

Remembering Naomi Remembering Tom: An Interview with Naomi Burton Stone

By Paul Wilkes

Naomi Burton Stone, Thomas Merton's longtime agent and subsequently his editor and literary trustee, died on November 16, 2004. In preparation for his Merton: A Film Biography (1984), author and filmmaker Paul Wilkes conducted an extensive interview with her, excerpts of which were used in the film. What follows is a lightly edited version of the entire interview, which has not been published previously; it appears here with the permission of Mr. Wilkes and the cooperation of Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, where the transcript of the interview and all other preparatory materials for the film are now housed.

Paul Wilkes: The first time that you met him, what were your impressions, what did he look like?

Naomi Stone: Well, I didn't meet him in Perry Street. We had a business relationship. When I met him for the first time, it was in the office where I worked. I was employed as a reader in Curtis Brown Ltd., a literary agency. I was the very youngest, the least important person, and he came off the street with a manuscript, so, he'd go to the information place and they said, "You see Miss Burton." I do remember what he looked like. He had very yellow hair; and he seemed to me completely English. I had been there less than a year myself, from England, and so that sort of stuck in my mind. I think he left me perhaps two manuscripts; I probably tried to get rid of one. We only liked to have one at a time, but I think he did leave me two then. The one I remember very well was called "The Labyrinth." It was a wonderful novel. It was very sort of wild, and it was about somebody who lived in New York but traveled all over the place. He went to France and England; there was quite a bit that was set in Cambridge. And I liked it enormously. I have no recollection of writing to him about it, so probably he telephoned frequently, to ask how things were going along, because he was living in New York City at that time I'm pretty sure. All the records on that book were lost, but I was very interested to see the other day, as I was looking through some early correspondence, that we sent it to fourteen publishers. All of them declined it. But it did something for me, something which in a funny kind of a way I've only just come to see that Tom did for me all through my relationship with him, which was to introduce me to all kinds of people. I was, as I say, very young. I didn't know anybody, and of course I was sending this book out not to the editor-in-chief, but to some associate editor, because that was the level on which I was operating. And I didn't know a lot of these people except as names, but there were lots of publishing parties in those days and people would come up and say, you sent me that wonderful book by this guy called Merton, and I'd say yes, and we'd talk about it for hours. Well, it was always declined by everybody, because somebody would read it after my age level, and say, "Oh no, we shan't make any



Paul Wilkes (c. 1984)

money” – you know, first novels and so on. So we kept on and on with that, and during that time, I think I probably met him twice. I can only remember once or twice going out and having a beer with him at the Roosevelt Bar, which was a pretty sleazy place in those days, no fancy stuff. And we used to talk about England and the war and how we both really ought to go back and do something about it – neither of us intending to do anything of the sort. I didn’t know anything much about him. I didn’t even know he was a Catholic. Of course you didn’t ask people things. I don’t know whether there were any signs in the book that it might have been so, as I find now that there are signs in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, which I overlooked completely when I read that at about the same time. But I just hadn’t any idea about that at all.

PW: People have mentioned that there was a certain longing or some unresolved quality in him that they could sense at that time. He was after something – not after something, but wanting something. Did you have that feeling about him?

NS: No, I know what you mean. I never felt that way about him. When he went – the first thing he did was to leave New York City. And I thought that was bad enough, when he went to Olean, New York – somewhere upstate New York. I don’t know how I walked into America and became an absolute typical Manhattanite from the word go. The only time I ever went to the west side was to the theater or Greenwich Village. We did have a lot in common, you know. If we had any conversation it was not about his work, it was not about England, war and our people we knew over there and things like that; it would have been about jazz, because I was a really terrific jazz addict and I’d spend hours in Nick’s and places like that – Peewee Russell, and downtown bars.

PW: Speaking of England, did he ever mention anything about – I don’t know if it’s true – that there was a woman and a child and all that stuff?

NS: No, he never . . .

PW: Because Furlong made such a big thing about his raging guilt.

