

Zen Buddhism as Radical Conviviality in the Works of Henry Miller, Kenneth Rexroth and Thomas Merton

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In 1952 Henry Miller listed D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (1927) as one of the hundred most influential books in his life. In the same year Gary Snyder gave a copy of Suzuki's book to Philip Whalen, setting him on a Zen Buddhist path that culminated in his ordination as a Zen priest. Kenneth Rexroth, another Suzuki admirer and a seminal figure of the West Coast Beat movement, had just published his most representative poetic work *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (1952). At the time, Suzuki was just starting his five-year visiting professorship at Columbia University, giving seminars that would exert a profound influence on John Cage, Allen Ginsberg and Erich Fromm, among others. From the mid-1940s onwards, Columbia University had been an unofficial hub of the New York Beat movement, and Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Lucien Carr were all students there. Later, Thomas Merton, Miller, and some of the Beats also shared the New York publisher, New Directions, run by James Laughlin. Another major literary New York publisher, Grove Press, printed Henry Miller and William S. Burroughs's fictional works as well as Suzuki's writings on Zen, including reprints of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), which deeply impressed Martin Heidegger and Carl Jung.¹

Not far from Broadway and 122nd Street, in Washington Heights, where the Union Theological Seminary dormitory is located and where Ginsberg and Carr became friends as Columbia students, a young Catholic priest had chosen a poor Puerto Rican immigrant neighbourhood as his parish. This was Ivan Illich, whose critiques of Western society and its repressive institutions, including education, energy, gender and industrial capitalism, informed the

dissenting culture that these American literary figures had forged. In 1973 Illich published *Tools for Conviviality*, which argued the need to create ‘tools’ to help people liberate themselves from the technocratic system that reduced them to nothing more than an appendage of the machine. Illich defined this liberating as ‘conviviality’:

I choose the term ‘conviviality’ to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value (Illich 1973, p. 11).

This notion of ‘conviviality’ aptly describes the relationships that these writers had with Zen because they were not dealing with Zen as a historical institution – which was often no less oppressive than institutionalized Christianity – but as a counter-institutional idea against the grain of modern industrial capitalism. With its emphasis on creative spontaneity and non-attachment, Zen represented for these writers, in Illich’s words, ‘the opposite of industrial productivity’, ‘autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment’ and ‘individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value’ (*ibid.*). Another sense of ‘conviviality’ is appropriate for these writers with their shared literary-religious affiliations. Despite many commonalities, they did not constitute any organizational, ideological or doctrinal collectivity. It is, rather, their spontaneous convergence that defines what they share: after all, the etymological root of conviviality is ‘feast’.

Henry Miller’s Zen aesthetics and critique of modernity

Henry Miller left his native New York for Paris in 1930 and lived there as an expatriate for a decade. When George Orwell, himself no stranger to being *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), visited Miller en route to Spain to fight against fascism, he was struck by Miller’s utter detachment from the politically charged climate of the day, and described *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) as written in ‘a voice from the crowd, from the underling, from the third-class carriage, from the ordinary, non-political, non-moral, passive man’ (Orwell 1953, p. 220).

In Paris, where he was forced to live hand-to-mouth, Miller found his voice, which involved abandoning an idealized notion of literature and discovering the genuine voice of his spontaneous nature. This process of literary self-discovery is analogous to the spiritual transformation accompanying the Buddhist dissolution of karmically bound ego and realization of one's true nature grounded in everyday life, that is, *satori*.

Using a classical Zen trope of a river in flux, *Tropic of Cancer* ends with a passage that might be described as 'satori in Paris', to borrow the title of Jack Kerouac's 1966 novella:

After everything had quietly sifted through my head a great peace came over me. Here, where the river gently winds through the girdle of hills, lies a soil so saturated with the past that however far back the mind roams one can never detach it from its human background. Christ, before my eyes there shimmered such a golden peace that only a neurotic could dream of turning his head away . . . In the wonderful peace that fell over me it seemed as if I had climbed the top of a high mountain; for a little while I would be able to look around me, to take in the meaning of the landscape. . . .

The sun is setting. I feel this river flow through me - its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate. The hills gently girdle it about: its course transfixed (Miller 2012, p. 245).

