

5

Merton and the Beats

Angus Stuart

"I am a monk, therefore by definition, as I understand it, the chief friend of beats..."¹

Thomas Merton said he was a friend of the beats because he was a monk, and as a monk, he of all people should be a friend of the beats, indeed "the chief friend of beats." Yet not all monks by any means necessarily fit the description "beatnik, peacenik, Trappist Buddhist monk" as his friend Edward Rice dubbed him;² not all monks could be referred to as "Jack Kerouac's monastic elder brother;"³ not all monks were "beat" in the way Merton was—he clearly had an affinity with the beats even though he had little or no direct contact with them—and his "beatness" is evident at many places in the originality of his writing, showing himself atypical as both a monk and a Catholic.

The phrase "beat generation" originated with Jack Kerouac in conversation with friend and aspiring author John Clellon Holmes in 1948.⁴ They were discussing their own generation of writers in comparison to the previous literary generation of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and others in the 1920s who had become known as the "lost generation." Kerouac picked up on the word "beat" as used by the hipsters, hustlers and street people of Times Square and elsewhere in New York in the 1940s. The word meant not simply tired or worn out but conveyed a sense of being *defeated* by life; being on the underside of society; no longer belonging or fitting in; living from hand-to-mouth, from day-to-day; a sense of urban subsistence, having to live by one's wits; of being *poor*. There was a sense of life reduced to its lowest, meanest terms (in the words of Thoreau);⁵ yet it conveyed a sense of getting to the root of real, genuine, authentic life when all the superficialities of convention

and societal expectation have been stripped away. "Everything belongs to me because I am poor," Jack Kerouac put on the lips of a black jazz musician in his piece "The Beginning of Bop."⁶ It is a *beatific* statement—a statement of what it means to be truly blessed (or blessed) as in, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁷ Kerouac later made explicit the connection of the word *beat* with *beatitude* by pronouncing it *be-at*.⁸ The word *beat* is also a word that conveys rhythm, as in moving to the beat (the rhythm of life), the upbeat, the downbeat, offbeat, backbeat. The jazz of the beat generation was more than a cool soundtrack; it was the aural expression of the evolving spirit of the generation, the heartbeat of life—Boom! Skiddle-dee-boom!

At the heart of the beats along with Kerouac are undoubtedly Allen Ginsberg (who probably did more than anyone to promote the beats as a literary movement) and William S. Burroughs who all met one another in and around the precincts of Columbia University, New York in the mid-1940s. Beyond these three there is a penumbra of others associated with them and with the literary *avant garde* of the 1940s and 1950s. Characters like Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke (from whom Kerouac derived the term "beat") are beats in the sense of the lives they lived and because they were fictionalized as characters in writings by Kerouac and others. It is true, though, that Kerouac himself was certainly inspired by the exuberant, stream-of-consciousness long letters written to him by Cassady which fed directly into his development of "spontaneous bop prosody." The poets of the West Coast and the San Francisco poetry renaissance of the mid-1950s have often been included in discussions of the beats. In large part this is because Allen Ginsberg had moved to Berkeley and had become involved in the local literary scene. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet and founder of City Lights publishing house and bookstore in San Francisco, did not regard himself as a beat poet though he published works by Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac.⁹ Most famously, he was sued for his publication of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in 1957, winning the landmark obscenity trial. Other West Coast poets such as Gary Snyder, Michael McClure and Philip Whalen have largely been

(mis)taken for beats because of their involvement in the poetry renaissance, and because they too were fictionalized as characters in subsequent autobiographical novels by Kerouac—the most famous of these being Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) in *The Dharma Bums*. Other writers often identified with the beats are, strictly speaking, really influenced by the original beats Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac. Chief among these is Gregory Corso who became so closely associated with them that he is generally regarded as one of the beats, and certainly views himself in this way. More widely still, writers of the 1960s such as Diane di Prima, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ed Sanders, Clark Coolidge and Anne Waldman are also recognized as stemming from the beat generation in that their writing has been influenced by them and bears striking similarities.

Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac were greatly influenced in their thinking by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, as they sought to make sense of the world and the times in which they were living in mid-twentieth century North America.¹⁰ The unprecedented carnage of the First World War, the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, the Holocaust, the inevitability of the Second World War culminating in the cataclysmic dropping of the atomic bomb giving birth to the nuclear age and, soon, the paranoia of the Cold War all seemed to mark a turning point in history, a growing crisis that Spengler's analysis seemed to predict and offered a framework by which to make sense of it all. Kerouac came to understand the work that he and others were engaged in as writers of the beat generation as embodying and expressing the "second religiousness" as anticipated by Spengler. And although not embracing—on the contrary letting go to a large extent—the existing forms of institutional religion, the beats as writers and poets saw themselves engaged in a deeply spiritual work that was concerned with the ultimate questions of reality and existence. As writers, they were seeking a new vision and a way of expressing the evolving beat culture that they saw and experienced around them. The word *beat* denotes the literary expression (as expressed by these writers) of the subterranean and alternative culture of the time that eventually would emerge as the counterculture of the 1960s.

Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs met at Columbia University, and along with others in their circle of friends sought to understand the times in which they lived and to formulate, then embody in their lives an appropriate response. Kerouac arrived first, in the fall of 1940, shortly after Merton had left. Merton had completed his M.A. thesis on William Blake in 1938 and although he had begun to put together ideas for a Ph.D. on Gerard Manley Hopkins, his life had begun to take another course. Engaged in teaching English at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York, he thought about devoting his life to serving the poor and underprivileged in Harlem, having been inspired by Baroness Catherine de Hueck and her work at Friendship House.¹¹ He was also exploring the possibility of a monastic vocation, first with the Franciscans (which did not work out), and then with the Trappists (more formally, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, O.C.S.O). Like Kerouac and others later, he was trying to work out what to do with his life and how he could adequately respond to the world and the times in which he lived. Merton was coming out of the same academic and cultural milieu as that from which the beats were to emerge a few short years later. He attended lectures by many of the same professors including Lionel Trilling and, most significantly, Mark Van Doren; he was engaged for a number of years working on the Columbia University publication *The Jester*—illustrating, writing, editing—along with Robert Lax, Edward Rice, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Giroux (Allen Ginsberg later also became involved). Given the overlap of literature professors it is not surprising that many of the authors in which both Merton and the beats were immersed were the same: Blake, Joyce, Thoreau, Emerson, Yeats. Merton and his friends were aspiring writers; there are numerous graphic passages in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that depict Merton and friends at Lax's family cottage in Olean, New York sitting in deepening chaos in various parts of the house and grounds, growing beards, drinking beer and pounding away at typewriters on their various novels.¹² In June 1940, Merton had begun to write an experimental, autobiographical novel he was calling *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*

(later published as *My Argument with the Gestapo*). At one point he relates a conversation set in a bombed-out house in London with two uniformed men who ask him who he is, and he replies,

I am a writer. I write what I see out the window. I am writing about the fear on the faces of the houses. I say as fast as I can, what preoccupation I see in the sick houses of bombed London, and I write that the houses of bombed London do not understand their own fear.¹³

When the uniformed men again demand to know who he is, he replies, "I am still trying to find out: and that is why I write." He then articulates his early vocation as a writer: "I will keep putting things down until they become clear. (And if they do not become clear?) I will have a hundred books, full of symbols, full of everything I ever knew or ever saw or ever thought..." The point that this illustrates is that Merton and the beats were ingredients in the same mid-twentieth century Columbia University stew, so it is not surprising to sense similar flavours in their subsequent lives, most noticeably in their non-conformist outlook and interests, and in their writing.

Like the beats, Merton too was deeply affected by the growing crisis in Europe, not least because of his familiarity with Europe having been educated at schools in France and England, yet he recognized that this was not simply a crisis on another continent with little to do with him and the life he was living in America. On the contrary, he came to see that the circumstances that had brought about the situation in Europe, and the inevitability of war, had everything to do with him, and with the society and times in which he lived; that in a sense this was a world that he had helped to create.¹⁴ Merton's response was found in his conversion to Roman Catholic Christianity providing him with a religious framework within which to find his place in the world and to develop his identity. This path led him to enter the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky in December 1941, and thence into deeper solitude, eventually becoming a hermit in 1965.

