

Getting with the Beat

Review of

Thomas Merton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings:

The Correspondence By Bill Morgan

Temple, PA: Beatdom Books, 2022

viii + 95 pages / \$11.99 paper

Reviewed by **Robert Weldon Whalen**

On May 15, 1968, Thomas Merton and Lawrence Ferlinghetti enjoyed after-dinner espressos at Caffè Trieste, in San Francisco's North Beach. Merton and Ferlinghetti might have been ambassadors from different galaxies; the beats, hipsters and hippies who frequented Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore lived worlds away from Merton's brother monks back at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Yet Merton and Ferlinghetti also had much in common. Both were poets; both studied at Columbia University with Mark Van Doren; they shared a number of friends, including James Laughlin of New Directions Books, who published them both. Merton was on a west coast scouting trip for Gethsemani, looking for sites for a new monastery or hermitage. He made it a point to pass through San Francisco and get together with Ferlinghetti. Seven years before, they'd engaged in a convoluted struggle to get one of Merton's "anti-poems," *Original Child Bomb*, published in Ferlinghetti's new journal, *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. What an ordeal! Ferlinghetti discovered that corralling poets into his journal was no easy matter. Merton, as usual, wrestled with his censors. *Original Child Bomb* didn't make it into the *Journal*, but, to the chagrin of Merton's superiors, his "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces," Merton's Auschwitz poem, did. Bill Morgan's brief text recounts Ferlinghetti and Merton's campaign to get Merton's poem into Ferlinghetti's journal.

No one knows Lawrence Ferlinghetti's work better than Bill Morgan; Ferlinghetti and Morgan were friends for a half-century. Morgan is as well one of the premier scholars of the Cold War beats. Author of the definitive bibliography of Ferlinghetti's work, Morgan was also Allen Ginsberg's archivist and bibliographer. He has published widely on the beat generation. Ferlinghetti spoke fondly of Merton and especially of their May 1968 meeting. *Thomas Merton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings: The Correspondence* quotes extensively from the Merton–Ferlinghetti correspondence and includes the texts of both *Original Child Bomb* (16-24) and "Chant" (35-38) as well as Ferlinghetti's contribution, "Picturesque Haiti" (66-72). Morgan's commentary on the

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Ferlinghetti–Merton relationship skillfully weaves all that together. Morgan’s text is expository, not analytical, but in outlining the Ferlinghetti–Merton literary correspondence Morgan explores two especially intriguing issues, one specific, one much more general.

The specific issue is the relationship between Merton, Trappist monk, and Ferlinghetti, beat poet and publisher. Was Merton a beat? If “beat” refers to a drug-fueled hedonism peppered with vulgarities designed the shock the bourgeoisie, then Merton was not a beat. The vulgarities which appeared in the poetry in the *Journal* bothered Merton’s ecclesiastical superiors and it inspired too, a brief bit of beat criticism by Merton. Merton wrote to Ferlinghetti on December 12, 1961, that though pleased with the *Journal* in general, he had mixed feelings about some of the individual pieces.

Not that I am mad at dirty words, they are perfectly good honest words as far as I am concerned, and they form part of my own interior mumblings a lot of the time, why not? I just wonder if this isn’t another kind of jargon which is a bit more respectable than the jargon of the slick magazines, but not very much more. And I wonder just how much is actually *said* by it. (74)

If “beat” means respect for the beat poets’ creations, then Merton was a beat. He wrote to his friend Ludovico Silva that Allen Ginsberg was not one of Merton’s favorites, but that reading Ginsberg triggered in Merton “a curious experience of recognizing an authentic interpretation of a society in which I live and from which I am in many ways alien. Ginsberg speaks a language I know” (12).

What then linked Merton, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg and the others in the Cold War avant-garde? That is the second and more general issue touched on in Morgan’s book. What linked them was the sacred, not the sacred as concept but the sacred as experience, what Teilhard de Chardin calls the “Divine Milieu.” Allen Ginsberg’s strange 1948 experience of the presence of long-dead William Blake, an experience that pointed Ginsberg to the “secret door in the universe,” was not unlike Merton’s 1958 Fourth and Walnut experience, which was similar to Gregory Corso’s visions on the Greek island of Hydra, which he reported to editor James Laughlin, who’d had a similar sensation while skiing in the mountains. Referring to these sorts of experiences, Laughlin wrote to Corso that “I often talk about them with my friend Tom Merton” (14). What were these things? Hallucinations? Mirages? Perhaps. Of course they were psychological phenomena; humans experience things through their psyches. But did these things point to something real, something not quite captive to philosophy, theology, art or ecclesiology? The beats thought so. They were, Morgan writes, “yearning to discover a spiritual basis for life” (8), a “spiritual center”; in the middle of Atomic Age, consumerist, secular America, they were desperate not just to think about but to encounter the Holy Ghost. So was Merton. Morgan’s book, then, illuminates the extraordinary pneumatology of the Cold War American avant-garde. The avant-garde’s search for the Spirit followed no easy road, as Merton wrote to Ferlinghetti in August 1961, but the journey was worth the sweat:

Call it fidelity to conscience, or to the inner voice, or to the Holy Spirit: but it involves a lot of struggle and no supineness and you probably won’t get much encouragement from anybody. . . . I can’t necessarily tell you where to look, or how much of it you have found already. The start of it all is that none of us really have started to look. But the mercy of God, unknown and caricatured and blasphemed by some of the most reputable squares, is the central reality out of which all the rest comes and into which all the rest returns. (44-45).