It might be argued on formal grounds that Miller's Paris trilogy (*Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1936), *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939)) constitutes a secular realization of Zen aesthetics: fact and fiction are indissolubly fused in free, unadorned self-expression; physical vulgarity and spiritual illumination are woven seamlessly in a singular, at times aggressive, voice of direct perception; a vehement sense of humour spews forth in the concrete, anecdotal and paradoxical register; plot or linear narrative is suspended in incandescent flashes of monologues and episodes whose focal point is the perennial present tense. We might even argue that the sexually explicit aspect of Miller's writing echoes the medieval Japanese Zen monk Ikkyū's visits to the brothel, and his erotic verses composed in his dotage to his blind, much younger lover. Miller was fond of recounting the tale of Zen monk 'Bobo-roshi' who experienced *satori* in the midst of sexual congress with a prostitute.

According to Frederick W. Turner, *Tropic of Cancer's* diagnosis of 'execrable' 'conditions of earthly existence', and its 'human refusal to accept, or, better, to come to creative terms with, the inescapable conditions of earthly existence: birth toil, suffering, aging, loss, death', is fundamentally a Buddhist one:

Miller is in distinguished company here. The first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha is commonly translated as 'suffering,' but more loosely and more accurately as a dissatisfaction with the inevitable conditions of our existence. In Buddhist thought this is regarded as the gateway to the Dharma (Turner 2011, p. 225 n.28).

Miller himself acknowledged Buddhist influence in his work. When asked if 'the "hero" of *Cancer*', 'a man who initiates nothing, who merely accepts things as they come to him' did not subscribe to 'a Buddhist view', he replied, 'I make no secret of the fact that I have been much influenced by Taoistic writing and Oriental philosophy in general. . . . I've come to believe that I'm at my best, I express myself best, when I'm following the philosophy of the East' (Kersnowski and Hughes 1994, p. 90). Miller identified especially with Zen Buddhism, attested by his remarks to his friend Lawrence Durrell throughout their lifelong correspondence: 'Zen is my idea of life absolutely – the closest thing to what I am unable to formulate in words. I am a Zen addict through and through . . . if you want to penetrate Buddhism, read Zen. No intelligent person, no sensitive person, can help but be a Buddhist'; 'I am a Zen right here in Paris, and never felt so well, so lucid, so right, so centered'; 'The nearest philosophy to my heart and temperament is Zen, as you probably know'; and 'Zen is more and more the only thing which makes sense to me' (MacNiven 1988, pp. 122, 124, 229, 273).

Miller first encountered Buddhism in his teens. He borrowed the Theosophist A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) from the Brooklyn Public Library at the age of eighteen, but it was not until 'circa 1935 or '36' when Durrell handed him a copy of Alan Watt's *The Spirit of Zen* (1936) that he 'went overboard' (*ibid.*, p. 364) and consumed a cornucopia of spiritual books that influenced him profoundly: 'Then came Suzuki, more Blavatsky, Nijinsky, Dane Rudhyar, Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme, Meister Eckhart – finally R. H. Blyth, bless the name' (*ibid.*). In this respect, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), which Miller wrote after his Paris trilogy, is a culmination of these convivially eclectic spiritual readings, a sage-like meditation on the Greek landscape, transforming it into a concrete scenic expression of *satori* – virtually a book-length elaboration of *Cancer*'s concluding passage.

In 1940 Miller returned to the United States and travelled through the country to get reacquainted with his native land. In *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), its searingly critical tone in sharp contrast with the serenity of *Colossus*, Miller describes his visit to an African-American slum in Detroit. There he

recalls the words of Swami Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893:

About Detroit, before I forget it - yes, it was here that Swami Vivekananda kicked over the traces. Some of you may be old enough to remember the stir he created when he spoke before the Parliament of Religions in Chicago back in the early Nineties. The story of the pilgrimage of this man who electrified the American people reads like a legend. At first unrecognized, rejected, reduced to starvation and forced to beg in the streets, he was finally hailed as the greatest spiritual leader of our time (Miller 1945, pp. 46–7).