Although Merton's entry into the monastery is sometimes

construed as a “flight from the world,” it is not clear that this is how Merton himself saw it. Certainly he had little to do with the outside world in the early years at Gethsemani, though he did publish a number of volumes of poetry and a “bestseller” autobiography (*The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948) that had a profound impact on the outside world (unprecedented for a monastic author), not least resulting in many people presenting themselves to Gethsemani and other religious houses as postulants for the religious life. Kerouac mentions reading Merton’s “Confession” in his journal entries for October 1949.¹⁵ As the 1950s progressed, and even more so in the 1960s, Merton’s active engagement with the outside world increased, particularly in his writings on war and peace, civil rights and social justice issues. It is perhaps significant that this deeper engagement with the world accompanied his move into greater solitude and silence in his daily life. Viewed with hindsight, whatever was in Merton’s mind at the time (December 1941), his entry to the monastery did not result in a flight from the world. Indeed, as his famous “Fourth and Walnut epiphany” makes clear, Merton came to realize that any such separation from the world is an illusion.¹⁶ What Merton later said about his entry into the monastery was that it enabled him to escape a “certain set of servitudes” that he could no longer accept:

servitudes to certain standards of value which to me were idiotic and repugnant and still are. Many of these were trivial, some of them were onerous, all are closely related. The image of a society that is happy because it drinks Coca-Cola or Seagrams or both and is protected by the bomb. The society that is imaged in the mass media and in advertising, in the movies, in TV, in best sellers, in current fads, in all the pompous and trifling masks with which it hides callousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, cruelty and fear.¹⁷

By radically embracing a commitment to serve God in his monasticism, Merton found a freedom from societal expectations and obligations, which ultimately and paradoxically enabled him to be of greater service to the world whose demands for conformity

he had escaped. For Merton, there could be no half measures; the words “Give up *everything*, give up *everything*!” resounded in his head as he made his final preparations to leave St. Bonaventure’s College and head to Kentucky just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into the Second World War.¹⁸ Merton was beat. It was time to start again.

Merton could describe himself as a friend of the beats because he was a monk, and a monk for Merton was one who had given up everything, stripped of all external support, of any reliance on wealth, owing nothing to the conformist demands or the corrupted values of society. He was beat, and yet in his poverty discovered riches beyond his imagining. As Kerouac said, “Everything belongs to me because I am poor.” A monk is a marginal person, living on the edge of society, and although monks by nature (by design, by definition) are marginal figures, Merton was more marginal still. At the outset of his book, *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy*, Robert Inchausti characterizes Merton as “the quintessential American outsider who defined himself in opposition to the world around him and then discovered in the alternative values with which he opposed the world a way back into dialogue with it and compassion for it.”¹⁹ Merton was a monk on the edge—on the edge of monasticism, on the edge of the Church as well as on the margins of society. Yet as Merton moved further and further to the margins, he found himself by some strange celestial geometry to be surrounded by figures from the counterculture of the 1960s,²⁰ the poets and artists, the troubadours of their generation with Bob Dylan’s “Gates of Eden” blasting from the windows of the hermitage. This is not formally to identify Merton with the beats, for he had very sparse direct contact with any of them, and even then, that was not unequivocal, and his circle of contacts and correspondents went way beyond those even remotely connected with the beats. Nevertheless, Merton was very much a monk of the beat generation in that he came out of the same literary, cultural and spiritual milieu as that from which they emerged, at more or less the same time in world history (the same politico-historical context), and he shared their distrust of authority and establishment, and their disaffection and disillusionment with the values of conformist, materialist technological society.

Merton's conversion to Roman Catholic Christianity is quite remarkable given the kind of person he had been in his early years based on the account given in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, supplemented by his journals from his pre-monastery years. He comes across as a very modern-thinking person with relatively little pre-existing contact with the Church or with religion in general. His father had played the organ for a time at Zion Episcopal (Anglican) Church in Douglaston, New York;²¹ he attended chapel at Oakham School in England because it was compulsory but he is not at all complimentary about the Chaplain, and kept his lips tight shut when it came to the Creed.²² Merton had become friends with a Hindu monk while at Columbia who advised him to read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*.²³ But perhaps it was his studies in literature that led him to ask the ultimate questions about life. He tells the story of purchasing a copy of Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* almost by chance in February 1937.²⁴ Being fluent in French, he had enrolled in a course on French Medieval Literature and the title seemed somehow relevant. Despite his initial horror and disgust when he realized it was a "Catholic" book with the official sanction of the Catholic Church, he read it anyway. In the book he was introduced to a concept of God that rendered discussion of the existence (or not) of God as redundant. God was not *a* being, he discovered, rather God *was* Being itself. The experience of human existence, life itself, consciousness of being is an experience of Being that is in all, encompasses all and is beyond all. This is a mystical conception of God, and although recognized as legitimate in orthodox mainstream Christianity, it is certainly not an understanding that all, or indeed most, Christians necessarily hold or are able to grasp. It is about finding one's truest identity in God, coming to identify oneself with Christ, having Christ consciousness. This is a profound insight, one which believers may come to after many years, after their faith has grown through successive stages of maturity. For Merton, this is where he started. Merton's lack of personal experience of religion up to this point was perhaps to his advantage in that he was able to be open to such a radical and profound insight without it being obscured by