NS: Oh, I know, it does fit into the story well, doesn’t it? You have to admit that part of it. Really, it fits in – either you go off and shoot lions and tigers in Africa or something, or else you go into a monastery – take your pick. And I guess lions might eat you faster than the monks. I’m not so sure though [chuckles]. But he never talked to me about that. I never even heard that story till – he was still alive – this is what’s so incredible to me; I thought it was so nutty, so totally crazy, that I never even asked him. I must have seen him after [that]; I was at Doubleday. I went to Doubleday in 1959. Sy Freedgood was one of his Columbia friends, and Anne Freedgood worked at Doubleday – marvelous woman – and I had lunch with Anne and Sy, and they asked me about it. And I said, “What?” and they immediately changed the subject. They probably thought I was horrified. [This was] the first time I ever heard somebody ask, did I know that he had had a child, that he had gotten somebody pregnant in England, there’d been a child and that both mother and child were killed in the blitz, and I said, “No, I didn’t know anything about it, I’d never heard of that.” As I say, this would be 1959, after 1959, and I certainly saw Tom on two or three occasions after that. I just went so out of my mind because it seemed so impossible. And of later years, when it’s been, oh, so much talked about and made so much of – I think there are two reasons why I didn’t exactly believe it. It was such a usual kind of happening at Oxford and Cambridge. And I find many Americans who find this much the worst thing, that the woman should have been paid off. If it’s true at all, that’s what would have happened. She probably would not have had the baby. She would probably have had what we used to call an illegal operation. Or if she did – the guardian was not, I wouldn’t have thought, in that tax bracket where he would have

wanted to support somebody for life. But he might have paid the person off. There seem to me so many good reasons why it was not true, and why it might have been a little more exotic to have left Cambridge because of something like that rather than because you had done no work, run up enormous bills, drank an awful lot, and [were] continually coming in late, being caught by the proctor – this kind of thing which his guardian felt was just wasting all his money and the hell with it. Now, I am more sorry I didn't ask Tom because the thing that puzzles me about it is that it would have been so totally unshocking to me at the time that I first met him. I mean, it would be unshocking to me today, because it was something that happened – you know, I had cousins who were sent off to South Africa because they'd got the barmaid into trouble or something like that, and it was considered very bad form because they owned the brewery. That made it much worse. So really I'm a very bad person to ask about it. I can't say: if I say I don't believe it, everybody says, "Oh, you want Tom to be perfect." I sure don't. I know he wasn't perfect in many ways.



PW: What about when he went into the monastery – when he went to Olean, that was bad enough – okay, Thomas Merton goes to the monastery.

NS: Well, I heard that he was going to go into the monastery, or had gone into a monastery, from Robert Lax. Bob came to see me, and that's a scene which I can see very well. I had an office that was right opposite the entrance; [it was a] terribly small company – there were only about nine of us in it. And Bob came in and I was at a file cabinet – I expect I was lowly enough to do my own filing in those days – and he said, "Thomas Merton wanted me to let you know that he has gone into a Trappist monastery." I'm not going to say exactly what I said because I wouldn't want you to have to edit it, but I said, "Oh, God, he'll never write again." Famous last words! And he told me at that time that Mark Van Doren was his literary executor. So to me it was death, you know. I thought he would be walled up with a jug of water and a bit of bread – I really didn't know anything about monasteries, and I was very shocked, because I had no idea he was a Catholic and I was very anti-Catholic at that time. So that's how I heard about it and that was my reaction. Now it didn't grieve me; I didn't grieve [that] for six years I heard nothing from him or whatever, because I never expected to really. I should explain that I didn't sell "The Labyrinth" and of course he destroyed that manuscript himself – there's, I think, written proof of that in one of his journals, [at] St. Bonnie's.

PW: He would be all things to all people – what was that about? Give me an example of how he might do that kind of thing.

