

Merton on the Beaten Track

Review of

Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String

Edited by Ron Dart

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Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

At the end of this book's brief introduction, by way of explaining its subtitle *A Golden String*, editor Ron Dart quotes the following lines from William Blake's poem "Jerusalem": "I give you the end of a golden string / Only wind it into a ball / It will lead you in at Heaven's gate, / Built in Jerusalem's wall" (xviii). Thus Dart identifies the unifying trope of this study of the relationship between Thomas Merton and eight voices affiliated with the mid-twentieth-century American literary phenomenon known as the Beat movement. While more explanatory details regarding the applicability of Blake's words to Dart's vision of the Merton-Beat connection are called for, the collection of essays nevertheless succeeds in pointing out that one common thread among this group of countercultural writers is a variously interpreted spiritual quest.

Thomas Merton and the Counterculture contains eight chapters, each highlighting an individual who is related, directly or indirectly, to the Beat culture and his or her significance to the life and works of Merton. The list, which in part reads like a Beat movement epic roll call, includes (in the order of placement in the book) the following personae: Mark Van Doren, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Everson, Denise Levertov and Henry Miller, discussed by (in the same order) Leah Cameron, Stephanie Redekop, Russel Hulsey, Ross Labrie, Robert Inchausti, Ron Dart, Lynn Szabo and, again, Ron Dart. Whether central or marginal to this Bohemian event, each literary figure under discussion has parallels with Merton – and in several instances, had direct interaction with him – connections that incline Dart to confer upon Merton in the book's dedication the title of "Inukshuk" (Inuit for a monument placed on a path to reassure other travelers that they are not going astray) and to grant him membership in "the Beat tribe" (vii). His extravagance notwithstanding, Dart persuasively justifies his book's existence by claiming that Merton studies to date have underexplored the ties between Merton and the Beat writers. In Dart's opinion, this under-treatment has a history. In his essay "Thomas Merton and William Everson" (81-99), Dart begins by referencing the 1969 publication of Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*, a book which Dart, a questioning youth at the time, used as a sort of primer for the emerging Beat movement. Dart points out that Merton and other countercultural writers active in that era, notably poet William Everson (aka

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Brother Antoninus), are absent from Roszak's study, and Dart intends for his essay, "Thomas Merton and William Everson," in which he discusses the personal correspondence between these two "wild bird Roman Catholics" (83) and ably compares a number of their writings, to remedy this deficiency.

In addition to its compelling concept, the book's laudable traits include a sensible organization. Mirroring the Beat movement's east-coast origins, the book opens with Leah Cameron's essay, "Their Own Beat: Mark Van Doren & Thomas Merton and the Revolution in Moral and Religious Poetry" (1-11), an exploration of the legendary Columbia University English professor whose long teaching career included Merton, Ginsberg and Kerouac as students (although not mentioned here, Ferlinghetti was also Van Doren's student). Cameron writes that Van Doren encouraged Merton to trust "authentic" and "directly stated" poetry (4). She is careful to differentiate between the eventual writing careers of Merton, Ginsberg and Kerouac, but one can still infer that such encouragement shaped the budding instincts of all three writers and in effect helped to launch a literary movement meant to liberate the writer's voice from societally imposed filters. In this opening essay Cameron also notes that through Van Doren, Merton came to realize poetry's "capacity . . . to express moral and religious truth" (2) and thus introduces the subject of spirituality that is common, to some extent, to the discussion of all the writers covered in the book, a central theme around which the book's individual parts, via the constant presence of Merton and the titular image of Blake's golden string that leads to heaven, are presumably meant to cohere.

The placement of Ron Dart's essay "Henry Miller and Thomas Merton: Our Faces" (117-23) as the final piece of the collection is fitting because, like Van Doren, Miller is situated on the margins of the actual Beat movement. Dart asserts that as a writer of an earlier generation who felt the impact of censorship, Miller anticipated the Beats' signature audacity. Dart quotes from correspondence in which Merton and Miller acknowledge their facial resemblance – Miller calls it "the look of an ex-convict" (122) – but uses their similarity of aspect to symbolize more profound links between the two innovative (therefore, sometimes misunderstood) writers and, in effect, to sum up Merton's affinities with the whole movement.