It was at the World's Parliament of Religions that the Japanese Zen master Shaku Sōen met Paul Carus, the German-American religious comparativist who headed Open Court Publishing Company in LaSalle, Illinois. Carus needed an assistant in preparing Eastern religious texts for publication by Open Court and asked Sōen for help. Sōen recommended his pupil, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

During his eleven-year sojourn in the United States, Suzuki wrote *Outline of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907) and helped Carus with the classic translation of *Tao Te Ching* (1903). As an Anglophone interlocutor of Buddhism, especially Zen, Suzuki translated – literally and figuratively – Buddhism into a comparative religious vocabulary suitable for modern Western readers. In *Outline*, Suzuki distinguishes Mahāyāna Buddhism as ‘broadly speaking . . . more liberal and progressive, but in many respects too metaphysical and full of speculative thoughts that frequently reach a dazzling eminence’ in contrast to the mainstream Buddhist tradition, which he saw as ‘somewhat conservative and may be considered in many points to be a rationalistic ethical system simply’ (1907, p. 2). In his later, more influential, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (1927) and *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), Suzuki dropped the rather rough Westernizing analogies of his earlier book and gave a more refined presentation which stressed the paradoxical nature of Zen in a universally purified form.

Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis. If anything, it is the antipode to logic, by which I mean the dualistic mode of thinking. . . . Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis; nor has it any set doctrines which are imposed on its followers for acceptance. . . . Therefore, there are in Zen no sacred books or dogmatic tenets, nor are there any symbolic formulae through which an access might be gained into the signification of Zen. If I am asked, then, what Zen teaches, I would answer, Zen teaches nothing. Whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind. We teach ourselves; Zen merely

points the way. Unless this pointing is teaching, there is certainly nothing in Zen purposely set up as its cardinal doctrines or as its fundamental philosophy (1964, p. 38).

Such a declaration of anti-dogmatic, transcendental self-expression – couched in existential and intellectual paradox – appealed to creative artists and thinkers in search of a method outside the bounds of Western rationalism. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* was published in the same year as *Tropic of Cancer*, 1934, and Suzuki's conception of Zen affirmed Miller's own radical critique of Western modernity.

Kenneth Rexroth's Anarcho-Buddhist poetics

Kenneth Rexroth, whose 1949 poetry collection *The Signature of All Things* pays homage to Suzuki's influence, recollects a trans-Atlantic crossing on a freighter, where he met 'a French African Negro, who was only partially literate, but who was able to talk for hours on the comparative merits of *Black Spring* and the *Tropic of Cancer* and the *Tropic of Capricorn*'. Rexroth recognized that 'Henry Miller is a really popular writer, a writer of and for real people, who, in other countries is read . . . by common people, by the people who, in the United States, read comic books' and that 'miners in the Pyrenees, camel drivers in Tlemcen, gondoliers in Venice, and certainly every *poule* in Paris, when they hear you're from California, ask, first thing, in one voice, 'Do you know 'M'sieu Millaire?' (Rexroth 1950, pp. 154–5). Such down-to-earth proletarian sensibility defined Miller's radical conviviality.

Rexroth mentions another work published in 1934 – the activist-philosopher Simone Weil's 'The Coming Cold War'. Rexroth describes this essay as one of 'the two most decisive insights' for 'an alert non-Bolshevik radical of the years of the Second World War', which 'pointed out that modern technology had made social violence a supranational thing, so that whoever "won," modern warfare resolved itself in actual practice into the lethal conflict of the man at the desk with the man at the bench' (Rexroth 1987, p. 35). This insight is close to Miller's impassioned antiwar screed *Murder the Murderer* (first published in 1944 and later collected in *Remember to Remember* (1961)), which quoted freely from Eugene Debs and Bartolomeo Vanzetti to buttress also an essentially 'non-Bolshevik radical' stance. *Murder the Murderer* was an autobiographical statement rooted in Miller's experience of alienation in his native New York City,

where he worked as an employment manager of a telegraph company (satirized fiercely as a loathsome symbol of American industrial civilization in *Tropic of Capricorn*).

Rexroth's Buddhist-cenobitic anarchism had a more religious and political inflection than Miller's 'philosophical anarchism' ('I have been a philosophical anarchist since my teens' (Calder 1985, p. 334)), but in many ways he shared the same autodidactic, proletarian sensibilities forged through vagrancy and odd jobs. Rexroth also admitted a spiritual debt to Buddhism: 'I suppose I, too, was influenced by Tantric Buddhism, but all down the years I have tended to keep quiet about my Buddhism, Tantric or other – seeing how there is such a large number of Airedales running around calling themselves Buddhists' (Rexroth 1991, p. 510). Like Miller, Rexroth admired Suzuki's work, suggesting its republication to his editor: 'Some ideas for Oriental Library. Pick up Suzuki as Routledge reissues. This will sell very well. Very very well' (Rexroth and Laughlin 1991, p. 94). He was also aware that 'D. T. Suzuki's Zen' 'had been thoroughly laundered' (Rexroth 1991, p. 511), and that spirituality was not a matter of unchanging dogma but of historical, even personal, reinvention. This awareness appears vividly in his poetic practice.