NS: Can I go right to Rosemary Ruether? (There was rather a big jump!) It struck me in reading Monica Furlong's book: I thought the correspondence that was reported in the Furlong book was rather a good example of the way Tom could make somebody feel that they could do something for him, and they were probably the only person who could. It's an endearing kind of a quality. It also is a very good way, if somebody criticizes you, if you say to them, "I think you're right, but you must tell

me.” It seemed to me she was very critical of him and I feel that Tom like all other human beings – I’m not saying anything unkind about him – I hate people criticizing me – I mean, you know, my reaction is always one of annoyance. And I’ve only learned this other little trick which is saying, “Well, thank you very, very much, that’s extremely helpful; could you tell me more?” – not from reading Tom’s correspondence, because I’ve been practicing it a little longer than that, but it’s a thing that disarms your attacker. That correspondence is very near the end of his life, I believe. And one of the last letters I had from him was talking about a book that he’d written which he had sent me at that time, and he said, “I don’t want to publish too soon because I think that a lot of it might seem terribly old fashioned to some of the very *avant garde* Catholics.” And I could sense that he didn’t like that kind of feeling. He didn’t want to be put down. He wanted to be “with it,” yet he was rather opposed to some of the more, oh, crazy liturgical things. My own private feeling is that he did not exactly welcome the mother tongue into the liturgy, for instance. And I have a little bit of an experience at that: I was staying down there and he was in his hermitage – it must have been quite near the end of his life then – and he came down to a temporary chapel, because they were redoing the basilica, and he said Mass for me. And he was kind of awkward, and I thought for a long time – I usually think everything is my fault, so I thought, “Oh dear, I disturbed him; he didn’t want to leave the hermitage,” and so on and so on, but it came to me much later that he really wasn’t comfortable in that English. He liked Latin and probably said the Mass in Latin, which he was perfectly able to do. You know, in the *Asian Journal*, when he’s in that church in India – the Church of St. Thomas, it is – there’s a little phrase which says something about, “and everything in the sanctuary was dark and silent and quiet, the way it used to be before the Council.” Isn’t that wonderful? Tom was considered so *avant garde*, but you know, what he really was, was somebody who went back into the further back past for all of the innovations – I mean, his innovations in the hermit life and in the monk’s life, I think probably come far more from the twelfth century than the twenty-first, -second, -third or -fourth.

PW: That’s a wonderful detail – he liked the old stuff. Let’s go to *Seven Storey Mountain* a bit. You receive a manuscript from this fellow in the monastery, and what goes on?

NS: One of the horrible things I discovered in reading over some of my correspondence is that what went on was that I didn’t sit down and read it the day it arrived. You must realize I had not heard from this person . . . (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, One: “Prisoner’s Base” – I’d forgotten it was called that). This manuscript came in to me at Curtis Brown in nineteen-forty-something-or-other. From looking back at correspondence, I thought Tom wrote me and said could he send it, but actually Bob Lax called me and said he had this manuscript and could he bring it in, or could Tom send it to me. So it did arrive through the mail, and when it came in, I discovered that I didn’t immediately say, “What a marvelous book, that’s the best first sentence I’ve ever read,” and rush home with it. I hadn’t heard from this guy for six years, five or six years, and he was in his cell with his bread and water as far as I was concerned. He had had two books of poetry published, but I appear not to have noticed that at all, even though he mentioned them in his first letter. I really didn’t ever know that they had been published. And so I put it on my reading shelf and in due course – I had really kind of a strange coincidence – here I am, with awful cough and cold again, and that’s exactly when I read the first time, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I took it home because I had this very bad cold and I thought I’d stay home the next day and stay in bed and read it. And I spent the whole day reading it. I really was very, very struck by it. There was a lot I didn’t understand; he kept talking about this thing called grace, and in the correspondence – we had a lot of correspondence about grace – I couldn’t understand what

that was. It was a word I didn't know the meaning of, theologically speaking. But there was so much of my own life in it. I think that's one of the reasons that Tom and I understood each other on a very basic level. He had a much more exotic life, of course, with his traveling and being born in France – I would have given anything to have been born in France and not in a suburb of London – and his going back and forth; and he'd been to Cambridge. I didn't go to any college, let alone Oxford or Cambridge. But our early schooling would have been very much the same. He went to a little school about twenty miles from where I was born and was growing up – a little, boys' boarding school. I went to boarding school when I was eight. And then he went on to what we call in England a public school, and that kind of teaching he had would have been very much the same as mine. I went to a big girls' school – boarding school – where we all worked for the same exams, where many of the girls went on to college and so on.

PW: So, you read this manuscript and you thought to yourself . . .

