

Book Reviews

In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton, Edited by Lynn R. Szabo, Preface by Kathleen Norris, (New York, New Directions, 2005), pp. xxxiv + 256 ISBN 0812216136 (pbk) \$16.95

Merton's poetry may well be thought of as the Cinderella area of his vast output, but there is a sense that it might well have been his favoured option. The poetry is often obscure. It sometimes reads like a private language, and yet the occasional breakthrough for the reader often generates quite remarkable moments of intimacy.

The editor of this selection, Lynn Szabo, a professor of American literature at Trinity Western University, Vancouver, Canada, has done us all a great service in producing an imaginative book centred on eight main themes that arise from Merton's poems. The poems stretch from those collected in the *Thirty Poems* of 1944 to gatherings in the *Collected Poems* of 1977, and beyond.

Geography's Landscapes is the first of the themes and takes us from Harlem in the forties – "Across the cages of the keyless aviaries/ the lines and wires, the galleries of the broken kites" – to the 'found' poem from 'Darjeeling' where whatever is, seems to become poetry:

*Taxi call kids. Sharp cries spread rev
motor whisper pony feet
Hoo! Hoo!
Motor going gone (hill)*

Within the theme based sections, the poems tend to move in date order and in each case we notice a movement from the leisurely iambs of Merton's early monastic phase through the cryptic, committed subversive, ironic middle period, to the more relaxed, humorous, iconoclastic later stage.

Poems from the Monastery will no doubt be turned to with a sigh, both of relief and nostalgia, by many who are stuck in Merton's romantic period. The very titles can make some of us drool: 'The Trappist Abbey: Matins'; 'Trappists, Working'; 'The Trappist Cemetery – Gethsemani'. Yes, this is what we came out to see. However, things develop in Merton, and 'Elegy for a Trappist' from 1968, is in fact a celebration of one of his fellow monks, and breathes a quite different air. Merton does a quick sketch of one of the more eccentric and loveable monks:

*Master of the sudden enthusiastic gift
In an avalanche
Of flower catalogues
And boundless love*

*Sometimes a little dangerous at corners
Vainly trying to smuggle
Some enormous and perfect bouquet
To a side altar
In the sleeves of your cowl.*

A trawl through each of the eight sections here and now could get relentless, so let's dip into *Poems of the Sacred* and read 'Hagia Sophia', that great hymn to the feminine, and 'The Night of Destiny' celebrating the end of

the Moslem fast which could also be seen as a poem for a Christmas Carol Service; "Midnight! Kissed with flame! See! See! My love is darkness".

In 'Songs of Contemplation' how could we not read 'Grace's House', and in *History's Voices* the utterly committed 'Original Time Bomb' about the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, and 'Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces'?

The Geography of Lograire (1969) which Paul Pearson has done so much helpful work on, can seem a closed book to many. As a way in perhaps we can get glimpses of familiar meaning from the fragments that resonate particularly with us, and then work outwards into more unfamiliar territory. This poem and *Cables to the Ace* were a brave new direction for Merton and they need to keep their place within any selection of his work.

The section *On Being Human* contains several poems to 'M', the nurse he fell in love with. Some years ago we wondered if we would ever see these poems in print, and now here they are as part of the poetic furniture. They show us Merton as a sixties teenager living on the thin edge of raw emotion. Communications were difficult as we read in 'Every Long Distance Call', and 'Never Call a Baby in a Thunderstorm'. In the end Merton felt that things had to be called to a halt, and yet "We are nearer than we know/Love has another place of its own".

In *Merton and Other Languages* read Raissa Maritain's poem on Chagall in Merton's translation, and see if you

don't get swept up into the dance "in the air on clouds". And if you are looking for self-fulfilling prophecies you will find them:

*All the authorities
In silence anywhere
Swear you only love your mind
If you marry a hot wire.*

(Antipoem 1)

Whatever new selection of poems comes out I shall always treasure my copy of the *Selected Poems* (1962) with the soup splashes on the page containing the poem *For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943*. I took the book to a monastery on retreat, and was obviously not concentrating on eating, but only had a mind for that remarkable poem: "Sweet brother, if I do not sleep/ My eyes are flowers for your tomb". The soup edition has an introduction from Mark Van Doren, which concludes, "For Merton there is another world beyond this one where his brother died, and where he himself writes poetry. But the poetry is a way to that world. Indeed, given his endowment, it may well be *the way*, so that mystic and poet, seer and singer, in his case are one." I recommend this new selection.

David Scott

Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition, Thomas Merton, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), pp. lxxvi + 305, ISBN: 0879070013. \$29.95

Following on from the five volumes of Merton's letters, under the general editorship of William Shannon,