The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1944) and *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (1952) are Kenneth Rexroth's two signature long poems, the former a prelude to the latter. Morgan Gibson, poet and Rexroth's friend, describes *The Dragon and the Unicorn* as an amplification of 'the erotic, organic personalism, still predominantly Christian but with vivid Buddhist themes and imagery, of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, the poem which it most closely resembles' (Gibson 1984, p. 21). Rexroth wrote *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* in 1940-1944 during World War II when he was first experimenting with Buddhist, Taoist, and other Eastern spiritual practices, and aiding Japanese-Americans escape U.S. wartime internment. The title is inspired by Shakespeare's poem of 1609, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', a matrimonial paean with metaphysical images of love, reason, truth and beauty. Rexroth transforms it into a nocturnal philosophical meditation that denounces the genocidal world war: 'War is the health of the State? Indeed!/War is the State. All personal/Anti-institutional values/Must be burnt out of each generation' (Rexroth 2003, p. 251). What distinguishes the poem is its combining of such political criticism with self-referential spiritual memento mori:

And I,
Walking by the viscid, menacing
Water, turn with my heavy heart

In my baffled brain, Plutarch's page –
 The falling light of the Spartan
 Heroes in the late Hellenic dusk –
 Agis, Cleomenes – this poem
 Of the phoenix and the tortoise –
 Of what survives and what perishes,
 And how, of the fall of history
 And waste of fact – on the crumbling
 Edge of a ruined polity
 That washes away in ocean
 Whose shores are all washing into death (Rexroth 2003, p. 240).

The Dragon and the Unicorn expands the mythical, intellectual and geographic range of Rexroth's earlier poem (dragon and unicorn are fiercer creatures than phoenix and tortoise). Bradford Morrow, Rexroth's literary executor, calls it 'the most complete formulation of his personal mystical philosophy, the most extensive indictment of Western civilization . . . and perhaps the closest approximation to his speaking voice there is in his poetical works' (Rexroth 1987, p. xix). The poem's elemental image of fire evokes the experience of spiritual illumination: 'I feel like Pascal often felt.//About the mid hour of the night//FIRE' (Rexroth 2003, p. 406). This image would recur in his 1967 poem *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*, written at the Daitokuji Zen temple in Kyoto, as a symbol of Buddhist teaching: 'The moat guards the scriptures/From fire, but the Buddha word/Is burning like the dry grass on/The Indian hills and like the stars' (*ibid.*, p. 662).

Apart from their spiritual and political affiliations, Rexroth and Miller share their understanding of sex as being inseparable from everyday life. In Rexroth's case, the sacred awareness in Tantric Buddhism accents this understanding, which is expressed in 'On Flower Wreath Hill' (1976):

Here Rexroth alludes to 'womb-consciousness,' symbolized in the womb-mandala of Tantric Buddhism, a major influence on his worldview because its erotic meditations confirmed his own intuitions of the creative processes of mind, body, and universe, and their fundamental unity. . . . All of this appealed to Rexroth, whose deepest commitments seemed to flow from a still pool of compassionate wisdom that might be called his Buddha-nature, obscured though it was by emotional and intellectual turmoil (Gibson 1986, pp. 8–9).

But there are also differences in Rexroth and Miller's approaches to literary practice. Rexroth's primary vocation is poetry and Miller's is prose. Rexroth's

poetic method is distinguished by the seamless juxtaposition of persons, entities and ideas into a carefully crafted meditation that shifts from nature to politics to religion within the compass of a single stanza or even a single line. In contrast, the dominant registers in Miller's prose are the ecstatic and the grotesque, ranging from unqualified passion to surrealistic burlesque. Rexroth is a consummate craftsman for whom the word can act as alchemy of the spirit (the title of his poem *The Signature of All Things* is a key phrase from German mystic Jacob Boehme), while for Miller language poses a limit to experience, and it is the transgression of this limit for the sake of fullness of life, irreducible to any sign or symbol, that defines his work. Miller was fond of remarking that literature and art were secondary to living. These differences are not merely a matter of literary sensibility, but also have spiritual ramifications.

