

In the seventh and eighth chapters, Fox uses seven “heresies,” that he has been personally accused of, as subheadings to present and draw support from Merton’s credibility on these issues, chiefly centered on feminism, original blessing and original sin. Rightly or wrongly, the reader senses a slight self-defensive tone throughout the book as Fox finds Merton to be – as so many people do! – on *his* side of the balance.

Perhaps one learns more about Fox than Merton in this book, but it is an enjoyable romp through the last fifty years nevertheless. Perhaps this book could prompt other writers to take up Merton’s works in an exercise of self-examination as well as cultural reflection, to delve into Merton’s writings, after their own careers have been sculpted, to discover many likenesses in the art of living a living life. Whether we listen now or later, the chances are good that Merton will still be communicating with us in the years to come. Perhaps others who have kept their distance from a fearful “Merton machine” will learn as Matthew Fox did that Merton could never inspire noise and clamor, let alone exploitation.

Gray Matthews

DART, Ron, editor, *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String*, illustrations by Arnold Shives (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2016), pp. xi + 125. ISBN 978-1423927883 (paper) \$20.00.

Ron Dart’s new collection, *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String*, accented with lively illustrations by Arnold Shives, explores Thomas Merton’s contributions as a countercultural figure alongside the literary Beats, as well as other literary figures of the counterculture including William Everson, Denise Levertov and Henry Miller. These essays add much-needed detail to an underdeveloped area of Merton studies and also will be of interest to students of the mid-century counterculture and the Beat Generation. In a little over one hundred pages, the volume’s contributors explore the ways in which outsider voices expressed discontent with American exceptionalism, the overweening American materialism of the 1950s and 1960s, and technological and scientific rationality.

Thomas Merton and the Counterculture develops its narrative in loosely chronological form. The first chapters situate the counterculture’s early development within New York City’s intellectual milieu, especially at that central site of elite and alternative literary culture: Columbia University. These central figures who, like Merton, were connected to Columbia University, range from the influential and progressive figure of Mark Van Doren, long-time professor at Columbia University, to Al-

len Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. After focusing on these three East Coast figures, the collection's next three chapters turn to the western wing of the Beat movement, the San Francisco Renaissance, considering such varied figures as Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and William Everson. In the final two chapters, the collection turns to two additional figures recognized as part of the literary counterculture, Denise Levertov and Henry Miller.

In Chapter 1, Leah Cameron brings our attention to Thomas Merton's early literary training in her essay, "Their Own Beat: Mark Van Doren & Thomas Merton and the Revolution in Moral and Religious Poetry" (1-11). Cameron sets the collection's foundation with her focus on Merton's experience in the Columbia English Department studying under Mark Van Doren. Renowned progressive critic and poet himself, Van Doren provided Merton, as Cameron points out, with fundamental guidance in aligning the development of his oeuvre with his spiritual growth. As Cameron writes, "Van Doren professed the then somewhat revolutionary idea that spiritual insight could be experienced beyond the dogma and paradigms of religious institutions, pointing seekers towards an exploration of the self in the social order" (2). Cameron also establishes the Beats' bona fides as essentially religious poets in their focus on ultimate spiritual questions, writing that Merton and the Beats alike were seeking "to discern . . . the core virtues required to discover and revolutionize ideas about self-identity in the social order" (4).

Columbia and Van Doren also influenced the author of the Beat Generation's poetic clarion call, Allen Ginsberg. In Chapter 2, "Thomas Merton and Allen Ginsberg: Poet Prophets of the Modern World" (12-32), Stephanie Redekop examines the significant intellectual parallels between Merton and Ginsberg. While both Merton and Ginsberg had formative experiences at Columbia, the poets tended early on toward different forms of public action: Merton turned toward the contemplative world and his work at Gethsemani, while Ginsberg for many years lived a deracinated life. Despite these differences, Redekop underscores the essential romanticism of the Beats and in fact the entire counterculture through the 1960s. Teasing out one especially telling correspondence, Redekop points out that the same year that Merton wrote about William Blake in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Allen Ginsberg had the mystical experience – his Blake vision – that he struggled to recapture throughout the rest of his life (see 14). Redekop illustrates the importance of Blake to both their intellectual and spiritual development and explores the way Blake's "cosmology provides a unique and fertile framework by which to compare Merton and Ginsberg" (14). Just as Blake had struggled with rationalizing and systematizing the impulse of the Enlightenment, Redekop

argues, Merton and Ginsberg attempted through Blake's cosmology to develop "a mystical awareness of the fundamentally spiritual nature of reality and of the need for an imaginative, spiritual rebellion against the modern cult of hyper-rationalism" (18).

