

## Interview with Lawrence Ferlinghetti

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*Conducted by Paul Wilkes<sup>1</sup> and edited by Gray Matthews*

**Lawrence Ferlinghetti:** I read *Seven Storey Mountain* in the late 1940s. At the time I was reading a lot of Catholic literature; St. Augustine. . . . And I went to France, and just before I read *Seven Storey Mountain*, and then it meant a lot to me at that time. I can't . . . . now I couldn't put my finger on it. . . . He was probably the first modern Catholic writer that I had ever read. And inasmuch as I had gone to Columbia University also in 1946-47, I identified with him quite strongly. And then it was only in 1961 that at City Lights Books we published a *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. This was issue number one. And the first thing in here is Merton's "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces." This *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* came into being because we asked a lot of non-political writers and thinkers and poets and artists to make a statement on the state of the world at that time. And . . . .

**Paul Wilkes:** How was Merton regarded in those circles . . . non-political or anti-war . . . ?

**Ferlinghetti:** Well, he was a poet. And that's the way the poets that we were publishing identified with him. We . . . this was the time of the early beat writing – 1950s and the early '60s. And I think most of the beat writers identified with Merton inasmuch as they read him at all. I don't know how much Merton they read, but . . . .

**Wilkes:** What does "beat writers" mean?

**Ferlinghetti:** Well, I was thinking of the main ones – Ginsberg and Gary Snyder and Gregory Corso, and Burroughs and Peter Orlovsky and . . . there were people associated with the group that also are in this issue. For instance, well, look on the back. Bertrand Russell – he wasn't exactly associated with the group. Gary Snyder. You see, it was a . . . we identified with a lot of people across . . . around the world. Albert Camus and . . . I see Norman Mailer is in here, Kenneth Patchen. Patchen certainly had . . . I don't know whether Patchen knew Merton or not. I sort of doubt it.

**Wilkes:** Let's go back to, to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, reading it. . . . Try to remember the quality. Was he a more serious or more acceptable religious writer – more intelligent or what?

**Ferlinghetti:** What do you mean?

**Wilkes:** Why would this be a book that you would remember or that you would . . .

**Ferlinghetti:** Well, because I was very involved in exploring Catholicism at that time. I remember when I was in France, just before that I had been down to Solesmes, which is a monastery in the south of France. And I was particularly interested in the Trappist discipline. But what made *Seven Storey Mountain* interesting to me was that here was this Columbia intellectual that was converted. Especially at a time when most poets were going the other way and becoming unconverted. I mean, Jack Kerouac went from Catholicism to Buddhism. It's not that he left Catholicism, but he became more and more of a Buddhist. It would be interesting to know whether Kerouac had read *Seven Storey Mountain* at Columbia or . . . shortly thereafter.

**Wilkes:** When you were at Columbia in '46-'47, did they know that Merton had been there?

**Ferlinghetti:** I wasn't conscious of that. I was in the English graduate school, whereas Ginsberg and Kerouac were in the undergraduate – in Columbia College, about the same time. But I didn't know them and I think in the English graduate school they weren't conscious of very much in the twentieth century at that time. I seemed to begin to get lost in the seventeenth century after I was there a few months. I escaped to France instead of going on for a Ph.D.

**Wilkes:** Merton's religious experience and going to join the Trappists – I mean a lot of people have religious experiences in their life but he's a guy who seemed to have held on to it. What do you think . . . did that mean something, that he had had . . . that he had stayed with it for so long – did it have any kind of validity in the outside world to people like yourself?

**Ferlinghetti:** That he had stayed with it for so long – when?

**Wilkes:** As a Trappist. That he had done that for 26 years, he had stayed in the trenches, I guess, really.

**Ferlinghetti:** Well, there must have been a conflict between the Trappist discipline of maintaining silence and his need to publish. And I think the Trappists probably welcomed his publication in the end because he certainly enriched their monastery. So that he evidently had a lenient Father Superior that allowed him to publish, which – it's debatable whether a Trappist should be allowed to publish at all.

**Wilkes:** Were you happy to have him in that particular issue?

**Ferlinghetti:** Oh, yes. We were very honored and delighted to get it. For one thing, we wrote many, many people, who never . . . famous people around the world who never. . . . We were very happy to have Merton in this particular issue of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* because so many people of his stature didn't even answer when we asked them to sound off and take a position on the situation in the world at that time. We were hoping for political or trans-political statements from many people like Merton in various disciplines besides . . . I mean in religion and in painting and so forth. . . . Many never answered. I remember I had a marvelous letter from Alan Watts after this issue came out. He got a copy of it and he immediately wrote me a letter saying he was really sorry that he hadn't answered, because he would have been honored to be in here alongside of Merton and alongside of the other names in there. So . . . Alan Watts was in the San Francisco Bay area, so we were in contact with him but he just didn't have time to come up with it . . . and, yeah.

