read Merton; but here Father Louis is riding along with Martin Heidegger and Emily Dickinson – all breathing for us. Much here is wrong, or at least debatable – for example, not all Merton's good poems are late ones (see 175). And it is not true that Merton's best poetry "slums in his prose" (176). Nor did Merton live at "*zero*" (177) (my italics). Nor is Merton the person "several successive or simultaneous ones," a quote attributed to Jean Leclercq. Nevertheless, Porter's prose is fun in its circular and celebrating way. The book is poem of praise for ten of his favorites and for his "secret intercourse" (189) with them. This is Porter's strength.

Victor A. Kramer, editor of *The Merton Annual* and of *Turning Toward the World*, the fourth volume of the Merton journals, read his first Merton book in 1958. He presently is Executive Director of The Aquinas Center for Catholic Studies at Emory University, Atlanta, where he also serves as Adjunct Professor of Catholic Studies.