A New Dawn for Merton's Verse

Review of
In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton
Edited with an Introduction by Lynn R. Szabo
Preface by Kathleen Norris
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Reviewed by **Malgorzata Poks**

Lynn R. Szabo deserves our gratitude for compiling this long-overdue volume of Merton's poems, the first such project in several decades. Much more inclusive than the original 1959 *Selected Poems* (revised edition: 1967), *In the Dark before Dawn* is a broader and more representative sampling of Merton's most enduring poetic work. The compilation spans over twenty-five years of Merton's creative life and includes, for the first time, a selection of his post-1963 verse including most of the love poems he wrote for M.

Szabo handsomely organized the 100-plus poems into eight sections, each of which acquaints the reader with an area of special importance to Merton's life-long poetic investigations. The headings for individual sections identify these areas as: "Geography's Landscapes," "Poems from the Monastery," "Poems of the Sacred," "Songs of Contemplation," "History's Voices," "Engaging the World," "On Being Human," and "Merton and Other Languages." Szabo justifies the volume's thematic organization by stating that her intention was to present the evolution of Merton's thinking on these frequently recurring issues as his art and spirituality matured. Moreover, by arranging the poems chronologically within each section, she hopes to enable the reader to follow the transformations of Merton's poetics and thereby to appreciate the distance he traveled as poet and monk. The volume succeeds admirably in both tasks.

Rereading Merton's poetry published in this recent collection, I was freshly struck by how much of Merton's verse of the forties (though many pieces have excellently withstood the test of time) betrays affectations and mannerisms which would have ruined him as a poet, had he not slowed down the tempo of work in the fifties to take a critical distance to his art. For instance, the all-too-predictable similes (e.g.: "clean as summer" [25]) and comparisons, while fresh and original when used occasionally, become irritating when employed routinely in every second poem. (The following passage from "Holy Communion: The City" is representative of both the strongest and the weakest of the early Merton: "Our thoughts are quieter than rivers, / Our loves are simpler than trees, / Our prayers deeper than the sea.") Moreover, his excessive use of such emotive verbs as "cry" and "weep," especially when they apply to a collective persona, make some poems slip into

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artificiality and sentimentality. In "Aubade: Lake Erie" (4), for example, the "innocent children . . . cry: 'Here is the hay-colored sun'" and in "Aubade – Harlem" (6), it is "The white men's wives" who cry, "like Pilate's . . . in the peril of their frozen dreams." Already the early verses, however, clearly demonstrate the poet's forte – his exceptional use of metaphor. Despite occasional mannerisms, what makes these poems a fascinating read is the sincerity of Merton's emotions, the originality of his poetic imagination, the strength and startling freshness of images (e.g., bathers' clothing abandoned on the bank of the Ohio is compared to "white birds shot to death" [4]).

In the Dark before Dawn admirably highlights still another strong point of Merton's art – his masterful sense of landscape and the ability to suggest an uncanny correspondence between the inner and the outer weather. Passing trains making the distant stars tremble, the monk's prayers supervising the atmosphere or rebuilding the ruined world "as fast as you destroy yourselves" (30) – all this is reminiscent of a butterfly effect of sorts. The state of constant flux and realignment of reality – early Merton might prefer to use the image of transubstantiation – assumes a basic unity of being and testifies to the original oneness of all creation. Only in this conceptual framework can Merton achieve the ecstatic sense of identification with what is, singing: "I am earth, earth / All these lighted things / Grow from my heart" (96-97). The ecstatic tone, resulting from an awareness that the whole world is secretly luminous with and illuminated by love, makes these verses love poems in their own right: powerful, captivating, and intense.

But there are also other love poems in the volume. Merton's poetic account of his relationship with M. records with stark honesty the ups and downs of an intensely romantic infatuation: the fascination and pangs of desire, the addictive need of one lover for the other, also, the terrible longing and searing loneliness, the agony of parting, the torment of memories, and the sense of estrangement even from oneself when the other has gone.

The collection's title (taken from "Elegy for a Trappist" [43]) captures an idea central to the entire corpus of Merton's work. The metaphor of "the dark before dawn" alludes to the small hours the monks spend in prayer and meditation, in anticipation of the approaching light/Light of day and the symbolic renewal of life. This pre-dawn darkness is emblematic of spiritual dryness and tribulation, of confusion and despair that, purifying the soul, prepare it for the union with the Source of all sense. Contrary to immediate sense impressions, such dark is ultimately healing and restorative. The dominant mood of a substantial group of Merton's poems collected here is that of wakefulness and patient waiting, in the midst of our often desolate lives, for the deliverance that cannot fail to come: "in my ending [dawn] is my meaning [light]" (73), Merton's "knowing night" (72) seems to be saying. But this is a secret known only to a few obscure saints and unsung heroes – like the "confessor of exotic roses" (43) and other Cistercian Fathers buried in the Gethsemani cemetery – to people whose mind is awake in the dark, through all the cloudy mornings and May evenings, through sweltering summer days and freezing winter nights.