Another of the book's positive features is the diversity of its contributors. It includes the work of such established Merton scholars as Robert Inchausti, distinguished author of multiple books on Merton, whose "'Have You Read the Old Testament Prophets Lately': Merton, Ferlinghetti, and the (Near) Remaking of a Counterculture" (70-80) engagingly analyzes the "short but rich" correspondence (70) between Merton and Ferlinghetti to demonstrate that Merton "challenged Ferlinghetti, pressing him a bit on the excesses of the emerging counter-culture" (71). But it also includes writers perhaps better known for their work in genres other than critical studies, for example, poet and artist Russel Hulsey, who, in his essay "from [*sic*] the Hammer of Heaven" (33-49) delivers a high-spirited discussion on the significant similarities between Merton and Kerouac.

With this diversity, the book points to a vibrant continuity among generations of Merton scholars. Leah Cameron and her contemporary Stephanie Redekop, whose "Thomas Merton and Allen Ginsberg: Poet-Prophets for the Modern World" (12-32) immediately follows Cameron's essay, provide this study with the perspectives of emerging Merton enthusiasts. Both authors are devoted former students of Lynn Szabo, respected Merton poetry specialist, whose essay interweaves analysis of Levertov and Merton within a powerfully personal narrative about the role of both writers in her own spiritual and intellectual journey in "Denise Levertov and Merton: Encounters and Intersection" (100-16).

Moreover, Szabo's own academic mentor Ross Labrie is also a contributor. His article "Nature and the Sacred in Merton and Snyder" (50-69) selects with surgical precision from the works of Merton and Gary Snyder to point out that while Merton's view of the cosmos is "hierarchical, directed towards a divine creator" and Snyder's "lateral," the two writers nevertheless share a reverence for the inclusive holiness of nature (69). A mature piece of professional writing, Labrie's essay is the gold standard for aspiring Merton critics and as such, anchors this collection of works illustrating various levels of analytical skill and rhetorical facility.

As previously mentioned, the book's subtitle *A Golden String* implicitly signals (at least to this reader) that William Blake will figure prominently in this study. And while one could ask for more from the editor/author on this subject, Blake's presence is evident in a number of ways. For instance, in the introduction, Dart acknowledges that as Merton evolved from student to contemplative poet, so did his appreciation of Blake; and Redekop notes that Ginsberg's Blakean affinities contain echoes of Merton's. But perhaps the most original suggestion of Blake is the artwork by Arnold Shives, drawings that appear on the cover and the opening page of each article. Reminiscent of Blake's illustrative etchings, with their evocative simplicity, they are a charming enhancement to the verbal texts of *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture*.

Ron Dart's judgment of the worthiness of the project he evidently foresaw in these informative and often passionate examinations of the relationship between Merton and the Beats is sound. The validity of his purpose, however, makes the book's flaws all the more unfortunate. Some of these faults are matters of content, or lack thereof, such as inadequate acknowledgment of existing studies on the topic as well as arguably insufficient attention to the complexities of Merton's relationship with the literary counterculture. Also, the absence of biographical notes on the contributors weakens the book's effectiveness for an audience not already familiar with Merton studies.

While complaints about substance are subject to reviewer opinion, less debatable is the charge of poor editing. With notable exceptions, this collection of essays has an unfinished appearance. The book lacks the final editing that surely would have revised faulty syntax and mechanical mishaps and addressed the incomplete documentation of sources, such as that found in the essays by Cameron and Redekop where parenthetical citations are not linked to any list of complete bibliographical information: "(Cunningham 8)" on page 3 is just one of several instances of this breach of one of the basic imperatives of scholarly writing. In conclusion, the frequency of errors in the book impairs its readability and distracts from its considerable potential as a contribution to Merton scholarship.