

Thomas Merton and the Beat Generation: A Subterranean Monastic Community

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BY FEBRUARY OF 1967 Merton's concerns regarding monasticism in the modern world had come to the point where he believed significant change was necessary. A journal entry dated the sixth of that month reads:

Monasticism. I see more and more the danger of identifying the monastic vocation and spirit with a particular kind of monastic consciousness—a particular tradition, however authentic. A monasticism limited to the medieval western – or worse still Byzantine – tradition cannot survive. It is utterly finished. I very much wonder how much the Rule of St Benedict can survive in practice. This is a very serious question. Maybe monasticism needs to be stated all over again in a new way. I have no knowing how to tackle this idea. It is just beginning to dawn on me.¹

After reading Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*,² I began to explore the possibility of understanding Merton's efforts to redefine monasticism in light of the trickster tradition. In 'An Inquiry into Merton as Trickster,'³ I demonstrated that the primary characteristics of the trickster are present in Merton, not as marginal but as essential qualities of his person, in particular, the inclination to redefine established institutions. At the end of that paper, I suggested several lines of inquiry for further study, one of which was his place within the American tradition of tricksters, specifically, his relation to Beat writers, a connection that has long been recognized but not as yet fully explored.⁴

A study of Merton's relationship to the Beat generation provides insight into his effort to find ways to redefine monasticism in and for the modern world. This paper will focus on what I believe to have

been at the core of this relationship and how it eventually became an essential aspect of his monastic identity.

The Relationship

While less celebrated than his visit with the Dalai Lama, Merton's stay with Lawrence Ferlinghetti at the City Lights apartment in San Francisco during May of 1968 was nonetheless a pilgrimage in its own right.⁵ City Lights bookstore had become a Mecca for Beat writers and artists; an open place where normally apolitical persons could speak uncensored upon any subject regarding the subordination of human life and freedom to political ideologies, structures, and programs. For this reason, Merton's work caught the attention of Beat writers; in particular, the logic of such statements as:

We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous.⁶

In 1961, Ferlinghetti⁷ published Merton's 'Chant to Be Used in Processions Around A Site With Furnaces' in the first edition of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*.⁸ Merton's poem was printed first in a series of writings by Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and others. By the time of Merton's visit, he was well established within the Beat community. With regard to the visit, a line from Merton's letter to Ping Ferry may be all that is needed: 'Saw Ferlinghetti in S.F. and drank some espresso with visionaries.'⁹

This gathering of visionaries originated on the East coast at Columbia University. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr entered Columbia shortly after Merton left in 1940. Ferlinghetti would arrive in 1946. All studied with Raymond Weaver, Lionel Trilling, and Mark Van Doren.¹⁰ The lives of these young writers were shaped by the Columbia experience in similar ways as reflected in *Love and Living* where Merton wrote, 'Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success.' This, he declared, was his message for his contemporaries. It was a message he attributed to his education at Columbia. There, he tells us, he learned the value of 'unsuccess.' There he was 'saved . . .

from one of those Madison Avenue jobs.' There he was 'lobbed . . . half conscious into the Village, where he came to his senses and continued to learn to imitate not Rockefeller but Thoreau.'¹¹ Such a statement could just as easily have been written by Ginsberg. It was at Columbia that Ginsberg's aspirations to become a labour lawyer were waylaid. It was there that he began to write wild and bewildering poetry about the best minds of his generation who studied Plotinus, Poe, St John of the Cross, and bop kabbalah, 'because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet.'¹² As one person would later testify, Ginsberg's personal view of life was colored by his exposure to jazz and Columbia University where he received a liberal and bohemian education.¹³

While Merton never met Kerouac or Ginsberg, publishers Giroux, Laughlin and Ferlinghetti, as well as friends Robert Lax and Ron Seitz, would provide the necessary connections for what would perhaps be best described as solitary ships passing in the night. There were others, however, who came to Gethsemani. From 1958 to 1968, Merton's journals and correspondence reveal the development of his relationship to the Beat generation, to include Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, Diana DePrima, Brother Antonius, Cid Corman, and Joan Baez. Merton's letter to Laughlin in February of 1958 explains how all this came about:

