

Book Reviews

Thomas Merton & Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings: The Correspondence

Bill Morgan

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As to the U.S. Beats I am more in sympathy with them but in most cases I do not respond to them fully.¹

Thomas Merton

I have before me a copy of Bill Morgan's *The Typewriter is Holy: The Complete Uncensored History of the Beat Generation* (2010). I have read this book several times and there can be no doubt Morgan has covered, in readable detail, the varied lives of the Beats in an honest and transparent way. Most of the significant Beats such as Kerouac, Cassady, Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs, Snyder and Ferlinghetti are covered in a candid way. Their opponents are also noted. There can be no doubt that Morgan is one of the finest chroniclers of the Beats, both as a complex tribe, and as individual activists and poets, in a thoughtful way. There is, though, more digging that needs to be done on the Beats and the Roman Catholic Beat tradition—such is the initial approach in *Thomas Merton & Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings*.

I have, in a suggestive way, attempted to reflect on the Roman Catholic Beats in two books: *Thomas Merton and Beats of the North Cascades* (2005 & 2008) and *Thomas Merton and the Counter Culture: A Golden String* (2016). I have also touched on the Beats in the North Cascades, a mountainous area where I live, in 'The Beat Generation in the Mountains', *Appalachia* (Winter/Spring 2012). But it is Morgan's fine primer on Merton and Ferlinghetti that needs to be heeded and read attentively. Merton and Ferlinghetti both shared a Roman Catholic

background, both had political leanings, both were poets and both shared a European cultural ethos. Morgan covers these similarities in a nuanced way.

The subtitle of this book sums up its main focus. Merton was emerging as a political writer in the late 1950s-early 1960s, though at the time he was mostly known for his writings on the contemplative life. Ferlinghetti was committed to calling forth poets to think and write in a more political, albeit anarchist, manner. From this idea arose, in 1961, a magazine, *The Journal For The Protection Of All Beings*. Ferlinghetti sent out many invitations for contributors but few were willing to submit an article or poem confronting the dire political issues of the time. Merton had written *Original Child Bomb: Points For Meditation To Be Scratched On The Walls Of A Cave*, a chilling 41 point description of the research, planning and final dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ferlinghetti thought this anti-poem would fit perfectly into the Journal. There was also another anti-poem by Merton that held Ferlinghetti: *Chant To Be Used In Processions Around A Site With Furnaces*, the theme being the docile attitude of those who mindlessly obeyed orders. A significant part of Morgan's book covers the correspondence in 1961 regarding Merton's contribution to the Journal. Their main concern was whether the Roman Catholic censors would allow such a poem by a monk to be published? In fact 'Chant' was published in *The Catholic Worker* in July that year, and Lax had already included 'Original Child Bomb' in his journal *Pax*; so the issue, in a sense, was sidestepped. Morgan includes both of these creative anti-poems in the book, and the details of the confusion about their publishing.

Needless to say others apart from Ferlinghetti were interested in publishing Merton's poems: James Laughlin who had published some of his earliest poems with *New Directions* in the 1940s, Robert Lax with his poetry broadside *Pax* and Dorothy Day with *The Catholic Worker* were all vying to publish Merton's prophetic and compact political commentary. Morgan does a excellent job of highlighting this reality. Morgan's comprehensive examination of the flurry of letters between Merton and Ferlinghetti reveals much about both men and the state of publishing at the time.

The book includes Ferlinghetti's contribution to *The Journal*, his prose-poem, 'Picturesque Haiti', in which he reflects on the obvious gap between the Haiti of the tourist industry and the endemic poverty endured by so many Haitians. Writing to Ferlinghetti about *The Journal* and its contents, Merton thought that 'a lot of this stuff was really good'

and that, 'I liked very much your beautiful Haiti ...'² But he also found that 'a lot of the material was not very near the target.'

Merton did face the ire of his censors, but true to form, Ferlinghetti and Laughlin were sensitive to the problem. Laughlin went the extra mile to help disseminate Merton's yet more political writings, the 'Cold War Letters'. Merton's letter to Ferlinghetti cited above tells the complex tale, and much else, in substantive depth — this is a letter worth mulling over many times, as it includes so much about many pertinent and timely issues,

Morgan touches on the use Lenny Bruce made of 'Chant', the language of 'Chant' being a perversion of its deeper religious meaning. Merton in the anti-poem was making it abundantly clear that a form of crude statism had become the new religion, a religion Ginsberg aptly portrayed in *Howl*. The intense period of correspondence period between Merton and Ferlinghetti came to an end by late 1961 but this did not mean an end of their friendship, nor Merton's interaction with the Beats.

The publication of Merton's *Monks Pond* in 1968 included contributions by Snyder and Kerouac. Although Merton invited Ferlinghetti to contribute, he made no submission. That year Merton took off on his search for a hermitage. On his travels, in May 1968, Merton and Ferlinghetti met for the first time, Ferlinghetti offering Merton a room for the night above City Lights, his independent bookstore in San Francisco. Thereafter a brief correspondence emerged again between Merton and Ferlinghetti, Morgan threading together these shorter letters.

Morgan brings this timely and well wrought book to an end by highlighting, in Ferlinghetti's poem, 'A Buddha in the Woodpile', his lament about the tragedy in Waco Texas with the Branch Davidians and pondering whether, if 'just one Thomas Merton Trappist' had been present, such carnage could have been prevented. And, in 2001, Ferlinghetti, in his poem 'Mouth', mused that 'perhaps I'll join the Trappists.'

Morgan begins the book by recounting visits with Ferlinghetti, when both were much younger, and recalling Ferlinghetti's fond remembrance of Merton. In the last weeks of Ferlinghetti's life — he died in 2021 at the age of 101 — Morgan broached the subject of writing a book about Merton and Ferlinghetti. He replied that it seemed 'Wonderful'.

I cannot finish this review without noting both the fine cover and the many black and white photographs in the book, many taken by Merton. The photographs that introduce us to the book are ones of a young Ferlinghetti in front of a sign reading 'Prayer Room', and Merton in his

Cistercian habit with the Kentucky knobs in the background. There are other photographs of James Laughlin, the cover of *Original Child Bomb*, typed and written letters, the cover of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and Merton with the Dalai Lama.

It is good to see Bill Morgan extending his work on the Beats in the direction of the Roman Catholic Beats, Merton being but one of them. Kerouac and Ferlinghetti have obvious affinities with Merton, Ferlinghetti more solid and grounded in contrast to Kerouac's slow tragic descent. Hopefully, in time, much more work will be done on the Roman Catholic Beats and those with Beat affinities, examining their internal points of concord and discord — Dorothy Day & *The Catholic Worker*, Dan & Phil Berrigan, William Everson & Mary Fabilli, Denise Levertov, Mary Norbert Korte and Jim Forest but doorways into such an expansive and catholic vision.

1. Letter to Stefan Baciu, 12 May 1965, in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth – Letters to Writers* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1993), p. 241.
2. Letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 12 December 1961, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 271.

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