conventional religious clutter. In a sense his initial belief in God was a-theist in recognizing from the outset that God was not a god. This made him atypical as a Christian which perhaps explains why he was atypical also as a monk. He described the kind of *pensées* he wrote for *Seeds of Contemplation* as being typical of what any monk might write,²⁵ but it is doubtful whether his fellow monks would have agreed with him on this.

This propensity to let go of the "god-part" of God as defined by kataphatic systematic theology, in time, well placed him to engage with others with widely differing views philosophically and theologically, with those of other faiths and those who professed no faith or had rejected faith in God as they had encountered it. And although he became familiar with the traditional categories and concepts of Christian theology, plumbing their depths, his prior understanding of God as the "hidden ground of being" enabled him to connect with the categories and concepts of other religious (and non-religious) traditions: Judaism, Islam (especially Sufi mysticism), Hinduism, Taoism and, especially, Buddhism in its various forms. Merton came to Christianity, in a sense, from the ground up, from first principles via philosophy (medieval mystical theology) rather than through an experience and acceptance of conventional religion as practiced at the time. This was his response to the values and conformities that ruled the society in which he was living and with which he had become disenchanted and disillusioned.

For Merton, Roman Catholic Christianity gave him a framework with which he could begin to make sense of (his) existence and a means by which to give his life shape and direction. The beats, inasmuch as one can use the term collectively, also saw themselves as engaged in making a religious response to the culture and times in which they were living. However, each of them (Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac) was coming out of very different religious backgrounds: Burroughs, Presbyterian Protestant Christianity; Ginsberg, Jewish; and Kerouac, French-Canadian Catholic Christianity, which perhaps represents the strongest

religious influence on any of the original three beats. Educated in his early years in French by nuns at the local Catholic elementary school in Lowell, Massachusetts and surrounded by the influence of French Catholic culture, particularly from his mother who was devout, Kerouac was saturated in a very traditional Catholicism from birth. By the time he reached Columbia and had come into contact with Burroughs and Ginsberg he had become largely disillusioned with the Church, though he retained his faith in Christ²⁶—not that this prevented him from exploring life to the fullest, including sex and drugs. Kerouac saw beyond the restrictive expectations and edicts of conventional, traditional, institutional religion to embrace a radical freedom in every aspect of life. Yet the beats, like Merton, were ripe for, and indeed searching for, a religious vision to provide a framework for their response to the world and the times in which they were living.

Influenced in part by Spengler, they came to explore Buddhism as a new and radical way of conceiving reality and human existence, unencumbered by the obsolete accoutrements of centuries of religious tradition in the West. In the early 1950s, at about the time Merton was beginning to revisit his early interest in the East and Buddhism (picking up from his association at Columbia with Bramachari the Hindu monk), Kerouac began studying Buddhism seriously and engaging in long discussions by letter about his findings, especially with Allen Ginsberg who was similarly ignited by the possibilities of Buddhism, and who ultimately embraced it in a much more formal and thoroughgoing way than Kerouac. Burroughs disparagingly referred to Kerouac as a “Catholic Buddhist,” and it is probably true that no matter how far he went into his Buddhist studies, and he went a long way, even writing a sutra²⁷ and a life of the Buddha (unpublished in his lifetime)²⁸ and numerous Haikus and Buddhist influenced works, he never lost or was able to shake off (even if he wanted to) his ingrained Catholic conception of God nor his innate devotion to Christ. Yet it was his studies in Buddhism and his practice of meditation that perhaps ultimately led to his return to Catholicism. By the time *On the Road* was published in 1957 and in interviews in subsequent years

he openly described himself as a Catholic (almost as a matter of course) and never as a Buddhist. Yet there is a pervasive Buddhist influence in almost all his writing. More than this, Kerouac’s Buddhism prepared the way for him to engage with his Catholic faith at a deeper level, beyond the formalism of his youth in Lowell.

