

Piggybacking on Merton

By J. S. Porter

Two interesting additions of late to the Merton library have come from a poet and a literary critic: Denise Levertov, who visited Merton in his hermitage, continued to write poems inspired by his work; and Frank Lentricchia, who recently discovered the poet-monk, uses Merton as a guide in the underworld of an identity crisis. Poet and critic do with Merton what so many have done over the years: ingest him, introject him, colonize him. Merton enters their lives as a kind of parallel life, dream life, or counter life, and he then enlarges, often quite radically, their identities and senses of self.

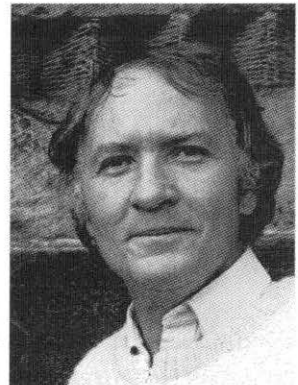
I

The late Denise Levertov, one of America's great meditative poets, has written, for example, poems not so much about Merton as collaborations with him. She uses incidents from his life as instruments for her own self-understanding. Take her poem "I learned that her name was Proverb" from her 1987 collection *Breathing the Water*,¹ for example:

And the secret names
of all we meet who lead us deeper
into our labyrinth
of valleys and mountains, twisting valleys
and steeper mountains—
their hidden names are always,
like Proverb, promises:
Rune, Omen, Fable, Parable,
those we meet for only
one crucial moment, gaze to gaze,
or for years know and don't recognize

but of whom later a word
sings back to us
as if from high among leaves,
still near but beyond sight

drawing us from tree to tree
towards the time and the unknown place
where we shall know
what it is to arrive. (51)



J. S. PORTER

J. S. PORTER is an essayist and poet, and professor of English at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario. He is a regular contributor to a number of Canadian literary reviews, including *The Antigonish Review*, *Brick*, and *Grail*. He is author of *The Thomas Merton Poems: A Caravan of Poems* (1988).

Levertov calls this tribute to Merton's dream of Proverb, which he recorded in a letter to Boris Pasternak,² a "spin-off." In her endnotes she defines a spin-off as "a verbal construct which neither describes nor comments but moves off at a tangent to, or parallel with, its inspirations" (85–86). The poem also fits into what Levertov sometimes calls her "embroideries," a poetic enterprise in which the poet stitches her own patterns into someone else's cloth to the point where the dividing line between the original source of inspiration and the spin-off is hardly traceable.

The poem works on a number of levels, personal and transpersonal, but it can also be embroidered on further, and, ironically, spun-off into a comment on Merton. Merton sought "the secret names" of the self through the "labyrinth," and "mountains, twisting valleys / and steeper mountains." He met what Jung would call his anima, or what a spiritual person might call his "spiritual self." He met Proverb once, "gaze to gaze" in a dream, but she was to return, as ably chronicled by Jim Forest in *Living With Wisdom*,³ in his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut, in a painting by Victor Hammer, in a nurse's voice in a hospital appropriately called after "the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation," and in his magnificent *Hagia Sophia* in which the young girl transmutes into the timeless Lady of Wisdom.⁴ She returns again in the Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa where Merton sees beyond "the shadow and the disguise."⁵

The key words in Levertov's poem—"secret names," "hidden names," "labyrinth," "unknown place," "arrival"—all have their resonance in Merton's life. He was looking for his name, this wanderer, this silent lamp, this king of birds; like the speaker of the poem, he was trying to find his true identity. For a long time he did not recognize his "Proverb," but slowly and particularly in Polonnaruwa he recognized her in "the unknown place / where we shall know / what it is to arrive."

Like Merton turning anew to Proverb, Levertov returns to Merton in "On a Theme by Thomas Merton" in her 1993 collection *Evening Train*:⁶

'Adam, where are you?'
 God's hands
 palpate darkness, the void
 that is Adam's inattention,
 his confused attention to everything,
 impassioned by multiplicity, his despair.

Multiplicity, his despair;
 God's hands
 enacting blindness. Like a child
 at a barbaric fairgrounds—
 noise, lights, the violent odors—
 Adam fragments himself. The whirling rides!

Fragmented Adam stares.
 God's hands
 unseen, the whirling rides
 dazzle, the lights blind him. Fragmented,
 he is not present to himself. God
 suffers the void that is his absence. (113)

Her “spin-off” or “embroidery” this time is based on a “theme alluded to...in one of [Merton’s] tapes of informal lectures given at Gethsemani in the 1960s.” Human fragmentation concerned Merton, socially and personally. He, like Adam, sometimes spread himself too thin. His “multiplicity” of activity was sometimes “his despair.” To muffle his own “noise” and the noise of society, Merton promoted, and lived, a measure of silence and solitude. He was acutely aware of Adam as the “nowhere man” of the Beatles, lost in “multiplicity,” dazzled by “lights” and the “barbaric fairgrounds.”

