

In the end it did not successfully continue as a relationship. Perhaps it opened up for Merton a glimpse of what the integration of love and solitude might be, but there is no clear indication that Merton felt he had achieved that. He never proclaimed the episode a success, and might have called it futile—but without ‘the lip-smacking over the bitterness and futility of it’. There is no talk about tragedy. ‘Life is not futile if you simply live it. It remains futile, however, as long as you keep watching yourself live it’ (p. 322).

The remainder of the journal appears to me just this: an unselfconscious living from day to day, with its usual interests, gripes and rewards. Occasionally there is some letter or phone call from M, and this throws him right back into all his helplessness. But the weight of the situation and his own choices lead to continued life in the hermitage.

One would expect some notable effort on his part to surmise what wisdom was gained from this experience, yet only the briefest remarks appear in this volume and in Volume 7, and they are usually negative in tone. This is a surprising omission indeed, and one might surmise that this is precisely the content of an unpublished writing of this period entitled *Retrospect*. *Retrospect* was an extended letter written to M, and a copy was mailed to J. Laughlin with the stipulation that it was not for publication. By Merton’s request it was not to be shown to anyone. It will eventually be placed in the Houghton Library at Harvard.

By his own account, Merton considered *Retrospect* ‘poorly written and not very interesting’.

I just thought I would write, for her, an account of what the whole thing has looked like. But I did not really manage it very well, and it is a poor piece of writing. Still, I thought it ought to be there with the other stuff as an authentic record.¹

For someone pursuing a monastic or other hermeneutic this leaves a critical gap. Was Merton better off for this experience or worse? What might a monk or nun learn from it? Perhaps the absence of such an overview itself is significant. Any effort to summarize or judge it may have seemed a falsification. The text we are presented with shows sufficient depth of beauty, love and loyalty, beyond all the ambiguity, to give us a much needed wisdom on what celibacy and monastic life is for someone so deeply committed to the search for God as was Thomas Merton.

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COOPER, David D. (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 320. \$35.00 hb.

The most significant sentence of this selection is seemingly innocuous. Written neither by Thomas Merton nor James Laughlin—the founder of New Directions Publishing—but by David D. Cooper, the volume’s editor, the sentence appears early in the text:

In preparing these letters for publication, I employ the editorial apparatus designed by Hugh Witemeyer for his edition of *William Carlos Williams and*

1. David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 290.

James Laughlin: Selected Letters, the first in a uniform seven volume series covering Laughlin's correspondence with principal New Directions writers (p. xxix).

Sentences like these are easy to skip. A reader who is excited, who wants to move quickly and deeply into the correspondence itself—correspondence that, as Cooper suggests, reveals 'a search for integrity as writers', a 'desire to love meaningfully and fully in a world that often seems to defy authentic living and real purpose' (p. xxiv)—may see this sentence simply as part of the book's substratum. As such, the sentence is merely informative. It is merely Cooper's invitation to interested readers who want to explore the layers of editorial decision-making. Sentences like this one, sentences that outline editorial strategy, are servants to the text itself: they are not what people purchase; not, finally, what people pay to read.

Yet such sentences are crucial because they are invitations to the textual sediment. Such sentences allow one to see that on which the text stands. In the case of *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, one sees that this text is supported by a simple idea: Merton is important and Laughlin is important and they are, in great part, important because they were part of a matrix of literary activity that was, and is, central to twentieth-century American culture. As the sentence tells its readers, this selection of Merton's and Laughlin's correspondence is part of a 'series covering Laughlin's correspondence with principal New Directions writers'. This sentence suggests, then, that Merton is a principal New Directions writer, that the principal writers published by New Directions are important enough to warrant the publication of selections of their correspondence with James Laughlin, and that James Laughlin is at the center of all this.

The importance of New Directions authors is indisputable as America moves quickly to the end of the millennium. Consider three, briefly: Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder and Denise Levertov. Rexroth (whose correspondence with Laughlin is part of the Norton series), was at the center of the San Francisco Renaissance and provided literary guidance to members of the Beat Movement that followed, including Gary Snyder. Snyder, one of the leaders of the Beat Movement, won the Pulitzer Prize for *Turtle Island*, published by New Directions in 1974. Finally, Levertov, arguably the finest American poet in the latter half of this century, was a stalwart New Directions writer.

Not surprisingly, all three appear in the letters Merton and Laughlin exchanged. Merton, in letter 89, speaks approvingly of Rexroth's autobiography, which was published in 1966 (he was exchanging letters with Rexroth himself at least as early as 1950: see letter 44). Of Levertov, Merton writes in letter 92 that 'she is one of the few poets into whose experience I can enter fully and with complete agreement and total acceptance' (p. 178). So too, Merton commends Snyder's essay 'Passage to More than India', in letter 195.

That Merton lived in the world of these writers is too often overlooked both by Merton devotees and by the literary-critical establishment. Those Merton devotees who would forget—or ignore—Merton's place in the literary avant-garde do a disservice to the monk as writer. Those literary-critical figures who would forget—or ignore—Merton's place in the literary avant-garde do a disservice to the writer as monk. Further, consider these teasers: in letter 201, Merton speaks of having slept, on a mattress, in the office of City Lights Bookstore, center of the west coast avant-garde. Imagine Merton the monk in San Francisco in 1968 sleeping on the floor of a

radical bookstore. Also, Cooper informs readers that following the Bangkok conference, Merton was to have met Snyder in Japan, where Snyder was living and studying Buddhism. Merton never did, because of his death. Imagine Merton the monk in Japan in 1968, having conversations with Snyder about Zen Buddhism. This selection of letters helps to solidify Merton's place as a peer not simply to other priests and monks, but to the artists who were re-writing the American experience.