**Wilkes:** Tell me a little bit about your first meeting with Merton.

**Ferlinghetti:** The only time I met Merton . . . well, the only time I met Merton in person was when he came to San Francisco on the way to the Far East. And it was several years after we published his piece. And I don't think I had any correspondence with him.<sup>2</sup> I knew he was coming, we picked him up at the airport and then he stayed at the City Lights editorial apartment at 485 Filbert Street, in San Francisco – little, tiny two-room apartment. And then we went for a walk in the evening. Before we turned in we went to a coffeehouse – Malvina's Coffehouse on Grant and Union Street. And we sat at a table in the front window and he was quite interested in any beautiful woman that walked by, I remember. It was a natural Trappist interest – why not? So then, we took him to the . . . or I took him to the airport the next morning. And that was

the last anyone saw of him. That was a great shock to hear that he'd died. And there seemed to be a great mystery around how he had died. I don't know whether you . . .

**Wilkes:** Well, what was your reaction when you heard that he had died?

**Ferlinghetti:** I thought that he had finally resolved the conflict about a Trappist remaining silent. It . . . there was very little to be found out about how he died, so . . . he just disappeared. He disappeared into silence.

**Wilkes:** Maybe we can have a little of that reading from that . . .

**Ferlinghetti:** This was the first issue of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. It was published in San Francisco by City Lights Books in 1961. The first piece in here is Merton's. It's a prose poem: "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces":<sup>3</sup>

How we made them sleep and purified them

How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent

How I commanded

I made clean appointments and then I made the travellers sleep and after that I made soap

I was born into a Catholic family but as these people were not going to need a priest I did not become a priest I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many

When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for fun in the bathroom they did not guess

It was a very big bathroom for two thousand people it awaited their arrival and they arrived safely

There would be an orchestra of merry widows not all the time much art

If they arrived at all they would be given a greeting card to

send home taken care of with good jobs wishing you would come to our joke

Another improvement I made was I built the chambers for two thousand invitations at a time the naked votaries were disinfected with Zyklon B

Children of tender age were always invited by reason of their youth they were unable to work they were marked out for play

They were washed like the others and more than the others

Very frequently women would hide their children in the piles of clothing but of course when we came to find them we would send the children into the chamber to be bathed

How often I commanded and made improvements and sealed the door on top there were flowers the men came with crystals I guaranteed the crystal parlor

I guaranteed the chamber and it was sealed you could see through portholes

They waited for the shower it was not hot water that came through vents though efficient winds gave full satisfaction portholes showed this

The satisfied all ran together to the doors awaiting arrival it was guaranteed they made ends meet

How I could tell by their cries that love came to a full stop I found the ones I had made clean after about a half hour

Jewish male inmates then worked up nice they had rubber boots in return for adequate food I could not guess their appetite

Those at the door were taken apart out of a fully stopped love by rubber made<sup>4</sup> inmates strategic hair and teeth being used later for defense

Then the males took off<sup>5</sup> all clean love rings and made away with happy gold

How I commanded and made soap 12 lbs fat 10 quarts water eight oz to a lb of caustic soda but it was hard to find any fat

A big new firm promoted steel forks operating on a cylinder they got the contract and with faultless workmanship delivered very fast goods

"For transporting the customers we suggest using light carts on wheels a drawing is submitted"

"We acknowledge four steady furnaces and an emergency guarantee"

"I am a big new commander operating on a cylinder I elevate the purified materials boil for 2 to 3 hours and then cool"

For putting them into a test fragrance I suggested an express elevator operated by the latest cylinder it was guaranteed

Their love was fully stopped by our perfected ovens but the love rings were salvaged

Thanks to the satisfaction of male inmates operating the heaters without need of compensation our guests were warmed

All the while I had obeyed perfectly

So I was hanged in a commanding position with a full view of the site plant and grounds

You smile at my career but you would do as I did if you knew yourself and dared

In my day we worked hard we saw what we did our self-sacrifice was conscientious and complete our work was faultless and detailed

Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done

The rest is silence.

**Wilkes:** Thomas Merton as a poet.

**Ferlinghetti:** I don't know how I would classify him as a poet. He was primarily a religious mystic who really couldn't escape the real world and he wouldn't allow his conscience to escape the real world. So it must have been a conflict all his life between retreat

and attack in the real world.

**Wilkes:** Was poetry more his . . . do you think it was a better form than prose for him?

**Ferlinghetti:** Well, I think *The Seven Storey Mountain* communicated with a much larger audience than any of his poetry ever did. I don't know . . . .

### Endnotes

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1. Editor's Note: this is the full transcript of the interview with poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti conducted by Paul Wilkes in preparation for his 1984 film, *Merton: A Film Biography*; an abbreviated version was published in Paul Wilkes, *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 28-31. Transcript edited by Gray Matthews.

2. Six letters from Merton to Ferlinghetti are included in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 267-73, four from 1961 dealing with the publication of Merton's prose poem, and two from 1968, the first concerning his upcoming visit, the second a note from Asia; the December 12, 1961 letter is also included in Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 19-21 [CWL 7]. There are also ten letters from Ferlinghetti to Merton in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY – eight from 1961 and two from 1968.

3. Thomas Merton, "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces," *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* 1 (1961) 5-7; Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 43-47; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345-49.

4. While this is the reading of the published versions, the correct reading, found in an earlier ditto of the poem, is almost certainly "male".

5. In *Emblems* and *Collected Poems* the reading is "removed".