In the nineteen-sixties, as Merton descended from the mystical heights and reclaimed membership in fallen humanity, seriously engaged the world, and listened to history's voices, his mood became quieter, more subdued, occasionally leaning toward doubt, even dejection ("Whether There Is Enjoyment in Bitterness" [187]). Although he still believed that a child "wins no wars and ends them all" ("Paper Cranes" [119]), this belief, after the birth of the *Original Child Bomb*, was more difficult to sustain.

Significantly, Merton now understood our estrangement from paradise along decidedly Heideg-

gerian lines as a fall into separateness. Falling into "apartments," becoming "securely established" in our supposedly unique and isolated identity, we become the labels that define us – the cloistered monk, set apart from the rest of the world (in a separate "apartment"), being no exception. Having attained this felt knowledge, Merton realizes that to be authentic he must become a no-monk who renounces the security of a "special" vocation and "dare[s] to go nameless in so secure a universe" (184-85). This gesture of renunciation must occasionally lead to disorientation ("I wonder who the hell I am" [188]) and bitterness, registered in the following lines:

> This afternoon, let me
> Be a sad person. Am I not
> Permitted (like other men)
> To be sick of myself? (185)

"Tormented by poetry and loss" (152), Merton claims his share in the human condition, identifying himself with sinners, guilty bystanders, even white liberals who, while pretending sympathy for victims of political and economic oppression, silently condone injustice as long as it does not affect them ("A Picture of Lee Ying" [131-33]). Reducing his presence to a mere voice performing other characters, Merton frequently resorts to disjointed style, discontinuous, object-based poetics, and subversive use of form to destabilize the manipulated, rhetorically-constructed, ideologically-inscribed, (post)modern vision of the world.

I must confess that I am particularly grateful for the inclusion of *Original Child Bomb* (111-18) in the collection. Upon rereading the poem on the construction and explosion of the first atomic bomb, I was freshly impressed by how powerful the poem still is and how innovative it must have been in 1962. Resisting figuration and linguistically inexpressible, the destructive power of the atom, unleashed on the "civilian target" by unscrupulous scientists and double-faced, irresponsible politicians, could only have been rendered by means of bitterly black humor. The jubilant mood of the nuclear scientists "excited as little boys on Christmas Eve" (116) hours before Little Boy was to be dropped on Hiroshima, could not have been better expressed by the master ironist Kurt Vonnegut himself, whose breakthrough novel on the bombing of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, was not published until 1969.

As a postmodern event *sensu stricto*, the nuclear explosion installed the power of the atom as a quasi-religious force so vast that it subjugated the human subject and threatened to abolish history. When God was declared dead, a new man-made god has taken His place. Savoring this irony, Merton would have agreed with Rob Wilson, the author of *American Sublime* (1991), that "as citizens of a postnuclear superpower whose impact willy-nilly approaches 'hegemonic,' we must challenge the sublime mythos that God-blessed Americans of elected Rapturism are empowered to overcome material rivals on a scale of nuclear superiority" (244). Such a challenge to the abuses of power permeates the whole mature canon of Merton's work, poetry included.

Another reflection the currently released collection awakens in me is that Merton's amazingly accurate diagnosis of the state of the world and a prescient anticipation of things to come – the qualities he is often praised and read for – can be traced to his earliest verses, and *In the Dark before Dawn* succeeds in highlighting this prophetic gift of the Gethsemani contemplative. Thus after 9/11 such poems as "In the Ruins of New York" (1947), which describes "great strong towers of ice and

steel . . . melted . . . by terror" (9), their ashes "curl[ing] with tufts of smoke" (10), cannot be read without a shudder. Almost two decades later he will make Eichmann the war criminal recognize the self-righteous reader as his double, warning: "Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done" (122). The problem is we still do think ourselves better and we still accuse the other, be it the cultural, the racial, or the religious other, of the destruction we bring into the world ourselves.

The collection closes with a section entitled "Merton and Other Languages." Merton's two poems in French – "Le secret" and "Je crois en l'amour" – are for the first time presented to the reader in a new, and masterful, translation (222-27). Br. Paul Quenon's renderings of these verses are witty, playful, and preserve much of Merton's own poetic spirit. Included also are several poems by foreign-language poets translated by Merton into English. I can only applaud this inclusion. It is as though Lynn Szabo was suggesting what I have long believed: that Merton's poetic gift shines through his translations with equal strength as it does in his original poetry.

All in all, to me the publication of *In the Dark before Dawn* is a hopeful sign that after the ascendancy of interest in Merton's prose writings on spiritual and social issues, it is finally time for his poetry to enjoy rereading and sustain critical as well as popular reevaluation.