In Japanese Zen Buddhism, there are two major traditions, the Rinzai sect that uses the riddling *koan* as a vehicle for awakening, and the Soto sect that makes *shikan-taza* ('just sitting') its primary meditative practice. Rinzai Zen approaches the attainment of *satori* as the negation of rational, linguistic logic (*koan* is a means of cracking this logic, to gain direct insight into existence as such). In a similar way, readers do not decipher Miller's use of language as we would, say, James Joyce's literary allusions, because the dominant energy of Miller's prose is anti-literary, analogous to the *koan* that short-circuits rationality, prompting readers to discard their literary pretensions and embrace their own life. Miller's development as a writer enabled this ethos to emerge, as he shed early literariness and returned to the demotic source of his Brooklyn brogue. His wife and friends told him 'to write as he talked in those transports that sometimes would come upon him like a fit' (Turner 2011, p. 154). Miller's biographer notes that he 'consciously worked to become . . . "the Happy Rock" and "the Rock Bottom Man" . . . and "the True Man of Ancient Times", taoist terms denoting the man who has conquered his mind to regain his natural state' (Ferguson 1991, p. 215), and this aspiration was as much a symbol of his literary project as of his spiritual commitment. Miller's ideal of the anonymous, nameless sage is comparable with D. T. Suzuki's evocation of *myōkōnin*, a commoner whose unexcelled devotion to the Buddha Amida in his everyday labour and activities embodied the actuality of *satori*.

Rexroth's literary mode corresponds more closely to the practice of Soto Zen, founded by Dōgen (1200–53). The Soto Zen practice of *shikan-taza* ('just sitting') reduces Zen to this basic activity, and emphasizes that there is no *satori* outside of it since the practice of *shikan-taza* itself manifests a person's Buddha-nature. In order to argue – to the breaking point of reason – the truth of this understanding, Dōgen composed *Shōbō-genzō* ('Treasury of the True

Dharma Eye'). In Peter Matthiessen's words,² Dogen's 'formidable masterwork' of 'metaphysical exploration' expresses 'an intense love of language, a mastery of paradox and repetition, meticulous nuance and startling image, swept along by a strong lyric sensibility in a mighty effort to express the inexpressible, the universal absolute, that is manifest in the simplest objects and events of everyday life' (1987, p. 139).

Rexroth's poetic language also aims to express the absolute in the 'simplest objects and events of everyday life', thus returning modern poetry to the primordial function of sacralizing everyday reality. Based on his lifelong study of Eastern spirituality, including visits to Japan, his poetic language became increasingly Buddhist after *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, when 'the [Buddhist] influence increases, until by 1967 his outlook is predominantly Buddhist' (Gibson 1986, p. 117).³ Like Dogen, Rexroth sees the unfiltered, unattached experience of the present moment as a vanishing point of ultimate reality, where ethics, epistemology and ontology enact a convivial convergence to form a radical critique of modern technocratic society:

He who lives without grasping
Lives always in experience
Of the immediate as the
Ultimate. The solution
Of the problem of knowing
And being is ethical.

Epistemology is moral (Rexroth 1970, pp. 294–5).

Thomas Merton's convivial encounter with Buddhism

In his spiritual and literary practice, the Catholic monk-poet Thomas Merton also turned the moral force of epistemology into a radically convivial critique of war, racism and capitalist alienation. Rexroth thought highly of Merton's work and chided their shared publisher, James Laughlin, for not recognizing Merton's talents earlier: 'And you let pass two best sellers by Merton, whom NOW you think is good. Up until recently he too was a 'crazy,' a hippogriff – the Trappist Monk who contributes to *View*. Ha, Ha . . .' (Laughlin and Rexroth 1991, p. 125). The admiration was mutual and Merton said as much via Laughlin: 'The new Rexroth is very good too. I certainly like his poems. They are clear and alive. He has a classic touch. I suppose he gets it from his contact with the Chinese'

(Merton and Laughlin 1997, p. 236). Laughlin was a crucial link in the Merton-Rexroth-Miller nexus as their friend and publisher, corresponding with them regularly. He encouraged Miller to read Merton's work, and Miller soon became Merton's admirer. Referring to 'Wisdom in Emptiness: A Dialogue by Daisetz T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton' (*New Directions Annual 17*, 1961), Miller wrote to *New Direction's* editor in chief on 6 October 1961:

I found that 'duologue' between Merton and Suzuki very, very exciting. What Merton has to say about Paradise and Heaven - most interesting. Do send me the finish product, when out. If you have published Merton, send me one, won't you, that you'd think I'd like. Not a novel - the metaphysics. I like his thinking. Give him greetings from me some time. Never read a line of his before. . . . Was happy to get the new annual with Merton's fragments on the Desert Fathers. Do give him warm greetings from me whenever you write him. I feel closer to him, his way of thinking, than any other American writer I know of (Miller and Laughlin 1996, p. 197).