II

A very different response to Merton, at least in style, but no less urgent than Levertov’s, heralds from Frank Lentricchia, “the Dirty Harry of contemporary literary theory,” in his *The Edge of Night: A Confession*.⁷ Lentricchia, the Katherine Everett Gilbert Professor of Literature at Duke University and the author of *Criticism and Social Change* and most recently *Modern Quartet*, would seem an unlikely candidate to piggyback on a monk. Mind you, the history of Merton’s contact with the world swarms with such “strange” linkages.

Didn’t Eldridge Cleaver, former leader of the Black Panthers, for example, read and meet Merton—readings of Merton tend to evolve into meetings—in prison and end up calling him brother? Lentricchia at any rate meets Merton during a time of personal crisis, a time of divorce and breakdown, while on a summer retreat in 1991 to Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina. *The Edge of Night* results from the retreat and its aftermath, and Merton canters through the book as one of its strongest presences.

The only thing Lentricchia knew about Merton prior to this time of soul-searching and crisis “was what everyone knew: that he gave up sex, drinking, and a promising literary career in order to enter Gethsemani Abbey...back in the days when the rules were severe and you communicated largely through sign language. It turned out he had a major literary career anyway” (51). Early on in the book, much like Levertov’s piggybacking, Lentricchia begins to graft his life to Merton’s. “I knew I had one thing in common with Merton. We wrote books, we worked alone” (47). In sentences that read like journal jottings akin to Merton’s in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Lentricchia goes on:

Prayer, says Merton, is the desire to pray. If Merton is right, I have been praying for a long time. (49)

I will not be required to surrender totally. Is this Merton’s coded message? That the self can be preserved in a monastery? Will I be able, there, to stand on the border of self and no self? (49)

Merton is right again, but there is one thing I will not do: I will not read his autobiography, which a friend has characterized as being too pious. (54)

I think about Aer Lingus [the Irish airline] and write sentences about Mepkin Abbey. I write one about Merton that makes me smile amidst strangers. (70)

Late at night, in Sligo, writing the monastery piece, I have friendly jousts with Thomas Merton. He tells me that Saint Anthony says that in perfect prayer the contemplative “no longer realizes that he is praying or indeed that he exists at all.” (79)

Later in the narrative, a shamefaced and blushing Lentricchia confesses:

The Seven Storey Mountain, which you are now reading, though you promised yourself you would never read it. You are gripped as you are rarely gripped by the pages on his decision to enter Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, and especially by the pages that describe the moments of entry.... You liked the sentence "I belonged to God, not to myself," you understand that he had sacrificed himself to something more valuable.... You appreciate, however, the situation whose recollection must have produced those sentences and sentiments, and you know how much the rest of Merton's life will be a repudiation of those sentences and sentiments, how much he will suffer the pains and pleasures of being in place, how much he will cherish the so-called accidents of distinction in persons, things and places. (111–12)

The use to which Lentricchia puts Merton here is similar to Levertov's poetic usage: Merton's words are used to probe identity, to discover or rediscover the true self, to question values. In a very narcissistic narrative Lentricchia seeks the passage out of self, and wants Merton to be one of the vehicles by which that is achieved.

Whether as an instrument for the extension of self, as in Levertov, or an instrument for the eclipse of self, as in Lentricchia, Thomas Merton continues to be referenced, argued over, quoted, embroidered on, reconstructed, appropriated, and ingested. Two fresh takes on a monk who refuses to die have come, as I've briefly outlined, from a poet and a critic whose footnotes to Merton take their place among the marginalia of a living text. They constitute part of the world's on-going dialogue with a monk.

Fittingly, the monk who defined himself as marginal and who himself excelled in marginal literary forms such as notes and meditations—along with anti-novels, anti-letters, and anti-poems—is illuminated by those on the margin of Merton scholarship. Poets and critics, like Levertov and Lentricchia, continue to receive nourishment from what Ron Seitz in *Song For Nobody* calls Merton's "chomp chomp umm good lip-puckered 'Aaahhhh!' to life."⁸

Notes

1. Denise Levertov, *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987); subsequent page references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, 1993) 89–91.
3. Jim Forest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 131–33.
4. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363–71.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 236.
6. Denise Levertov, *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions, 1992); subsequent page references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.
7. Frank Lentricchia, *The Edge of Night: A Confession* (New York: Random, 1994); subsequent page references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.
8. Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, MO: Triumph, 1993) 34.