

# Book Reviews

Thomas Merton and Latin America:  
A Consonance of Voices

Malgorzata Poks

Katowice 2007

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Like Victorian mountaineers climbing in the Alps who hired guides, and had absolute trust in their abilities – this was how I felt, working my way through this book with the Polish critic and writer, Malgorzata Poks. But for icy Alps read Latin America. Merton ‘discovered’ Latin America and its writers in the early fifties when the Brazilian scholar, Amoroso Lima visited him. Languages presented no difficulty for Merton, and he seemed to thrive in a variety of cultures.

I was alerted to Poks’ knowledge of the poems and imaginative creations of Merton when unlike most seminars at Merton conferences, she took as her subjects those longish prose poems to be found if you look hard enough in the depth of Merton’s *Collected Poems*, such as *Rites for the Extrusion of a Leper*, and *Atlas and the Fatman*. This is terrain that, I feel, few have explored. Rapidly, I did my homework, and the research Merton did on ancient cultures in Central and South America became for me a completely fresh experience, and Poks’s book, that started life as a doctoral dissertation, has

provided a sure compass with which to get my bearings.

I can’t say I’ve got my head around it all, but let me say a little about the insights I have found in the book. In 1957 Ernesto Cardenal arrived at Gethsemani from Nicaragua. Merton and he became close friends, and although Cardenal only stayed for two years, and was obviously not suited to the Trappist regime, it was long enough for Merton to work up a serious homesickness for Latin America. Merton began negotiating to set up a community with Cardenal there. The desire was intense in Merton but the Order disallowed it. So Gethsemani is where Merton remained and Latin America had to come to him, as it did, in the form of poetry. He deepened literary friendships with several writers, corresponded with them and translated their work, and, as Merton was able to do with such skill and enthusiasm, opened up new worlds for so many.

*The Geography of Lograire* is one classic text for this area of his interest, particularly in the section entitled SOUTH. Poems of Merton’s like CEXOCHITL: THE SIGN OF FLOWERS (Mexico), CHILAM BALAM (Yucatan), DZULES (Yucatan), give a poetic treatment to anthropological accounts. Merton also translated individual poets’ work: Jorge Carrera Andrade; Carlos Drummond de

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.

**David Scott** is Rector of St Lawrence with St Swithun in Winchester, and Warden of the Diocesan School of Spirituality.

*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.

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### 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