

Andrade; Alfonso Cortes; Pablo Antonio Cuadra; Nicanor Parra; Cesar Vallejo, and perhaps holding the whole enterprise together, Ernesto Cardenal. Merton's relationship with the editor of *New Directions*, James Laughlin, was integral to the whole enterprise. The book *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1961), which contains Merton's translations of the work of these poets, set off the whole enterprise, made it real and focused it in the world of contemporary poetry. Poks's work on this corpus is outstanding and I think ground-breaking for Merton scholars and enthusiasts alike. How did we live so long and not let the sun of Latin America shine on us? How fortunate that Cardenal should come to Gethsemani, and that what seemed like failure, his departure, was turned into a creative opportunity for Merton. That opportunity is well chronicled by Poks. One piece of advice about reading Poks's book is to have a copy of the *Collected Poems* close to hand. There is quite a lot of multi-referencing. One thing with Merton inevitably leads to another.

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*Note: Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* can be obtained from the following address: [justyna.rozek@gallus.pl](mailto:justyna.rozek@gallus.pl). Normally, you will be given the number of their bank account and asked to pay first. When they receive a faxed confirmation of payment, they will be ready to send the book to the address you indicate. A word of warning: do not let them charge you more

than £10 + £4.50 for priority registered mail (in US\$20 + \$10). The Polish currency is strong and slight variations in the exchange rate are possible. If they overcharge you, do not hesitate to contact the author at [gosiapoks@poczta.onet.pl](mailto:gosiapoks@poczta.onet.pl). or: ul. Sobieskiego 16, 42-286 Koszecin, Poland.

### Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things

J. S. Porter  
Novalis, Ottawa, 2008  
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215 pages

J.S. Porter's most recent book is an exploration of Thomas Merton's life and thought from a literary perspective, and from the standpoint of a Merton aficionado. This book is almost conversational in style, it is not academic, and it doesn't make any claims to be academic.

Porter has spun a web bringing together many of Merton's numerous interests, what he calls "a word-collage of Merton's many-sided fullness." (p.33) It is the web of a fellow poet making connections and weaving these interests together into a rich tapestry in a way not dissimilar from Merton's approach in his later poetry, especially in works such as *The Geography of Lograire* where Merton weaved together events and stories from the four compass points and from various times in history. Academics might not find Porter's approach very satisfactory, especially his patchy references but, for general readers, it provides a rich introduction to Thomas Merton that will hopefully serve

to whet their appetite and make them want to delve into Merton's own writings.

The preface, where Porter begins looking at Merton alongside Nouwen is a little offputting – John Eudes Bamberger once remarked on Merton and Nouwen, two men whom he knew well, that "anybody who thinks Nouwen was the Merton of his generation didn't know Henri or didn't know Merton." (Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*, p.119.) However, once past this red-herring of a preface Porter's focus falls firmly on Merton. His approach is personal and down to earth, frequently using references to his own experience to illustrate aspects of Merton's life and thought.

There is some unevenness to the chapters, some really shine, such as his chapters on Merton as a letter writer, Merton as a public intellectual, and on Merton as a reader and translator of poetry. In the latter Porter points clearly to the importance to Merton of the South American poets, and poets such as Muir and Zukofsky, and highlights Merton's skill as a translator of poetry. Other chapters, such as his chapter on Merton the contemplative and activist, are not as strong and one feels that further honing might have brought the same clarity as in the better chapters.

In his chapter on "Merton as Public Intellectual", Porter begins by placing Merton in the midst of a long line of such public intellectuals that have been produced over many years by Columbia University – Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun and, more recently, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said. He then gives particular attention to Merton's writings about Nazi Germany, espe-

cially on Adolf Eichmann. Readers who have read other essays by Porter, such as his 2004 essay "Thomas Merton as Public Intellectual", published in *The Merton Seasonal*, will know that Porter is particularly astute when it comes to the application of Merton's social criticism to our present day. This chapter is no exception, in fact, it is pivotal to the whole book and justifies calling Merton, in the words of Robert Lax, "Hermit at the heart of things." In particular, Porter uses Merton's thought in critiquing the United States, suggesting actions like those of Eichmann continue today as "new Eichmanns sign papers, issue directives and conduct desk murder. When an administration, as in the United States, increases its defence budget by billions and reduces its medicare budget by millions, the direct consequence is that people die." (p.118) As Porter, earlier in the book, quotes from Merton: "Never was a country at once shrewder and less wise – shrewd in nonessentials and lunatic in essentials." (p.28)

Generally Porter's focus is on the later Merton and he applies to Merton a question asked by Said: "What of artistic lateness, not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction?" (p.166) This quote from Said sums up succinctly much of the later Merton.

Porter writes that Merton managed to get his body, heart, mind and spirit on the page when he wrote and through this he achieved presence to his reader so that the reader is left with the sense that they have met Merton in the flesh. In a similar way, in reading *Hermit at the Heart of Things*, I found that Porter was frequently writing about many of the same areas of Merton's

life and thought that so often strike me – how could one man write so much and accomplish so much; what other writer grew so much or so deeply in so short a time; you don't read Merton, you meet him; you need to read him holistically; Merton is one of the great readers of the century. I was reminded here of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* where Hector, the general studies teacher, says that "The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met . . . and it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours." In this volume this is Porter's experience of Thomas Merton and I am sure it is one with which many readers of Thomas Merton will feel familiar.

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**Soul Searching, The Journey of Thomas Merton**

DVD

Running time 67 minutes

2007 Duckworths Inc

**T**he new documentary about Thomas Merton does not provide a complete picture. It is not objective, and it is not thorough.

Instead, *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* is a poetic reverie, a beautifully edited homage and thoughtfully presented personal appreciation by

the American filmmaker Morgan Atkinson.

The operative concepts in *Soul Searching* are "search" and "soul." For here, Atkinson offers a search for meaning, for self, for the other, for love, and for God. He employs an impressive roster of collaborators – many of the stars and a few surprise comets from the sky of Mertoniana – as commentators. Their work assumes some knowledge of Merton, and although most will quarrel about some omission or emphasis, one is unlikely to quibble about the sensuous good looks, noble spirit, and the finely stitched fabric of sound in Atkinson's film.

The film has plenty of soul. While it evidences the scholastic soul of intellect and will, of which Merton had amply, the film also exemplifies the soul of the good jazz that Merton dug. This is the Merton of Everyone – the monk who sinned and picked himself up; who aspired and got knocked down, and who at the end of the day persevered and tried to do the right thing, and succeeded at it – only to die an accidental and premature death.

Merton does make for good drama, and this is an attribute not lost in the sound bites of the film's commentators. Within the time restrictions, Atkinson understandably skips over circumstances and achievements some may regret. Still, the filmmaker finds ways to subtly interject events or practices that are satisfying to those who know about them. Atkinson echoes, for instance, Merton's photography in shots of his own, and uses Merton's abstract and figurative drawings, cleverly paralleling the mindset of the man who drew female nudes with the man who doodled monks in their cowls.

*Soul Searching* is a complex bit of work