NS: Well, I didn't think to myself, "Where should I send it?" because luckily for me . . . I mean, it would have been a hard thing for two reasons. In those days . . . it was a book that was obviously not only the part that I related to very well, the early part about his wild life and so on. The part I didn't understand so well but was definitely extremely moved by, was the part about his becoming a Catholic and his going into the monastery. You had to put yourself back into those days when Catholic writers were published by Catholic publishers, and there were quite a number of them. I can think of one immediate exception – Graham Greene – but he wasn't exactly toeing the Catholic line, was he, and so that was perhaps one explanation there. But, when I got this book, I was told that Bob Giroux would like to see it. Tom felt sure Bob would like it. I expect Bob Lax had perhaps spoken to Bob Giroux – I don't remember that. But in any case, I finished reading the book – just an aside on a personal level: what I did was to get up out of my frightful bed with my box of kleenex and look all through my shelves and my English *Book of Common Prayer* so I could find the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, which I read for the first time in my life to prove that I would never become a Catholic. And then I went back, and I wrote him a rather good letter. You know, you open those files from long ago, and you wonder what awful thing you might have said: "Well, I dare say we might be able to do something, or try somehow or other" – but I didn't actually say that – I did tell him that I thought we should delay a little bit for technical reasons. Bob was having sales conferences, and there was no point in sending the manuscript over there. I wanted him to get it in his hands personally, immediately and we won't go into how long it took me to do that. And so, it went off, and then everything went swimming along from there. Bob liked it very much. It was an unusual book for a regular trade house to take, but the terms were very generous – they had only to pay an accrued advance of royalties; no huge sums of money were involved. They really weren't very often in those days. And it took rather a long time for it to come out, for one reason. . . .

PW: And then?

NS: And then, it just took off, and sold and sold. Really exciting – I mean, things were happening. I expect you heard things about the actual sales from Bob Giroux. Book stores that had ordered a thousand copies which were delivered on Monday, and Tuesday they'd call up and say, "Where are our thousand copies?" and they were told, "Well, you sold them apparently." It was really exciting. It was on the bestseller list in the *Times* for – not as long as it should have been; it was suddenly jumped down and, there was a little, sort of, dirty work going on, I think, at that time. A lot of times people were asked – we did some research into it – you'd ask a book store – I remember somebody in Boston being

asked, “Why aren’t you reporting this book if you’re doing so well?” – because it was a Catholic book. I mean, you don’t report it because it’s Catholic. Really strange to hear that today, isn’t it? You realize what enormous change there’s been. I mean, maybe we can get over other prejudices.

PW: Over the years, tell me how many copies *Seven Storey Mountain* has sold, and how much has that meant in revenues?

NS: I wouldn’t know. I’m not being cagey, but I have no idea because I’ve been away, but a lot, a lot. I was involved in getting money for authors in a way, and this was one case where we had no advance on that. It’s very touching. The monastery was a little hard up at that time and so we got Harcourt, Brace [to] advance a thousand dollars at Christmas before the book had come out because they knew that it was going to do all right – nobody knew it was going to do what it was going to do. But, I remember within the first year it sold one hundred thousand copies in hard cover, because Bob and I went to Giovanni’s Restaurant – we ate seven-layer chocolate cake for lunch to celebrate. But it certainly, you know, is still in print. The amazing thing is that his books, I think with the exception of two that are available in some other form, like a poetry book that’s in the *Collected Poems* or something like that – everything is in print. That’s unheard of, you know.

PW: It is unheard of. I love the seven-storey chocolate cake.

NS: Seven-layer . . . seven-layer chocolate cake.

PW: Here’s a little quote. You get *The Sign of Jonas* and you say, “It’s exciting to read something that knocks sparks out of your brain.” To me there’s a sweetness, there’s a real nice quality to that, a real encouragement to him also. I guess in his life you were far more than just his agent or a friend or

...

NS: Who said that?

PW: You did.

NS: When?

PW: You did. It’s in the book. It’s in the Monica Furlong book. “It’s exciting to read something that knocks sparks out of your brain.”