The process by which Kerouac integrated the insights gained from Buddhism with his Catholicism is no doubt complicated and invites a more detailed investigation of his journals and correspondence of these (re)formative years in the late-1950s and early-1960s. However, two particular episodes have found their way into his published output and perhaps offer some clues as to Kerouac’s evolving religious experience and outlook. Both of these episodes, to a greater or lesser extent, are about solitude: Kerouac’s experience, engagement and reflection on solitude. The first is the sixty-three days he spent as a fire lookout in the North Cascades in the summer of 1956; the other experience was the time Kerouac spent at Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s cabin in Bixby Canyon, Big Sur in the summer of 1960.

The North Cascades experience found its way into a number of Kerouac’s books including the follow-up to *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, also in the anthology *Lonesome Traveler*, and, most fully and least idealized, in *Desolation Angels* based largely on the journal he kept that summer perched over 6000 feet on top of Desolation Peak, twelve miles south of the Canadian border, overlooking Ross Lake. Having been inspired by the original dharma bum, Gary Snyder, who had done fire lookout duty for a number of previous summers before getting blacklisted in McCarthy era America for his political views and connections, Kerouac headed to the mountains full of expectations of spiritual insight and blessing from this period of extended solitude. Very quickly, however, he came face-to-face with the more challenging aspects of solitude, and in particular with a confrontation with himself. Anyone who knows anything of the spiritual value of solitude knows that this is precisely the point of solitude, or at least part of it (a key part): stripping away all the distractions,

activities, preoccupations, pursuits, concerns and conversations, that keep us from seeing ourselves as we are, and from engaging in reality, uncluttered by our illusions and ignorance of ourselves and of life. It is by no means necessarily an easy or pleasant experience; loneliness and desolation are very much part of the aloneness of solitude. It is precisely this desolation, this stripping away of illusion in solitude, that offers the purifying benefits of solitude—the blessing, the “beatitude” that works for purity of heart and clarity of vision, for purity of heart is about vision: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”²⁹ Taking Merton’s understanding of God (and that of the whole tradition of mystical theology), this is about seeing *Reality* as it is, experiencing Being in the midst (at the centre) of one’s own being. Merton would conceive this as the discovery of the “true self” that is identified with this divine centre of one’s being, the divine spark, the *point vierge*; but in the process it can make our “false self,” our everyday persona that we present to the world, the self that is identified and defined by our ego, feel very uncomfortable and threatened, being exposed as an illusion, a fiction that we write about ourselves.³⁰ The desolation of Kerouac’s experience of solitude in the North Cascades was perhaps the most important thing about it and contains the seed of blessing, the pearl of great price.

The second episode in which Kerouac experiences solitude is in *Big Sur* based on the time he spent at Ferlinghetti’s cabin alone in the summer of 1960. Kerouac went there to rest and recuperate and find some restoration of soul in the wake of the psychological pounding he had taken from the media and those critics who had read *On the Road* and not understood it, and who vilified and victimized Kerouac as some sort of scapegoat for juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, crime, violence, loose morals and all the ills of urban society in the late 1950s—a victimization that arguably exacerbated his predisposition to alcoholism. In many ways, *Big Sur* is less about solitude (as such) than it is about Kerouac’s struggle with alcohol and the pitifully destructive and tragic effect it was having on him. Yet in terms of confronting the self, in this case his severely wounded and damaged self, it is very powerful and

represents some of Kerouac’s strongest and most important writing, though not an easy or comforting read. The penultimate chapter, in particular, gives a vivid account of *delirium tremens*, an account that prominently figures the Cross (of Christ) as an emblem of light and hope.

Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the Cross. I see the Cross, it’s silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swimming out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of darkness, I start to scream because I know I’m dying ... I swallow the scream and just let myself go into death and the Cross; as soon as that happens I slowly sink back to life ... I lie there in cold sweat wondering what’s come over me for years my Buddhist studies and pipesmoking assured meditation on emptiness and all of a sudden the Cross is manifested to me – my eyes fill with tears...³¹

Written as a novel, the *Big Sur* narrative, as with almost all of Kerouac’s writing, draws heavily on his personal experience, consciously so, as it was the ambition of his life’s work to write the “legend” of his life, *The Duluoz Legend*. As with *On the Road* and other writings it has been largely misunderstood by critics and readers who have approached it not knowing what it was and expecting it to be some other kind of book. It has sometimes been seen as proof of the dissolution of Kerouac’s life and therefore as some sort of negation of him as a person and as a writer. Yet Ann Charters, Kerouac’s earliest biographer, makes the point that, terrible and tragic as it is, Kerouac is still able to write about it, and write well, conveying the full horror of the pit of hell into which he had fallen and which ultimately would consume him.³² Robert Inchausti quotes Merton that the responsibility of a writer is “to awaken a lucid anguish”³³ in their readers. Setting aside, if possible, the tragedy of Kerouac’s alcoholism, the point is that he was able to take the raw material of his life—even this—and write about it in such a way as to communicate truth, reality and lucid anguish. His

intuition of the Cross, the Christian symbol that denotes universal suffering, is an emblem of his own suffering and an identification with the suffering Christ (the incarnation of God, the divine spark) that is at the centre of his own being, the Christ within that is the universal human identity, for Merton as for Kerouac as for all, where union with God as the ground of being is found.

Thomas Merton was once asked about the “secret of his success” to which he replied that he had always tried to avoid success and that his best-selling autobiography was an accident due to inattention, and he was striving to make sure it never happened again. “Be anything you like,” he wrote, “be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all cost avoid one thing: success....”³⁴ Merton’s reply was not published and he never heard from the enquirer again. Merton characteristically uses hyperbole here to make his point that faithfulness to oneself and to what one believes to be one’s calling is more important than the outcome. Merton was not “results oriented.” He had similar words for Jim Forest as a young peace activist discouraged by the apparent lack of progress.³⁵ There is a certain *beatness* in this kind of outlook. It’s a beat-attitude and clearly a beatitude in the sense of “Blessed are those...” who do not put much store by success, for they shall not be disappointed! In *On the Road*, Kerouac has the protagonist, Sal Paradise (based on himself) say in one particularly golden passage:

... the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”³⁶

Burning, consumed by life and the joy of living—yet this does not really describe Sal Paradise himself as it does the people he follows after and aspires to be like. Much of Kerouac’s writing revolves around *un-success* and things not turning out as planned and hoped for, beginning perhaps with the first venture onto the road when Sal

Paradise sets out for the West by heading north out of New York City and finds himself thumbing a ride in the rain on a road with no cars, eventually returning to the city on a bus with a group of chattering schoolteachers to start again, taking a bus to Chicago.³⁷ The theme of un-success and of things not turning out “right” is the most pervasive and arguably most appealing aspect of his “true-story” novels. It is the sad joy of human existence found in living in the moment and adapting to life as it comes, improvising like a jazz musician, living in the spirit, by grace and not under law.

Living with un-success and in the face of defeat is very much at the heart of what it means to be *beat*. A successful beat poet would seem to be a contradiction in terms. For Kerouac, his eventual success with *On the Road* proved to be more a curse than a blessing, leading him deeper into alcoholism and the ultimate defeat, in human terms, death. Living in the presence of death is a major theme in beat writings: Ginsberg’s *Kaddish*, based on the Jewish prayer for the dead, was written for his mother who had died after spending many years in and out of mental institutions; from Kerouac’s first novel, *The Town and the City*, written in the shadow of and dealing with his father’s death from cancer in 1946 when Jack was twenty-four, all the way through to the nightmare visions of death in *Big Sur*, and most significantly in *Visions of Gerard*, dealing with the death at the age of nine of his older brother in 1926 when Kerouac was four. Later his sister, Caroline, also died an early death. Merton too lived in the shadow of death—his mother died when he was six, his father when he was sixteen, and his only brother (three years younger) was killed flying with the Royal Canadian Air Force in the spring of 1943, movingly memorialized in a poem towards the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.³⁸ Seeking to live life authentically meant for both Thomas Merton and the beats living life honestly in the face of the ultimate defeat in death with an attitude of acceptance and surrender. Merton articulates this in terms of his monastic vocation as the pursuit of *purity of heart*.

