

## SEITZ SAY

Review of

*THE GETHSEMANI POEMS*

by Ron Seitz

Monterey, Kentucky, Larkspur Press, 1985

—Reviewed by Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.

These terse stutterings of silence between words are broken dialogue between two minds, Ron Seitz of Bellarmine College, Louisville, and Thomas Merton, extinct and buried at Gethsemani. Their encounters in the past have released an untamed manner of speaking which, with pen and pause, the poet whips into discipline. Like Chinese paintings, the vacant parts are often the most powerful. "Muse//what tic of love//jerked//this mind to //shudder//flame to waste//my breath-stop" The empty page is a void out of which flashes a broken utterance dissolving into the unspoken. At the end of the book we reach the source of this poetic stream in what very well could be the authentic voice of Merton himself: "Got to don Gandhian garb of lean loin//cloth & sunkcheek hunger hunch as I//sandal me way to bare rice bowl breakfast." Poetry originates as word-play between friends, which in *The Gethsemani Poems* becomes word music creating its own meanings: dirges, elegies, celebrations, haunted moments, futile moments. Tenuous threads of word association hold together the unmeasured volume on each page. The person-monk-poet becomes a face between the unutterable and the spoken. Such are we all.

Nowhere does a monk appear in this cloister of poems except as an elusive and haunting figure, a blur beyond a frosted window, a memory, a silent partner in a monologue. Silence here is the field of creative possibilities, and the monastery is a field for silence. Out of it comes poems perhaps never heard: "the voice unlistened//no poem to mark it. No matter. It is the person, far more than the poem, that is created in the flow between silence and sound: "The landscape of silence shapes the face//that empties into speech." The poem is an articulation of silence, the poet vanishes in the dialogue between them:

The silence so full  
lifts the mouth to open  
and listens to itself in speech

One is almost painfully aware of this in the splintered contrasts of hard "k"s and precise "t"s in

The Farm  
dog bark caught hung in air  
to catch unseen  
the first bird's mid arc  
climbing the sky's heart

Or again, in the alternation of soft and hard words: "in a creek hush halt, stopt water//these host hands cupped// in mute freeze."

As might be expected, the visual analogue to silence is white, predominant in winter poems, in "my Zhivago white eyes//empty// with//light", in my moon held face "crucified in whiteness." Occasionally there are contrasting slashes of blue and gold "van Gogh binding blinders to shut the sun", or hotter tones heard in the resurrection of a:

Voodoo boned in Creole light  
to clash cymbals & the River  
tug wails dying  
Amen.

Brother Paul Quenon is a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani. He has written several reviews of Merton books. His poem, "More Geography from Lograire: Written from Merton's Hermitage," appeared in the Spring 1985 *Merton Seasonal*.

Life cannot all be precious moments and holy hush.

Christian themes of sin and conversion, death and new life run as threads through a silk screen of Buddhist sensibilities. There is one poem remarkable for its blend of prophetic religion with the particularly Mertonian style of Buddhism - that Zarathustra waving the sutras in a century that has had its nightfall:

Generation  
 sunken cheek and blue-jawed we  
 galloped through dives damning  
 Buddha a pregnant  
 book Zen  
 our Apocalypse howling  
 generation now  
 old and  
 spent



BROTHER PAUL QUENON  
 Gethsemani Archives

The futility of doom-saying is but an extreme case of the effervescence of the word. What comes from silence returns to silence and to the void which is presence. All language, the poem itself, is sanctified in dissolving. Creativity in its full abandon becomes apophatic and sacrifices itself in an act of worship. This is, I believe, what is symbolized in the next to last poem where Seitz shows us Merton engaged in a strange solitary rite:

sitting his rocker before the fire  
 unfolding this paper (Seitz's poem) with fingers  
 flickered by flame  
 heat eating the page edge  
 wrinkly crisping gray to black  
 a light ash float up the chimney  
 out to unvoiced words wavering  
 syllable by syllable on the still air  
 printing darkness hard to trees  
 beneath a dome freeze December sky  
 roofing silent in snow  
 those chalice'd high hands  
 warming the monastery  
 Whole Earth's Eucharist

The purest art is unseen though present, and in this one can recognize Merton's own artistic ideal. Like the Night-Flowering Cactus, the best poems are those which have never been read:

Sun and city never see my deep white bell  
 Or know my timeless moment of void:  
 There is no reply to my munificence.  
 When I come I lift my sudden Eucharist  
 Out of the earth's unfathomable joy

Among poems that have been read, the best are those that conceal an unread poem, something about which Merton confides with Robert Lax in *A Catch of Anti-Letters*:

"...underneath this book is the real poem which is not to be spoken, the guys who do not go all the way to the real poem better stop the train and get off, and they already have, they were never on the train in the first place." (p.32)

The "real poem" is the one in which Seitz and Merton have done their real collaboration, although neither has ever written it. *The Gethsemani Poems* makes me believe the collaboration is still going on nevertheless.

A special mention must be made of the superb printing by The Larkspur Press. It is a work of art in itself and makes one feel again how books are things of value. You want to handle it with care. "Set in Emerson & American Uncial type, printed on Ragston paper with a Curtis Flannel cover & bound in a Japanese binding."