EMOTIONS IN TRANQUILLITY

Review of

THE GETHSEMANI POEMS
by Ron Seitz
Monterey, Kentucky, Larkspur Press, 1985

—Reviewed by Deba Prasad Patnaik

Inspired by the Trappist monk-poet, Thomas Merton, and the Abbey of Gethsemani, Ron Seitz's poems are "emotions recollected in tranquillity." Appropriate to Merton's own spirit and the ambience of his monastery, a sense of quiet, simplicity and holiness combined with a touch of playfulness and humor and a feeling of affection informs the poems in this handsomely produced volume.

The majority of the poems are well-executed; feeling and language effectively and carefully matched. But a few are, to quote from one "slack/ on the edge of/ language" and appear to be "aborted poems" because of a deliberate quirkiness and allusiveness noticed in "Upon Reaching Thirty," "Dream of Dublin," "Carnival" and "When Writing Merton," for example. "Dream of Dublin" will serve to illustrate this:

so sang Joyce this morning &
a sinister word-slinger I was
in shades
panatela cloud & coffee
Tang dynasty mustache

a Wake to my 8 o'clock window
(aborted poems       steaming the pane)
Age for my efforts! Time in my craw!
all of it bombast & (truly now)
gone to hell

Seitz is at his best in poems such as "Monk," "To Tom Gone," "February," "Travaux-Piegan Tribe," "Midnight," "Signature," "Brother" and in the "Day of the Hermit" sequence. In these poems he demonstrates an unusual sincerity of feeling, syntactical experimentation, economy of language and a taut lyricism. "Brother" shows this:

because we’re (both of us) the same
string pluck of that gypsy guitar
strung taut in our loins—
    an ear to the rail of my vision
    will do it
why me? echo of other sweats
whiskered a stranger to your birth
    (no rewrite on that windy step)
opened the dream slant  hum & beauty
of your dance now crooked
    the eyeblink of your bell roping me
    ’s the answer
    dear brother

Even though his subject matter easily lends itself to heavy philosophical cogitation in a poem, Seitz avoids obscurity and obtuseness by concentrating on the clarity and evocation of an experience and feeling and the appropriate use of language. From "Tom-foolery koan quips" he moves into "hushed signature" of "praise" and celebration "between silence and speech."

To quote the poem "Monk" illustrates his artistry:

    your crisscross
    in Time  yells
    its light
splits space
with play
the whole
of your hand
shaking
    the World

Editor’s Note: Five poems from this collection have appeared in
The Merton Seasonal: "Signature: in Memory of Thomas Merton" (Summer 1984) and "Upon First Meeting T.M.;" "Noh Satori/ at Monks Pond;" "When Writing Merton" and "In Memory of Thomas Merton/ at the hermitage" (Autumn 1985).