All prayer, reading, meditation, and all the activities of the

monastic life are aimed at *purity of heart*, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by Him. It means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacity in order to obey God's will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth. *Purity of heart* is then correlative to a new spiritual identity—the “self” as recognized in the context of realities willed by God.³⁹

Merton came to see the whole purpose of the monastic life to be aimed at purity of heart. In the beatitudes the pure in heart are said to be blessed “for they will see God.”⁴⁰ Once more, it is about *vision*, seeing into the ultimate reality of things, coming to understand the identity of our individual personal being with the heart of Being. In Merton's final epiphany at Polonnaruwa he speaks of being “jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied *vision* of things, and an inner clearness, clarity as if exploding from the rocks themselves became evident and obvious.”⁴¹ At last he has seen “beyond the shadow and the disguise” what he had been “obscurely looking for.”⁴² This is what (as it turned out) his final pilgrimage had been about, the culmination of his life and vocation as a monk—seeking purity of heart, clarity of vision and, ultimately, the realization of his true identity. In Merton's own understanding of himself as a monk, as he wrote to Ginsberg's mentor, William Carlos Williams, he was naturally a friend of the beats. The beats were also engaged in the quest for purity of heart, seeking clarity of vision and an authentic way of being in the world.

In his correspondence with New Directions publisher James Laughlin, Merton wrote about having Kerouac (and others) come down to the monastery and “solve the problems of the world for two or three days, perhaps on the edge of some quiet lake.”⁴³ Kerouac had become friends with Merton's Columbia contemporary and long-time friend Robert Lax who, it was hoped, would facilitate the meeting.⁴⁴ No such meeting ever took place. It is tempting and tantalizing to speculate on what they might have talked about and

how the conversation might have gone. Perhaps they may have spoken a few words to one another in French, though they may have had to give up on that and revert to English given Merton's possible difficulty in understanding Kerouac's Canuck *Joual*, though Kerouac would have had no difficulty with Merton's French from his days in France, the land to which he felt he really belonged “by no documentary title but by geographical birth.”⁴⁵ They would have had much to talk about and reminisce on their experiences at Columbia: their professors, the courses they took (Mark Van Doren's course on Shakespeare, for example, for which Kerouac gained an “A” grade);⁴⁶ and how Van Doren was instrumental in getting both of them published through Merton's Columbia contemporary and fellow Catholic, Robert Giroux. Giroux's greatest success was publishing *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his greatest mistake perhaps was rejecting Kerouac's *On the Road* scroll in 1951.⁴⁷

Perhaps they would have talked about jazz: Merton described himself as a “Kansas City man,” an aficionado of Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams and the great stride pianists of the 1930s; Kerouac would have no doubt concurred and perhaps been able to convey to Merton something of the excitement of bop and the rise of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk in the years immediately following Merton's entry into the monastery, though Merton was not unaware of developments in jazz and contemporary music, even having a phonograph installed in the hermitage to which he moved in 1965. Surely they would have discussed religion—their very different experiences of Catholicism (their thoughts on Vatican II, perhaps?) and their mutual interest in Buddhism, comparing their respective experiences of meeting revered Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki.⁴⁸ Perhaps they would have spoken of the emerging counterculture and the ambivalence that each might have felt towards it; perhaps they would have disagreed over Vietnam, or at least had a lively discussion. Most interestingly, they might have had a discussion about the origins of the beat generation and what it means to be beat, and Merton may have been able to explore with Kerouac why, as a monk or at least as the

kind of monk he was, he should be a natural friend of the beats.

Alas, it was not to be; and although Merton subsequently published two poems by Kerouac in his short-lived, four-issue poetry magazine, *Monk's Pond*, in 1968,⁴⁹ when he received the winter 1967 issue of *Floating Bear*, Diane di Prima's magazine containing something by Kerouac, he "had forgotten his existence."⁵⁰ He admired Ginsberg as a poet, and was grateful to Williams for sending him a copy of *Kaddish*⁵¹ but he was drawn more, he said, to the poets of Latin America.⁵² William Burroughs does not appear anywhere in Merton's journals or correspondence although Merton's later experiments in poetry, especially in *Cables to the Ace*, bear an uncanny resemblance to the work Burroughs had been producing using the technique of cutting up existing texts to create startling new images and ideas.⁵³