From the time of his uneasy fall into fame as the poster boy of the Beat Generation when *On the Road* was published, Jack Kerouac has dominated explorations of the Beats. In Chapter 3, Russel Hulsey's "from the Hammer of Heaven" (33-49) takes pains to describe the "myriad noteworthy similarities" (35) between Kerouac and Merton. Hulsey champions Kerouac's and Merton's status as spiritual guides or "holy messengers" (34), angels caught in the "lust and trappings" that come with being human (34). Most important among these similarities was the marginalization that made them effective cultural commentators. They both struggled to live at some distance from conventional mid-twentieth-century expectations. Both were deeply committed to the contemplative life, each "would take an inner-mounting turn in divergent directions with respect to their own private lives and sense of contentment" (41). They both practiced "non-attachment *meditation*" (40), and they were both connected to the Catholic faith, although they pursued this faith in different directions and to differing degrees. However, by the 1960s, their paths would diverge. Merton, from Gethsemani, "had begun launching his own strategic assault upon the American Way . . . by means of producing influential works of literary, poetic, socio-political, and contemplative merit, and of profound mystical insight" (37). After his experience on the road, Kerouac's ability to sustain this contemplative mode was challenged by his restlessness and, eventually, his deepening dependence on alcohol.

In a pivot from writers of the East Coast, in Chapter 4, "The Sacred in Merton and Snyder" (50-69), Ross Labrie turns to the burgeoning literary culture of San Francisco. Merton and Snyder were drawn together by their appreciation of the emergence of Beat culture and poetry. More important, Gary Snyder's retreat to a Zen monastery in Japan was influenced by D. T. Suzuki as well as Thomas Merton's own renunciatory monasticism (51). Labrie demonstrates that their distinctive (albeit interrelated) spiritual traditions and use of language underscore the importance for both of moving past an egoistic existence: "As with Snyder Merton came to value the Buddhist perception that the ego was a source of suffering. As a Christian Merton believed that the ego's gradual displacement would liberate the true, created self that contained something of the mind of the creator" (57). Through their reaction against the normative individualism of 1950s United States and their identification with religious traditions outside the "Puritan" mainstream, Snyder and Merton were able to push

against the entrenched and often unreflective dualism between nature and culture, and the deep-rooted mistrust of “nature.”

No discussion of West Coast literary culture is complete without reference to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet, publisher and founder of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. Robert Inchausti, in “‘Have You Read the Old Testament Prophets Lately?’ Merton, Ferlinghetti, and the (Near) Remaking of the Counterculture” (70-80), offers a brief essay exploring the “short but rich relationship” between Merton and Ferlinghetti (70). Like Ginsberg and Kerouac, Ferlinghetti shared with Merton connections to the Columbia University English Department (although Ferlinghetti did not attend Columbia until the end of World War II, and he would continue his education to obtain a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne). Ferlinghetti’s central position in the avant garde publishing world is celebrated; however, his correspondence with Merton is less well-known. By the 1960s, both Ferlinghetti and Merton were involved in protest against American imperialism and the Vietnam War and developing a relationship “which was really more of a correspondence centered on poetry, publishing, and protest” (71). In the early 1960s Merton and Ferlinghetti worked together on the *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, Ferlinghetti’s anti-Vietnam War protest periodical to which Merton contributed his “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces.” At this point, Inchausti explains, Merton’s commitment to social action was increasingly visible. The relationship was promising; however, we are reduced to speculation about what might have developed between them had Merton not died in 1968.

William Everson’s correspondence with Thomas Merton is the subject of the final longer essay. In Chapter 6, “Thomas Merton and William Everson” (81-99), Ron Dart redresses the omission of Everson (aka Brother Antoninus) and Merton from important social histories of the counterculture, such as Theodore Roszak’s *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (1969). Dart expressly aims to establish that Merton, the “Hippie Hermit” (83), and Everson, the “Beat Friar” (88), were indeed part of the 1960s counterculture. “Both men . . . had become the leading Roman Catholic poets in the United States and both had affinities with the Beat generation” (88). To illustrate this, Dart demonstrates the way their paths crossed, diverged and crossed again. Members of different monastic orders, and even in the face of official pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, they struggled with timely issues. Like Kerouac, and more pressingly, they struggled to understand the relationship of spirituality and sexuality. Like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and so many others, they grappled to define their position with regard to American imperialism. Their importance, for Dart,

is that they provide a glimpse into the possibilities of a monastic, Roman Catholic relationship to emerging counterculture and political expression: "Both men were wild birds in their different ways, had different flight patterns, landed in different places, but there were moments in their lives (mostly the 1960s) when, for a season, both men shared the same space under the blue canopy and often landed in the same pond" (98).

