

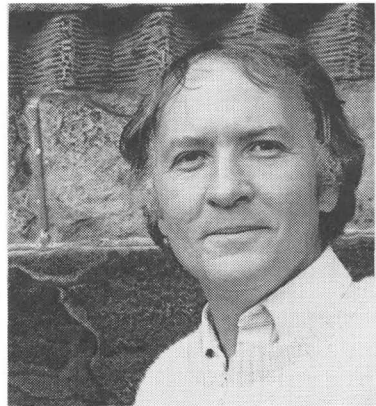
# THOMAS MERTON IN LAS VEGAS

by **J. S. Porter**

Coming into the paved desert, the neon sun, the wishing-well of America, with a jean jacket and a three day growth in a DC-9, Thomas Merton spies the mountains gouged for casinos, the rivers dammed for light bulbs, the churches on every block. "One pull and you can change your life," a figure on a billboard announces. Merton thinks to himself: the Devil dresses and speaks so well. In his room he observes that drawers contain Gideon Bibles and bingo chips, the television instructs viewers in black jack and the hallways play muzak. He decides to go for a walk through the palm trees and the traffic, looking for monks, but finds instead the cocky and the complacent. He notices a bumper sticker: "This isn't reality. This is America." The heat bears down on his balding head, and he limps back to the hotel on the strip. He re-enters the lobby with a Bob Dylan line in his head: "Money doesn't talk: it screams." As Peter Pans and true believers pull the one armed bandits, Merton thinks a single thought before an extended prayer and a long sleep: how fitting it is that the heart of darkness should lurk in spotless lighted streets that repel the night, in twenty-four hours-a-day entertainment centers injecting amnesia and in sugar-coated promises that never countenance doubt.

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