Merton's friendship with the beats, his affinity for them, and his family resemblance to them—"Jack Kerouac's monastic elder brother"—is everywhere evident in his prodigious writings, especially where he is speaking most personally and candidly (*The Day of a Stranger*, for example⁵⁴), and especially in his later years when he was expanding the bounds of his Catholicism and his monasticism, and increasingly becoming associated and identified with the counterculture, spending time on the West Coast in his final year visiting with Ferlinghetti and others at City Lights⁵⁵ and engaging in dialogue at W.H. Ferry's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara.⁵⁶ Merton did not simply, as he claimed, have an affinity with the beats because he was a monk; he had an affinity with them because he was in many ways a *beat monk*, a monk of the beat generation having emerged from the same politico-historical and cultural context, especially Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s, as those who came to be known as the beats. Merton was not a typical monk. He was a "monk on the edge." He was beat, through and through.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993; Harvest edition, 1994), 290. Letter to William Carlos

Williams (July 11, 1961).

2. Edward Rice, *The Man In The Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 16.
3. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1988), 5.
4. Jack Kerouac, "About the Beat Generation" in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), 559-562. Also see, "Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, 566. Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 1983), 252.
5. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas, (New York: Norton edition, 1966), 61.
6. Jack Kerouac, "The Beginning of Bop," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, 557.
7. Matthew 5:3 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.
8. Jack Kerouac, "Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, 565-573.
9. Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1992), 1-3.
10. This is documented in most sources on the beat generation. For a detailed treatment see: John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2001), 11-13, 37-48.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948; SPCK edition, 1990), 340-350, 357-360.
12. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 200, 239-241, 288.
13. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 52.
14. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 402.
15. Jack Kerouac, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Viking, 2004), 236-238.
16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 156-157.
17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 37.
18. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1959), 270.

19. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, 4.
20. See particularly Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph, 1993); also Angus Stuart, "Thomas Merton and the West Coast Counter-Culture: Monastic Vocation and the Challenge to Conformity," *The Merton Journal* Vol. 13 (2006) No. 1, 38-46.
21. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 12.
22. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 73.
23. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 198.
24. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 171-173.
25. Thomas Merton, "Author's Note" in the original *Seeds of Contemplation* and all subsequent editions as well as the substantial revision and expansion, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. See for example: Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions, 1954; Dell edition) 10; *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) xiv where a footnote is added: "In the twelve years since this was written and publishes, not a few Cistercians have vehemently denied that these thoughts were either characteristic or worthy of a normal Cistercian, which is perhaps quite true."
26. Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 86.
27. Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1960).
28. Jack Kerouac, *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha* (New York: Viking, 2008).
29. Matthew 5:8 (NRSV).
30. For an in-depth survey and treatment of Merton's writings on the "true self" and the "false Self," see James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ava Maria, 1978).
31. Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1962; Penguin edition, 1992), 205-206.
32. Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973; New York, St. Martin's edition), 337.
33. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart O.C.S.O. (New York: New Directions, 1981), 275. Cited in Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, 135.
34. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and

- Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 9.
35. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters of Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985; London, Collins Flame edition, 1990), 294. Letter to James Forest (February 21, 1966).
36. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking, 1957; Penguin edition, 1976), 8.
37. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, 12-13.
38. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 404.
39. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 68. The emphasis is Merton's.
40. Matthew 5:8 (NRSV).
41. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 233-234. Emphasis added.
42. Thomas Merton, *Asian Journal*, 235-236.
43. David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: Norton, 1997), 158. Letter to James Laughlin (March 18, 1960).
44. *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, 153. Letter to James Laughlin (April 20, 1960).
45. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 31.
46. Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 465.
47. Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 137, 166.
48. Kerouac met Suzuki on October 15, 1958, see Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac*, 297. Merton met Suzuki in June 1964, see Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Five 1963-1965*, Robert E. Daggy, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 113-117.
49. Jack Kerouac, "Two Poems Dedicated to Thomas Merton" in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, 466.
50. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Seven 1967-1968*, Patrick Hart OSCO, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 23.
51. Thomas Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 289-290. Letter to: William

Carlos Williams (July 11, 1961).

52. Thomas Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 227, 259-260. Letters to: Ludovico Silva (January 17, 1966); Clayton Eshelman (January 28, 1966).

53. See for example Merton's poem "Newscast" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 427.

54. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 214-222.

55. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 120. Also other entries throughout this volume demonstrate Merton's growing identification with and immersion in the counterculture.

56. A transcription of this dialogue which took place on October 3, 1968 is published as "The Center Dialogue" in Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 28-70.