NS: Yeah, well, I mean, some of my authors knocked sparks out of my brain. I’ve been thinking a lot about why his relationship to me was different, that and looking at some of the troubles that we went through. I mean, almost every time I ever went to the monastery was because we were in some frightful hassle, usually over foreign rights. He would continually give somebody . . . “I’m just doing a little pamphlet for Mr. So-and-so,” and then it comes out in a book. He has not one publisher, but two – Jay Laughlin and Bob Giroux – all of whom have options contracted for books. This kind of thing was very, very trying. I really was thinking that if he had not been in a monastery, he would have been so impossible. I think one would have stopped representing him. There’s a lot you can put up with from authors, but I was a very, very lucky person that I worked for one of the two, I would say, at that time, top agencies, if not the top one. We weren’t enormous, but we were very, very good. And we didn’t really have to take anybody, keep anybody on; if people got very obstreperous we’d say, “I’d really think you’d be happier elsewhere,” and then try to get rid of him.

PW: Why did he do that? What was he up to?

NS: I don’t know. It’s extraordinary, you know, even looking back. It’s very strange, and I’ve often thought perhaps I’d exaggerated it, but reading through some of the old correspondence, I really didn’t. I mean, in one letter, he’s saying, “I’m not going to do this ever again,” and then there will be a P.S.: “I’ve just got to finish up this pamphlet for Mr. So-and-so.” And the pamphlet always came

out in huge type, so that it was like a big book. And he couldn't seem to understand that. I think writers want to be read by everybody and the stricture – it was like trying to fit him into some kind of harness to say, “New Directions will do a book at this time, and Harcourt, Brace in the next season; you really don't want to flood the market because you don't get good reviews” – “Oh, here's another book from Merton,” that kind of thing. I think he didn't really willfully want to do anything bad to his publishers, but he just couldn't see that it mattered. He liked to give things to people. I think he was a very generous person, and you know that is a hardship that a monk, or anybody who has taken a vow of poverty, has got nothing to give, have they? So, just give the text of something to this lovely order of Benedictines in France who turned around, made a book, sold it to an English publisher and the English publisher imported the copies here, to a different publisher, not New Directions – it was Viking Press. And we had to go to them and say, “This chapter is a chapter out of a book that Bob Giroux owns.” It was really wild.

PW: What was your relationship about with Merton? What did you mean to him in his life? What did you represent to him?

NS: It sort of falls into two things. My relationship with Merton, I feel, had a very definite break and turn for the worse when I became a Catholic. I'll explain to you why. Before that, I was obviously much more objective and therefore my advice would have seemed sounder, whether it was or not. But when I became a Catholic, I began to see him as a saint, or wanted him to be a saint. I didn't exactly see him as a saint, but that was what I had begun to think. It really spoiled a lot of things, I think, feeling that way about him. I was shocked and so on. I think we more or less got over it, but I thought he complained an awful lot, and I didn't think monks should complain. Maybe I always felt that – we were walking along – quite near the end of his life – outside Gethsemani and he said, “And that's the barn where you told me in your letter to go and have a good cry and then stop snivelling.” And I was really amazed. It must have been ten years earlier that I had said that, but at one time I think he looked upon me as a nice shoulder to cry on, a nice elder sister. In fact there's something in the correspondence about how he'd always wanted a sister and this was great. But then I unfortunately took on a rather Lucyish aspect, and became rather critical of him, to put it mildly. We had quite a lot of differences, but it was not about his work. You know, he never needed any editing, I didn't think; he wrote beautifully. It was more other things – extracurricular things he was doing. And I also felt that he was making decisions on very little . . . he wasn't up to date; he wasn't reading newspapers.

PW: What would be an example of that kind of impetuosity of his?

NS: How do you mean, what impetuosity?

PW: You say he was making decisions without really having . . .

NS: Well, I remember going down and spending some time with him. I went out on a picnic with him and a guy called Matthew – I suppose who was sent along as a chaperone. And he was telling me all these things that were happening: “I know _____ was a Catholic by that. . . . Every Sunday that you have a sermon in every church out there in the world on the evils of communism.” I said, “What are you talking about? Nobody talks about that.” And I found out that he was not receiving any, what I consider readable Catholic literature, Catholic newspapers, but had a lot of people writing him who might have their point of view – they were definitely entitled to it, and I wouldn't have even been against it, but if you only have one side all the time, it doesn't really give you the ability . . . I remember being horrified to find that he was writing about nuclear matters and never heard of Edward Teller. Well, that seemed strange to me, you know. I really had a talk with the Abbot about that, about

how he should be allowed to read *The New York Times* or something that had, at least in those days, a little more balance, I would think.