Larry Ferlinghetti's stuff sounds interesting. I now have permission to read anything so there are no problems about the nature of the material... Am interested in everything that is alive, and anything that strikes you as something I ought to know about, please send.¹⁴

Laughlin would send Beat books. And, by March of 1960, Merton was encouraging Laughlin to bring Kerouac, Lax, and a few others down to Gethsemani to solve the problems of the world.¹⁵

How Merton Understood the Relationship

Definitions of Beat vary and include a variety of alternatives: beatnik, neo-beat, contemporaries of beats, each suggesting something different with regard to the nature of the relationship. Merton identified himself as a 'friend of the beats.' In a letter to William Carlos Williams dated 11th July 1961, Merton wrote:

It has taken me a long time to get to be able to follow your advice and read *Kaddish* [and *Other Poems*], because nobody sent me one. But

finally Laughlin is out in SF and the City Lights Books sent me a copy. I agree with you about it. I think it is great and living poetry and certainly religious in its concern. In fact, who are more concerned with ultimates than the beats? Why do you think that just because I am a monk I should be likely to shrink from beats? Who am I to shrink from anyone, I am a monk, therefore by definition, as I understand it, the chief friend of the beats and one who has no business reproving them. And why should I?¹⁶

But it was a precarious friendship. For example, by October of 1966, Merton could write:

I found some good things in the library—old articles on Camus from the immediate post-war years (1946–). And some [Gregory] Corso, R[obert] Creely and others not so good (I still can't read Charles Olson). I very much doubt whether I can or should get involved in this kind of poetry—or at least not with the people who want it. I've had enough with the pontifical Cid Corman. Maybe they all want to be gurus as well as poets.¹⁷

While Merton and Ginsberg had been reading each other's books, there was a tension between these two men. In an article printed in *Harpers*, November of 1965, Merton wrote:

The South American poets who had a meeting in Concepcion, Chile, last winter, considered the two Americans present to be "innocents"—should one say fools? Especially one—who was continually making a huge fuss about how poets needed lots of drugs and sex and was always the first one to go home.

The two poets were Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, Ginsberg being the one making the fuss about drugs and sex. This difference of opinion on sex and drugs marked the relationship from the beginning as indicated by Ginsberg's journal entry of August 1955 of a dream he had of Merton after reading *Tears of the Blind Lion*:

Saw Fr Thomas Merton in the halls, come on a visit to the house, dressed in swinging robes - we talked, he brought a friend, I looked in the bathroom to see friend - a redhead (hipster looking) with small rat red mouth & pale skin, and another cat - He says, "I need to be told how I look," laughing, he's English-like, I say - "Still pimply adolescence not grown old - rather like Hamlet" (he looks awful but I don't want to insult him too much) with his long cassock & I notice big ungainly legs & wide effeminate ass underneath, and like Auden probably tits on flabby chest and like Hollander long arms, then this head of his which is young English schoolboy big-eared - I say "Tell me once & for all about this divine

ecstasy - does it come once or often? How long does it last? Is it long or short? How many times etc.?" This after I said he was like Hamlet. My feeling a mixture of affection envy & contempt for his body - I thought, with an ass like that no wonder he's a mystic, O well he's no worse than anyone trying to escape not getting laid.¹⁸

The dream reveals radically different attitudes regarding the body; attitudes that initially separated the celibate monk and the gay poet. With time, however, the body would become common ground. Compare, for example, the following two poems. The first is an excerpt from Ginsberg's "Song."

The weight of the world
is love.
Under the burden
of solitude.
under the burden
of dissatisfaction

the weight
the weight we carry
is love

The warm bodies
shine together
in the darkness,
the hand moves
to the center
of the flesh,
the skin trembles
in the happiness
and the soul comes
joyful to the eye -

yes, yes,
that's what
I wanted,
I always wanted,
I always wanted,
to return
to the body
where I was born.