The person who is in great part responsible for making all these writers—Merton among them—central to American letters and culture is none other than James Laughlin himself. Scion of a Pittsburgh steel family, Laughlin used his money and connections—at the suggestion of Ezra Pound (pp. xiii-xiv)—to promote the literary avant-garde and in so doing help reshape American culture.

Laughlin, in fact, tutored Merton in the avant-garde. It was Laughlin, more often than not, who sent to Merton the works of authors whom Merton should read, at least as Laughlin saw it. See, for instance, letter 17, in which Merton thanks Laughlin for sending him copies of books by William Carlos Williams and William Everson. Significant about this letter is its date: 12 May 1948. Laughlin began to introduce Merton to the avant-garde long before Merton himself fully joined it. Consider, as well, letter 199. Here, on the eve of a trip Merton was to take to California, Laughlin provides Merton with the addresses of such literary rebels and luminaries as Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Robert Duncan and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Revealed in *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* is, then, an intimate glance into one of the writers who constitutes part of the twentieth-century American literary avant-garde, the publisher who helped him to become so, and their relationship.

This relationship was not entirely professional. It was also personal, a relationship not only of writer and publisher, but that of friends. This emerges subtly in letter 136 and letter 137. In letter 136, Merton offers this to Laughlin: he is nearly 50 years of age, and he will, most likely, become a hermit. Given these facts, he wants to 'get my affairs in some sort of order' (p. 251) and wants, in short, for Laughlin to serve as his literary executor. The end of Merton's life (at least his productive writing life) is in sight now, and he wants to entrust Laughlin with his literary remains.

In letter 137, Laughlin also begins to explore the fact of his aging (he is Merton's age). In what can only be seen as an act of friendship, Laughlin tells Merton that he, Merton, might want to choose a literary executor who is younger (what if Laughlin is dead and can't fulfill duty?) and not his publisher (isn't there a potential conflict of interest?). Still, Laughlin tells Merton that 'nothing would give me greater personal satisfaction than to be able to do some work for you...now or in the future' (p. 255). This is not the language of a publisher hoping to further the career of one of his writers (and by consequence, his own). This is, rather, the language of a friend.

The tenor of this review, it should be obvious, has been positive. Cooper has provided a great service not only to readers interested in Merton, but also to readers interested in Laughlin's enormous influence in American letters. Nonetheless, the book has two small shortcomings.

First, there is far too much of Merton and far too little of Laughlin. Cooper tells

us that he 'respected James Laughlin's desire that the present volume include, like the others in the Norton series, many more Merton letters than his own' (p. xxvii). While one wants to applaud Laughlin for his desire, so it seems, to foreground his writers, one nonetheless wishes that Laughlin was more present in the text. His importance to twentieth-century American letters and culture in general, and to Merton's development as a writer in particular, cannot be underestimated; it would be a delight to delve more deeply, more broadly, into the publisher himself.

Secondly, an astute reader will discover that as the correspondence nears its end (say from 1966 onward), Merton begins to change the way in which he signs his letters. Prior to this period, he nearly always signs with some use of 'Christ', as in, 'Cordially in Christ' (p. 265). However, Merton comes to discontinue this practice, preferring lines like, 'All the best' (p. 279). One wonders why. Is this an indication of a deepening friendship, where the formality of the priestly farewell is no longer needed? Is it an indication, coincident with Merton's interest in non-Christian religions, specifically Zen, that a theological/metaphysical change is afoot? One wishes that Cooper would have addressed this in his introduction. As the editor of this correspondence, and as an very advanced reader of Merton (see his *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989]), Cooper might be able to provide insight into the sign of the signature.

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SHANNON, William H., *'Something of a Rebel': Thomas Merton, his Life and Works. An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), pp. 175. \$9.95 paperback. ISBN 0-86716-272-4.

It is a delicate and daring task to attempt to tell the story of a person's life. Surely the author of such a work must be flooded and barraged with a torrent of ideas and images. What is the most appropriate metaphor, the ideal point of departure, the container that will carry the message and best communicate the essence as well as nuance of personality? This is the toil of gladness that William Shannon has set for himself in attempting to introduce the life and works of Thomas Merton to a new and wider audience.

'Something of a REBEL': after so long a time, the title stirred my imagination and lured me to make an appointment wherein I laid hopes on encountering a sprite, a tumble of words, a yank of phrases, that could and would somehow jump-start the wearisome mystical desires of my boomer-aged soul. My generation was suckled on the rebellious pap of the 1960s and perhaps the appointment I was making regarding this book's title, was a naive desire to feel once again a fresh hint of hope that Merton's words so often spawned.

But at my age one should know that you don't make appointments unless you're willing to be disappointed. Shannon states outright in his introduction, 'Some might question my using the word "rebel" in the title of a book about Gethsemani's famous monk'. I must admit I didn't question it; it seemed right, a good point of departure, though it needed to be given more breadth and depth. I imagined a discussion of how the shallow, self-absorbed rebel, himself a metaphor of our age, was transformed into a creative spirit and resolved his rebellion. It is true, Merton was a rebel who resisted accepted conventions, as Shannon suggests. This