Laughlin passed Miller's enthusiastic regards to Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Louisville, Kentucky, and quoted from Merton's letter in reply: 'Thanks for the quote from Henry Miller. Well, that is a testimonial. I am really warmed by it. To me that is an indication that I am perhaps after all a Christian.' Laughlin added, 'You and Tom have so much in common and your wonderful spirit of understanding humanity, that I hope some time the two of you can get together' (*ibid.*, p. 198). This spiritual conviviality, in which Laughlin served as an intermediary, led to an epistolary friendship between Miller and Merton.

In a letter to Miller, Merton heaped fraternal praise on Miller's essay collection *Stand Still like the Hummingbird* (1962):

I cannot let your hummingbird get away without a resounding shout of approval. Perhaps J. Laughlin already told you how much I liked it from the first. I have been getting into it again and like more and more. . . . All that you say seems to me as obvious as if I had said it myself and you have said it better than I ever could. It needs to be said over and over again.

I resound everything you say, Europe, Zen, Thoreau, and your real basic Christian spirit which I wish a few Christians shared! (Merton 1993, p. 279)

Merton went so far as to tell Miller that, had he pursued a secular life, it would have most likely resembled Miller's and admitted to Laughlin that Miller's '“Murder the Murderer” is in many ways like something I wrote at the time, on a much smaller scale, in *The Secular Journal*' (Merton and Laughlin 1997, p. 181).

Merton met Suzuki and found him to be a kindred spirit: 'I met Suzuki the Zen man recently, and we agreed warmly about everything' (Merton 1993, p. 280). On Merton's death, Miller wrote Laughlin, 'I admired Merton greatly. He was a real radical, a true anarchist, even if a Christian' (Miller and Laughlin 1996, p. 240). The relationship between the two men was deeply abiding, based on the recognition of each other's common spiritual orientation, albeit expressed very differently. Merton's spirituality was fostered within the celibate, rigorous discipline of a hierarchical monastic order, while Miller's literary release of antinomian energies embraced the obscene and the sacred on the same plane of existence.

Merton's literary style is closer to Rexroth's than to Miller's because they each shared a sacramental sensibility towards religious metaphor and language. The Buddhist metaphors in Rexroth's verses are explicit, blending with Christian images of contemplative mysticism:

The moonlight of the Resurrection,
The moon of Amida on the sea,
Glitters on the wings of the bombers,
Illuminates the darkened cities (Rexroth 2003, p. 248).

Women of easy virtue,
Nanda and Syata, came
To Buddha before the first
Enlightenment. Ambipali,
A whore richer than princes,
Before the last Nirvana.
Jesus was born in Rachel's tomb,
John's Salome his midwife (*ibid.*, p. 326).

These two passages, from Rexroth's *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* and *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, combine Buddhist and Christian tropes: the first intimates a metaphysical presence in the midst of wartime aerial bombing, and the second draws biographical parallels between Gautama Buddha and Jesus. The oft-used image of the bodhisattva 'Kuan Shih Yin/Kannon' in Rexroth's later poem 'SUCHNESS' also shows this Catholic-Buddhist poetic interfusion. As Sam Hamill puts it:

Rexroth brings an essentially Catholic attitude to his sacramental practice, but the equation, the realization is fundamentally Buddhist. In his sacrament he finds Buddhist emptiness, the essence of the 'dead body of an angel.' Buddhism has no

angels. The flame without ash is the light of the coming to comprehend the essential emptiness or thusness at the heart of Zen practice (Rexroth 2003, p. xxviii).