The second is from Merton's "May Song"

It is May
We weep for love
In the imperfect wood
In the land of bodies

O lonely little boat
Carry me away
Across the sea of wine

O small strong boat
Bring me
My child.

What Merton Found of Value in the Relationship

There are two phrases that provide some insight into what Merton valued in this relationship: 'Christians turned inside out' and 'monks in reverse.' Both refer, in different ways, to the body as an essential aspect of the contemplative life.

The first phrase, 'Christians turned inside out,' occurs in reference to non-Christian writers who are, none-the-less, of value to the person living the contemplative life. On 24th October 1958, Merton's 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal' appeared in *Commonweal*.¹⁹ In this article, Merton wrote:

A sincere and efficacious desire to enter more deeply into the beauty of the Christian mystery implies a willingness to sacrifice the things which are called "beautiful" by the decadent standards of a materialistic world. Yet the Christian contemplative need not confine himself to religious, still less to professionally "pious" models... One might add that a fully integrated vision of our time and of its spirit presupposes some contact with the genius of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who are Christians turned inside out.

Baudelaire and, in particular, Rimbaud were predecessors to the Beats. The line 'fully integrated vision of our time and of its spirit' sheds some light on the phrase 'Christians turned inside out.' There are two kinds of Christians. There are right-side-out Christians and inside-out ones. It is only by recognizing both sides that one can have a 'fully integrated vision.' So, what makes someone like Rimbaud an inside-out Christian? They approach the Gospel from the inside out, from the body, from the desires of the body, or as E. M. Forster says, 'the holiness of direct desire.'

In a letter to Bruno Paul Schlesinger dated 13th December 1961, Merton stresses the importance of this human dimension:

That we have come to a certain kind of "end" of the development of Western Christianity is no accident... the survival of religion as an abstract formality without a humanist matrix, religion apart from man and almost in some sense apart from God Himself... is killing religion in our midst today, not the atheists. So that one who seeks God without culture and without humanism tends inevitably to promote a religion that is irreligious and even unconsciously atheistic... Sorry if I sound like a beatnik, but this is what is driving intelligent people as far from Christianity as they can travel. Hence, in one word, a pretended Christianity, without the human dimensions which nature herself has provided, our religion becomes a lunar landscape of meaningless gestures and observances.²⁰

The second phrase, 'monks in reverse,' occurs in the following manner. On 18th September 1966, Merton wrote to *The New Yorker* in response to an article that they had printed at the time of Lenny Bruce's death.

In *The New Yorker* for August 20 – which I have just now happened to see – there is a paragraph in "Talk of the Town" about Lenny Bruce and Bud Powell. I was very moved by it. Having been for quite some time in a monastery I had never had any occasion to hear – or even to hear of – either Lenny Bruce... What I would like to know is this: how can I now hear what Lenny Bruce was saying, and learn more about the struggle he had to face—doubtless much of it against my Church, or representatives of it. Would it be possible for the writer of that paragraph to get in touch with me and fill me in a little on this situation, and perhaps send me references that I could consult? I would be very grateful. Need I add that my interest is entirely sympathetic to Lenny Bruce and what he was evidently trying to achieve?²¹

Eighteen months later, March of 1968, Merton received a copy of *The Essential Lenny Bruce*²² as a gift from Lionel Landry.²³ Merton wrote to Landry:

I looked straight at the back and found that actually what he did was a marvelous adaptation of a much longer and more intricate poem of mine. This was the same poem, but cut down to a series of left hooks for the night club or wherever he did it, and much funnier. My own is very dour and quiet, this is rambunctious and wild.

Lawrence Schiller, in his book, *Ladies and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce*,²⁴ tells about the routine that was based on 'A Devout Meditation in Memory

of Adolf Eichmann,' with overtones from 'Chant to Be Used in Processions Around A Site With Furnaces.'