PW: Naomi, he wrote so authoritatively about everything that he wrote about.

NS: You see, we editors are above money.

PW: The tale that you were going to tell us?

NS: Oh, I was going to tell you, the last time I was down to see him, I went down to sign the trust agreement papers, and I went out to the abbey to stay, and I drove him into Louisville. And he was very annoyed with me because I had an appointment to see Father Abbot, Dom James, after we came back. We were going to the O'Callaghans to have lunch and the lawyer John Ford was going to be there, and so on. Jay couldn't make it, but the rest of us were going to sign this great document which had been in the works for something like two years. He'd been trying to get the deal set up and, you know, lawyers would be hired and they'd die or leave the country, and it really was a long process, and Tom was cross. He said, "Why do you want to go and talk to the abbot?" And I said, "Well, I do; I like him, Tom, he's my friend and he's been to our house in New York, and I always come there." You see, I really represented the abbey. Tom had given his soul away to that monastery and so technically, Curtis Brown represented the abbey. And I was their guest, and a whole lot of other things like that. But the abbot thought I was absolutely the most holy who ever lived, so why wouldn't I want to talk to him? I mean, that was nice. I didn't get any of that from Merton, I can tell you. And so, he was muttering on and telling me all the things that were wrong. And we came to a sign which said, "Toll Booth, One Mile." I said, "You've got one mile to do all your grumbling for the day and then I don't want to hear one other word about it." "What do you mean, grumbling?" I said, "What have you been doing? Nothing else. And don't waste time now, you better [get] a lot more out." Well, he had to laugh.

PW: What was your relationship about with him? I mean, were you his confessor?

NS: Oh, no, far from it. He never told me anything, unless he thought I was absolutely certain to have heard it from someone else.

PW: Why were you . . .

NS: Well, because, I think we had all this sort of common background that we were more like . . . I mean, we understood each other because we were very basically English – I'm just only old English, but, he was much more cosmopolitan – that we had so many things in our past that we liked and had done the same kind of things. Nobody paid me a million dollars or anything like that – I didn't get into trouble – I was too smart. But I understood where he was coming from, as we say today, very much. And I'm sure he complained. You see, a lot of people took it seriously. One of his friends came rushing to see me at Doubleday once and said, "We've got to get him out of that place, he's being poisoned, and they're treating him terribly badly." This is where poor Tom is in his hermitage, which he's longed to be in, and the guy goes there and he says, "We had the most awful meal, and he had to boil water on a wood fire," and on and on about it, and he was going to write an article about it. So I wrote Tom and said, "I think you'd better call him off; this is very bad." And Tom wrote back and said, "Good God, what does he want, it's Lent. I gave him sardines and bread and butter. I thought that was a very good meal." But he probably had said something that . . . I never blame anybody for saying anything about him. They get such and such an impression from him, because he probably said it; I'm quite sure of that.

PW: There were about fifteen different Thomas Mertons.

NS: Oh, yes, many, many, many Thomas Mertons. And I certainly wouldn't ever feel that I knew him very well. It's very hard. And you see when people die, too, they make a different impact on your life, obviously. Everything gets sort of like one of those compressors of material, not necessarily garbage, but it's a compressor that cuts everything down. And, so it's hard to say why he grumbled to me – I expect I was supposed to say, yes, or something – you know, to understand. I really didn't though, because he had chosen that life and the one thing that I feel, the inspiring part to me of his life, is not what he did or didn't do, and what he did before he was a monk, or whether he was the perfect monk or not. It's the fact that he stayed there, and that he really gave up a lot. I think maybe I'm one of the few people who understood what he was giving up when he went into a monastery before he had sold any of his writings, except for book reviews or something like that, because he really knew he was a writer. I certainly knew he was a writer. You have signs, like fourteen publishers saying encouraging things even though they wouldn't take a book. That's a sign, you know, somebody's got it. And the fact that you can even remember anything after how many years – forty years or more, forty-two years since I read that "Labyrinth," and yet I can still see scenes of it. There's one in a New York nightclub which was a place I used to go to all the time – sort of a bar on 52nd Street, where the hat check girl's door – the door from the bar to the hat check girl – opened out and the street door opened in, and you always wondered what would happen if somebody got caught, and in Tom's book they did – you know, sort of silly things like that.