With some qualification, this might apply to Merton also, particularly in his later life. Both Rexroth and Merton displayed an impressive array of religious knowledge in their poetry. As Rexroth explained in the preface to *The Signature of All Things*:

The point of view is, as in all my work, a religious anarchism which I hope I have made sufficiently, where necessary, explicit or implicit, as the case may be. For better statements, I refer you to the work of Martin Buber, Albert Schweitzer, D. H. Lawrence, Boehme, D. T. Suzuki, Piotr Kropotkin, or, for that matter, to the Gospels and the sayings of Buddha, or to Lao Tze and Chuang Tze' (1950, pp. 9–10).

Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966), *Cables to the Ace* (1968), and *The Geography of Lograire* (1969) display similar poetic erudition. A passage from his celebrated prose-poem 'Day of a Stranger' (1965) demonstrates this quality, alongside a feature of radical conviviality that he shared with Miller, namely cataloguing figures of disparate traditions and suggesting spiritual connections among them:

There is a mental ecology, too, a living balance of spirits in this corner of the woods. There is room here for many other songs besides those of birds. Of Vallejo, for instance. Or Rilke, or René Char, Montale, Zukofsky, Ungaretti, Edwin Muir, Quasimodo, or some Greeks. Or the dry, disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra, the poet of the sneeze. Here also is Chuang Tzu, whose climate is perhaps most the climate of this silent corner of woods. A climate in which there is no need for explanation. Here is the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzu's and Fu's: Kung Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu. An Hui Neng. And Chao-Chu. And the drawings of Sengai. And a big graceful scroll from Suzuki (1992, p. 216).

The choice of Chuang Tzu to exemplify 'the climate of this silent corner of woods', where Merton's hermitage was located, is noteworthy, for Merton considered *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), his free adaptation of the Taoist classic, one of his best books. Merton's assistant in the translation was John C. H. Wu, a Catholic jurist and author of *The Golden Age of Zen* (1967), for which Merton wrote an introduction that later became part of his dialogue with D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). The allusions to Suzuki's scroll and the Rinzai Zen monk Sengai's drawing refer to gifts Merton received from Suzuki which decorated his hermitage.

Merton was critical of the Beats' hedonism: 'the artist who is held by dope or drink is just as much a prisoner of a corrupt commercial or political power structure as the artist who is held by the coercion of the Writer's Union' (1985, p. 376).⁴ He also deprecated institutionalized Buddhism and facile appropriation of Zen as a countercultural lifestyle. Merton was sceptical of uncritically adopting Zen practice and neglecting its traditional discipline; he thought any Christian exploration of Eastern spiritual practice ought to be grounded within the Christian tradition. He was thus critical of syncretic innovations that jettisoned the original roots of one's faith for an artificial assemblage, remarking that although 'the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am', '[t]his does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing' (Merton 2009, pp. 140–1). This declaration encapsulates a critical aspect of Merton, Miller and Rexroth's radical conviviality, which was grounded in their own experience.

In his earlier monastic years, Merton treated Eastern spirituality with the prejudice of a fervent convert, certain that Roman Catholicism realized the Nicene Creed's declaration of 'one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church'. Merton stated in the first edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), 'If, like the mystics of the Orient you succeed in emptying your mind of every thought and every desire, you may indeed withdraw into the center of yourself and concentrate everything within you upon the imaginary point where your life springs out of God: yet you will not really find God' (1949, p. 39). However, in the 1962 second edition, he deleted this passage, after studying Buddhism and cultivating Catholic contemplative prayer in the intervening years. Merton's revival of contemplative prayer, which has parallels with Buddhist meditation, played a crucial role in the reinstitution of eremitic practice in the Cistercian monastic order.

Merton first encountered Buddhist ideas through youthful readings in the 1930s, but it was not until his 1968 journey to Asia that his intellectual investigation was actualized in experience. His three-day meeting with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and first-hand observation of Buddhist traditional popular culture in practice enriched his understanding of Buddhism. Merton's culminating moment of aesthetic and spiritual illumination occurred as he came face-to-face with the Buddhist statues of Polonnaruwa in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) during his Asian journey:

Looking at these figures, I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tired vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding

from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya* . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination (1968, p. 235).

In his dialogue with Suzuki, Merton observed that 'in understanding Buddhism it would be a great mistake to concentrate on the doctrine, the formulated philosophy of life, and to neglect the experience, which is absolutely essential'; while acknowledging Christian 'obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude', he also affirmed that 'the heart of Catholicism, too, is a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations' (1968b, p. 39).