Some nights he would end his act with a bit that had no precedent in the history of American night club humor. It was inspired by a poem by Thomas Merton that Lenny had read and treasured for a couple of years... It was much too strong for a nightclub audience. Lenny had been holding back with it, waiting till the time was right. Now was the time. Every night he would enact that chilling poem. He would call for a single pin spot. Then he would put on a very straight German accent. Staring sternly at the audience, he was Adolf Eichmann standing in the dock: My name is Adolf Eichmann. The Jews came every day to vat they thought would be fun in the showers.

Merton's response? 'People like Lenny Bruce are really monks in reverse and hence I feel much closer to them than I do to say the President of General Motors.' This curious phrase, 'monks in reverse' is perhaps best understood in light of the *New York Times* article that he had read.²⁵

Lenny Bruce... had a huge appetite for life, in all its transience, absurdity, and potentiality. What he wanted was to make it all more real, to startle his listeners into realizing how much they were missing as a result of their evasions. He kept asking them, as they laughed, why certain words were "obscene." Who had made them "obscene," and why? Similarly, he insisted on exploring — with a bizarre accuracy of perception — the chasm between Christianity and churches, between love and marriage, between law and lawyers, between the urgency of fantasies and the insubstantial safety of "normality." He had no programmatic answers. His delight was in questioning those who had given up trying to find answers. But the questioning was never malicious; it was affecting — as well as risibly — hopeful.

With this in mind, Merton may have been suggesting that there are two kinds of monks; one that moves in forward direction and another in reverse. If the above description is of a monk in reverse, we may conclude that this kind of monk engages the world in playful antics of a backward sort with the hope of opening a larger vision of life in all its grandeur that includes rather than excludes the body and all of the experiences of the body.

These two references indicate that Merton had come to recognize that there were individuals who were fulfilling the roles of monks in the modern world, even though in reverse and from the inside out. As Merton explains in a letter to Parra: 'today the poets and other artists

tend to fulfill many of the functions that were once the monopoly of monks—and which of course the monks have made haste to abandon, in order to center themselves firmly in the midst of a square society.' So, forward moving monks, the ones who wear their habits right side out, fit the square world. The Beat generation, on the other hand, are monks who are moving in reverse with their habits on inside out; they neither fit nor care to fit in square society. They live outside the square establishment, beyond social conventions. They situate themselves between society's restrictions and the individual's freedom to explore and discover his or her true humanity at the deepest possible level.

This notion of a different order of monk had been developing since the late 1950s and is more fully understood in light of Merton's correspondence with Milosz, and his work on Camus. It is a notion, however, that finds its theological roots in Clement of Alexandria. In his correspondence with Milosz, Merton works out an understanding of solidarity with those who risk everything for the third position that refuses to allow life to be subordinated to political agenda. In his essays on Camus, Merton works at developing mutual understanding with a non-Christian with whom he has found common ground as reflected in his reference to Camus as 'that Algerian cenobite.' In Clement of Alexandria, Merton found a model for his approach to the world, one that affirmed, rather than negated the world whereby those outside the institutional Church may nonetheless participate in the Gospel.

Merton found in the Beat generation monks in the modern world who stand outside the structures of their day, risking everything for the third position that rebels against the subordination of human life to power and authority invested in social institutions. He saw their work as compatible with the Gospel. Living outside monastic walls, these monks howled through the dark hours of the night in the streets of America. Merton was their friend: a friend who recognized and valued what they had to offer.

It was that howling or hullabaloo that caught Merton's attention. He recognized in them what was of value to him as he was trying to redefine his monastic vocation. Merton's poem, 'Five Virgins,' written during a time of intense interest in the Beats, reveals what it was.

There were five howling virgins
Who came

To the Wedding of the Lamb
 With their disabled motorcycles
 And their oil tanks
 Empty

But since they knew how
 To dance
 A person says to them
 To stay anyhow.