PW: As I'm doing more and more of these conversations, talking to people, it seems like Merton, because of this great mind that he had, and this great energy, that maybe that was the only place he could go to go up against God, or confront God at the most basic or total level, because was that the only person who could keep him interested for a whole life – that would challenge him?

NS: It's a very interesting thought, but I don't think when he was, what, 26 or something – that his mind hadn't expanded that much. I would say one of the miracles is that he did go to this place, which is not exactly the center of learning in the civilized world to put it mildly, and managed to educate himself as marvelously as he did. I often wonder how – I hope you're going to edit some of this out, if I'm ever going to go to Gethsemani again – how would he ever get to be ordained and do all the right theology. I know they had people teaching . . . it's interesting that very soon after he became a priest himself, he became the Master of Scholastics, teaching them. And of course, his enormous interest in reading – he had interlibrary loans all over the country.

PW: Why do you think he did go in there? Thomas Merton went into the monastic life because . . .

NS: I don't think anybody knows exactly. May I suggest, Paul, you read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I think that's what it is all about. But I haven't read it – I mean I haven't read it for so long. I was just being flippant. I don't know. People have a feeling that they are being [drawn] towards something. You have to look back. He had this feeling once, twice before in his life: remember when he was in Rome, when he was a schoolboy still, and he managed to get rid of that. You can push it away and so many times, I think all of us in our lives have had a tremendous urge to do something – I remember standing under a chestnut tree and thinking, "I must become an Episcopal nun" – that's why I went to an Episcopal convent in England. But I managed to think up nineteen good reasons – quickly – why I shouldn't, and never wrote back. But he'd been to Gethsemani on a retreat. It's very seductive . . . the chanting, the Latin, all these things; of course I know we got Latin in the churches those days, but it wasn't exactly that high form of chanting. If you have a scholarly turn of mind, which was one of his great things – I mean I really think he was a great scholar, great poet . . . I think

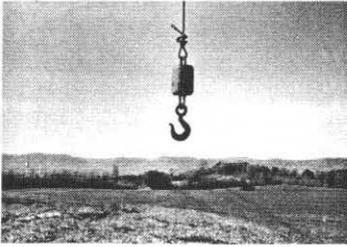
he just went there seeking God alone. He probably wasn't very happy with his past life. I do not buy the fact that he was guilt-ridden; I've never felt that anybody who had so much joy and fun in his life . . . why doesn't he come through to me ever as guilt-ridden? I never can see that side of him at all. He had a great sense of humor, you know, he laughed like anything.

PW: It seems that there's a certain heroic quality of going into the monastery, to the toughest possible life that a man can lead. Some of the monks talk about that kind of a marine corps thing. Do you think he enjoyed that – the challenge of that?

NS: Well, I can't say whether he did or didn't, but I think what we're doing if we say that is to put the 1960s-to-'80s interpretation on it, rather than when he went. I would think the bravery of his going was that he went on the 7th of December, literally. I mean he set out, or decided to go – he didn't get there until the 10th. It couldn't have taken him that long because he went on a train, but he did go right after Pearl Harbor, which really takes a lot of guts in the circumstances. {gap}

PW: Why don't you just tell me about it?