Chapter 6, Lynn Szabo's reflective "Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov: Encounters and Intersections" (100-16), explores the power of both Merton's and Levertov's theopoetics, as well as their intersecting influence on the development of her own "sacramentalist" position (103). After sharing the profound effect on her of reading Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, Szabo turns to the power of Denise Levertov's poetry, which "has affirmed the capacious intellect and intelligence, the wit, the charm, the rebel and the utter incarnationality that was the foundation of the re-identification of self that was her life" (106). Szabo's aim in the essays is not to establish clear-cut influence between the two poets, but rather to underscore affinities between them. Nevertheless, their paths did cross when Levertov visited Merton at Gethsemani, exactly a year before his death. They met in protest of the Vietnam War, sharing "kindred passions," and were "radical searchers for authenticity and influence in a world gone wild with war" (108).

Ron Dart closes this collection with a final pairing between Thomas Merton and Henry Miller. In Chapter 8, "Thomas Merton and Henry Miller: Our Faces" (117-23), Dart focuses not on the power of Miller's incendiary works such as *Tropic of Cancer*, but instead on his well-regarded non-fiction prose, such as *The Wisdom of the Heart* and *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Yet the notoriety of Miller's challenged works obscures deeper connections between the two writers, and indeed, as Dart points out, "Merton also noted that both he and Miller shared the same fate of having their books banned and censored" (120). Through study of Merton's letters to Miller over a period of roughly four years, Dart reveals Merton's keen interest in Miller's non-fiction prose, for, according to Dart, Merton recognized the power of Miller's insight in ways that establishment readers did not. "The fact that Miller and Merton were often maligned, caricatured and misunderstood speaks much about a shallow reaction to the sages, prophets and saints of the time" (123).

In a short space, the collection suggests further areas for study, as we look to discern the aspects of post-war culture, which allowed space to question the dominant ideologies of Cold War America. In addition to its contributions to our understanding of Merton within the broader cultural context, this collection illuminates the struggles of political and spiritual

seekers that made the counterculture after World War II so profane and yet inspirited, ludic and yet deeply serious.

Lisette N. Gibson

BRAGAN, Kenneth, *The Rising Importance of Thomas Merton's Spiritual Legacy* (Singapore: Strategic Book Publishing, 2016), pp. xviii + 49. ISBN: 978-1-681815893 (paper) \$9.95.

In the context of the 2015 centenary year of Thomas Merton's birth and the 2018 fiftieth anniversary of his death, it is certainly timely to assess Merton's spiritual legacy, and the title of this book offers to do that. In his introduction to this slim volume, Kenneth Bragan lays out his stall. He places Merton's spiritual legacy in the context of natural spirituality, which he feels has received a boost from recent neuroscience claims that "there is an area of the brain receptive to signs of transcendence just as there are areas responsive to the five senses" (vii). From this viewpoint, mystical experience is now "a natural phenomenon. . . . Nothing unworldly or supernatural about it – it is just another function of the brain, although one that is only consciously operative in special states of awareness, such as meditation, prayer, and contemplation" (vii). Traditional theism is then replaced by an experiential approach where God is found in human wholeness, which further connects with neuroscience.

Here Bragan brings in Merton's spirituality and "the equation of finding the truth of oneself along with finding God" (viii). It is this perspective, apparently given legitimacy by neuroscience, that the author thinks will lead to a rising importance of Merton's take on spirituality. In the remainder of the introduction, Bragan outlines Merton's early life and conversion, writing that Merton's inner changes "are amenable to being fully understood by the advances being made in neuroscience. . . . His journals make this abundantly clear" (xvii).

In the next chapter Bragan draws on one piece of research where near-death experiences in the operating theatre are linked to certain neural pathways that the author then calls the spiritual doorway in the brain. Under certain crises, physiological changes in our brain produce neurochemistry, which leads to strange sensations of intense spirituality, which are then framed and defined by life experiences and memory.¹

Merton records no such experiences from the times when he was actually on a hospital operating table. However, Bragan proceeds to place him on a metaphorical one as he then dissects Merton's "God-experience"

1. See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/mar/13/kevin-nelson-near-death-experience> (accessed 8 March 2017).