And there you have it:
 There were five noisy virgins
 Without gas
 But looking good
 In the traffic of the dance

Consequently
 There were ten virgins
 At the Wedding of the Lamb.

Howling or hullabaloo (craziness that makes a lot of noise accompanied by disorder) described Merton's state of mind at this time. The journal entries around this date indicate his ongoing struggle to move more deeply into silence and solitude while, at the same time, very much engaged and frustrated by numerous issues ranging from political activism to theological wrangling, as well as, his relationship with M that he referred to as 'hullabaloo.' As difficult as these contradictions were, he accepted them, understanding them as essential aspects of his monastic identity. Hullabaloo had found a permanent place in his life. Faith could no longer be understood as an evasion of the absurd via endless explanations but rather a particular way of encountering the absurd as suggested in this poem.

How is one to face the absurd? With the reference to dancing virgins, we see the converging of two ideas that Merton had been entertaining for some time: the metaphor of the dance for the contemplative life and the idea of *le point vierge*²⁶ or what he would sometimes refer to as the 'still point' or the 'third position.' It seems reasonable to suggest that behind the images of this poem is an emerging insight that the howling virgins who know how to dance at *le point vierge* participate in the wedding of the Lamb. *Le point vierge* is a metaphysical reality and the inclusion of the howling virgins in the wedding of the Lamb is transforming his monastic community in

such a way that it included persons who we could easily imagine arriving at Gethsemani on motorcycles. His understanding of the contemplative life as the obedience and vigilance of wise virgins was shifting to include the talents of those confused virgins who arrive late but get in anyway because they are good looking and know how to dance.

Who might Merton have had in mind? Around this time, Merton received a letter from James Laughlin regarding Bob Dylan's motorcycle accident. Four months earlier, Merton told Laughlin that he had been listening to Dylan's latest album, *Bringing It All Back Home*. Merton had developed an interest in Dylan as a poet and social phenomenon, as had many of the Beats. Merton referred to Dylan's music as the new liturgy.²⁷ Intending to write an essay on Dylan, he asked Laughlin to send him articles regarding the young rock singer. Strange as this may sound, it had become more characteristic than uncharacteristic of Merton during these years. It reveals something of the nature of Merton's growing circle of friends outside the walls of Gethsemani. He had known for some time that he needed contact with a broader community.²⁸ During these years, Merton's monastic community—that is to say his idea of that community or, specifically, his monastic identity—was going through a transformation. He found solidarity with another kind of monk, one as essential to the wedding of the Lamb as those he had found within the monastic walls of Gethsemani.

Solidarity—yes. I can see it is going to be a strange kind of underground solidarity perhaps, with people who know they cannot belong to the world of the establishment, organized insanity. Who perhaps have some other, slightly better, insanity—that may make sense if anyone survives.²⁹

Conclusion

Merton recognized that these wayward virgins who desired to be saints as he did had something of value to offer those who remain vigilant in solemn processions. 'Five Virgins' reveals what he had found of importance in this relationship, as well as, how it was unfolding into his efforts to understand monasticism in a new way. The Beats represented the hullabaloo, the absurd, the *mysterium tremendum*. This strange and unpredictable movement of God, Merton believed, had been walled out by the old monastic system. So he redefined his monastic identity to include body and soul, the sacred and the profane,

order and chaos, tradition and improvisation. He did this by integrating back into his life that which he had left outside when he entered the monastery, that which had taken shape in him at Columbia and now presented itself to him in the Beats. For Merton, this was the only way in which monasticism could be redefined. Having embodied this new understanding of what it means to be a monk within himself, he had in effect brought a new monastic order into the world. Constructing a monastic identity that consisted of these two dimensions, one constructed above ground, one subterranean, he became the new monk wherein the subterranean world of the body would be allowed to enrich and inform a new way of being a monk.

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