

Canaries in the Mineshaft

Review of

Thomas Merton and the Beats of the North Cascades

By Ron Dart

with Illustrations by Arnold Shives

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Reviewed by **David Joseph Belcastro**

Ron Dart aptly describes this publication as a “missive.” From beginning to end, the writing is informal and familiar. Eventually, one feels that he or she is reading a letter from a friend who is sharing a personal experience of mountain peaks and spiritual pilgrimages from which an alternative perspective of the world is gained. While drawing on the literary works, journals and correspondence of others, the missive is as much about the author as it is about a few Beat writers from the Pacific Northwest and a monk from Kentucky. So, as we read along, we learn that the author presently lives on the rock rim of Sumas Mountain, climbed Jack Kerouac’s fabled Hozomeem, and in 1975 was introduced to the writings of Thomas Merton. Does this make the work any less valuable? I don’t believe so. It simply demonstrates that the earlier work of monks and poets has now found new ground in which to take root and flourish.

This is not to suggest that the title is misleading. On the contrary, Dart does share his reflections on Merton’s relation to the Beat writers of the North Cascades, in particular, Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and Cid Corman. The narrative of these friendships, woven from their letters and journal entries, tells the story of an American tradition shaped by those who had the courage to witness to another vision of this land than the one that prevails in the institutions of government and commerce. As the story unfolds, one becomes aware of a monastic community that extended far beyond the walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani – a community of writers who contributed significantly to Merton’s formation as a monk and a poet of the twentieth century. With Rexroth, Merton searched for a form of poetry that spoke to human longing for an authentic experience of the contemplative life. With Kerouac, Merton experimented with the hermetical life. With Snyder and Corman, Merton shared an interest in Eastern traditions. While Merton and these writers were alike in many ways, Dart rightly points out that Merton offered something of his own and something of importance to the conversation that took place among these writers. While the Beats tended to idealize and romanticize Eastern traditions and neglect or even reject what the Biblical traditions have to offer, Merton, while interested in and open to traditions other than his own, was able to maintain more balance in his perspective. Furthermore, his life as a monk living within a monastic

community and under the *Rule of St. Benedict*, distinguished Merton from this group that was far more anti-establishment and in some ways far less disciplined.

As informative as this missive is with regard to Merton's relation to these writers, there is something else going on here that may be of even greater importance. I sense that Dart is less interested in Merton's friendship with writers from the North Cascades than in what brought them together. He not only wants to restore the message these men proclaimed in their writings but also to witness to the vision that was manifested in the lives they lived. These were writers, he points out, that were "committed to the integration of thought and action, idea and life." This, he believes, is what makes their contribution to the present discussions on spirituality unique. They offered more than a mere academic study of the subject. Because they were concerned about all aspects of life and desired the transformation of the human community at the deepest level, Dart describes them as "sensitive canaries that maritime miners took down mine shafts" who are particularly sensitive to toxins in the air. Consequently, their "lives and writings warn us about such poison and point the way to better, clearer and cleaner places and peaks." The toxin about which they sound an alarm – and Dart here sounds a second alarm – is American culture itself that has become primarily, if not exclusively, *vita activa* driven by the religious and political vision of Manifest Destiny. Merton and Beat writers came together to challenge this image of America with an alternative *vita contemplativa*. They sought "something saner, deeper, more human and humane in a world dominated by rationalism, empiricism, technology and a frantic work ethics."

Each chapter is introduced by prints created by Arnold Shives, an artist, hiker, and mountaineer. As I sat awhile with each print, I became aware that they share something in common with Merton's photography. They are zen-like, witnessing as they do to the connections between landscape and inscape, between nature and the interior life of the soul, between mountain-climbing and spiritual journeys. Each print gives expression to the language of peak and valley experiences that must be, as Dart points out, integrated into our lives as "the freedom of the mountains and the demands and responsibilities in the lowlands." These prints greatly enhance the reading experience. Dart and Shives are men of the North Cascades whose vision as represented here in words and prints bring alive the relations and labors of those who proceeded them. Keeping to the parameters of a missive and not venturing into a more scholarly genre, they explore and thereby open new areas for further research which is, as Dart points out, sufficiently important that it should be taken up by those interested in "American and Canadian mountaineers, poets, monks and artists of the peaks of the Canadian Coastal and Cascade ranges to further the vision of the True North and offer an alternate way of seeing the peaks and doing politics." As such, this missive may be read as an invitation to the International Thomas Merton Society to organize a conference that focuses on the Merton-Beat connection, the tradition they embodied, and the vision they offer for the Americas.