Indeed, Merton's intellectual commitment to 'living experience' took him beyond Christian engagement with Buddhism into an empathic dialogue with Marxism, which he distinguished from its repressive distortions in socialist states. He described the Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse as 'closer to monasticism than many theologians' and invoked the spirit of early Marx as synonymous with Christianity in his last public lecture (Merton and LeClercq 2002, p. 175; Merton 1968, pp. 326–43). In a letter to the Argentine writer, Miguel Grinberg he wrote:

Henry Miller is a good friend of mine and I think he has very good insight into this problem. He has said many really urgent things about the question of our modern world and where it is going. The problem is the dehumanization of man, the alienation of man. The Marxists could have developed this concept, which is found in Marx, but they have not been able to (1993, p. 196).

In the tradition of the early Marx, Illich conceived 'conviviality' as a critique of industrial capitalist 'dehumanization' and 'alienation'. Through their common words, ideas and sensibilities, Merton, Miller and Rexroth shared this radical conviviality. Merton commented on Miller's appreciation of his work, 'I believe that this element of inner recognition that cuts through apparent external barriers and divisions is of crucial importance today' (Merton and Laughlin, p. 189). These three men's spiritual assonance was profound, and part of its critical idiom that 'cuts through apparent external barriers and divisions' (*ibid.*) was Buddhism. It circulated in their writings in a non-sectarian, non-institutional fashion as an important element of their social and ideological dissent.

Miller's biographer has noted that he 'was largely responsible for the upsurge of interest in Zen Buddhism and oriental religions and philosophies which was characteristic of the Beat movement' (Ferguson 1991, p. 326), although, of course, Rexroth and Merton also exerted considerable influence. But as Buddhism has taken root institutionally as a viable religious practice among many non-Asians in the West during the last fifty years, the radical social critique in Miller, Rexroth and Merton's conviviality has often been eclipsed in favour of uncritical incorporation of Buddhism into what Marcuse calls the 'affirmative culture' of contemporary capitalism (Marcuse 2007, pp. 82–112). In Slavoj Žižek's words, 'although 'Western Buddhism' presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of the capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement' (2001, p. 12). Even the politically critical views of 'engaged Buddhism' have suffered frequently from naive social analysis and fetishistic treatment of Buddhist teachers (Knabb 1993). In the face of such Western domestication of Buddhism, Miller, Merton and Rexroth's radical conviviality remains relevant as an example of how to integrate Buddhism into Anglophone literature and culture as an idiom of nonconformity.

Notes

- 1 The man responsible for Grove Press's publication of D. T. Suzuki (and Alan Watts) was Donald Allen, a pivotal figure in the New York and San Francisco literary scene in the last half of the twentieth century. Allen translated Eugène Ionesco's plays, edited Fran O'Hara's poetry, and published many major Beat writers under his Grey Fox Press. He also attended Shuryu Suzuki's Zen meditation sessions at Sokoji Soto Zen Mission and San Francisco Zen Center, the latter becoming one of the epicenters of American Zen Buddhism.
- 2 Peter Matthiessen is also an important figure in this literary genealogy of radical conviviality, although he belongs to a later generation for whom Zen was turning into an identifiably Western, specifically American, community-based practice. Matthiessen was introduced to *zazen* as he was facing his Buddhist wife's terminal illness, took a vow of Zen priesthood in 1981, and is now a Zen priest of White Plum Asanga. After a brief expatriate period in Paris of the 1950s, where he co-founded *The Paris Review* and worked for the CIA (a decision he later regretted deeply), he became a major literary voice in both fiction and nature writing, as well as an important nonfiction chronicler of radical political dissent

(*Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* (1969) and *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983).

- 3 In the International Studies Library at Kanda University, Japan, 15,000 volumes from Rexroth's personal library are located in the Kenneth Rexroth Collection.
- 4 Although often dubbed 'Father of the Beats', Kenneth Rexroth also disapproved the hedonistic drug culture spawned by the Beats: 'The leading magazine of the Beatniks is difficult to distinguish from a house organ for a pharmaceutical house, financed by Chicago money. . . . Today the ill-housed, ill-fed, ill-clothed, and illiterate live in glass houses, take lysergic acid, wear leotards, and send their children to progressive schools that specialize in Free Love for infants. We now have a lumpen-intelligentsia and a new kind of lumpen-bourgeoisie' (Rexroth 1987, p. 206).