NS: Tell you about the funeral? Well, I'd like to tell you about when I heard the news of Tom's death. I was in bed with the flu – you know, I have a history of my respiratory ailments and Merton – and I got a call, and it was from Dom James, and it was really rather touching. I knew at once something had happened; he said, "Naomi, you know that Father Louis is in . . . went to the Orient." And I said, "Yes," and I knew immediately that something had happened because his voice was shaking, and he told me he was dead. And the next thing that happened was that *The New York Times* called up and asked me all kinds of questions: "How much money did he make out of *The Seven Storey Mountain*?" I said, "I have no idea." And then there was a little bit of a wait – it seemed to me they said the body would be there, flown back. They were expecting it back on a Sunday – it would come in Sunday night and the funeral was to be Monday. Of course we got there and there was no body at all. I had a very bad trip down; I didn't think I was going to get out – there was a blizzard in Boston – but we did manage to get out there, and it was a huge group of people. It was the first time I'd really ever seen a lot of Tom's friends together. Some of these people didn't even know him, but were people who had corresponded with him. And it was a real eye-opener: from the most simple people to really very sophisticated people; and people of all ages – there was a girl that he'd corresponded with – a kid who was in high school. He'd helped her start an underground newspaper in California and she had been given some money to go to Europe for her graduation after high school. She used it to come to his funeral. It was very touching – things like that were really very, very amazing and wonderful. We were there for over a day. The funeral ended up by being on a Tuesday, it seems to me, and his body didn't come in until that day, and it was very moving but it was also kind of trying. When they had the prayers for the dead, we were in the church – it was a great honor to be allowed to be in the church. And Tommie and Frank O'Callaghan and I were in that front row with some other people who sobbed and cried . . . and poor monks – we were really on top of them, and that was a very hard thing for them. They were not used to having anybody, and certainly not a lot of women, so close. And there was a little break after his body came in, the coffin came in – it was described in *The New York Times* as a silver coffin – it was one of those typical gray boxes. And this monk came over to me and said, "Naomi, I think I should tell you that we're going to say the Office of the Dead; it's going to be a long time" – and he gave a look at these weeping females. And I said, "Okay," and I said to these ladies next to me, "I think we'd better go out," and told Tommie and Frank and we all left and I took them along and suggested it would be an awfully good idea to get all the crying out of their system, because Frank



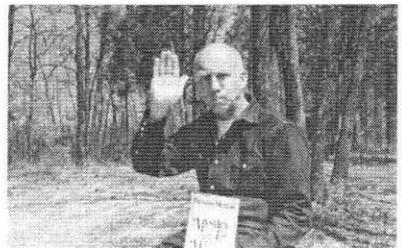
said, “I’m not going to go back to the Mass if they’re not going to stop.” That was a real eye-opener to me, the sort of people he had who really felt tremendously close to him. And in a way, it’s embarrassing to me that I don’t feel that close to him. I mean, I’ve been an agent for such a long, long time and dealt with so many authors and I don’t . . . it’s somebody everybody knows. I think I said at one other point that what Tom has done for me, particularly since his death, is this enormous amount of friends I have

through him. I’ve done a lot of speaking on him. I’m certainly very interested in his work. Sure, I love him like I love a brother or something like that, who might infuriate me a lot of the time. I had that kind of a relationship with one of my brothers. The other one I blindly adored no matter what he did. But one of them – the one nearest to me in age – we were still fighting until he probably went off to heaven a couple of years ago. I really miss him too. But it’s not quite the same as being the one big focal point, as he is to a lot of people [who] have had their lives turned around by him. And a lot of those people I’ve had the privilege of knowing because I’ve been somewhere to speak and they’ll come up and talk to me and say, “You know, I started reading something of his . . .” The difference of books that they have read is very interesting. Once I went down and gave a whole weekend retreat on Merton in Philadelphia, at LaSalle and Temple together. Well, I’ve got friends from that weekend that I still see every year. They come up here and it’s an enormous gift that I’ve received from him in that way.



{She talks about photos she took on an outing with Merton.} Oh that’s a picture that I must have taken of Tom; it’s in the spring because there’s dogwood or some kind of white blossom – an extremely poor photograph, I would say. That is one – I always call it “The Skyhook,” but I think I’ve been told it’s called “The Only Known Photo of God” – this hook that’s coming down from the sky. The difference between these two photographs is the difference between an artist and a poet who

is behind the camera and a prosaic agent. Oh, that’s a picnic at Dom Frederic’s lake, and Tom is there with a loaf of bread. Tommie O’Callaghan had brought the picnic out and she had some marvelous homemade bread, I remember it well. And that’s – I can’t think of his name now, a young man who’s written a lot of poetry down there, Roy somebody {Ron Seitz}. And that is – just a piece of water. Now that photograph – I had brought Tom down a copy of *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and he said, “I think the guru ought to send a message to his public,” and he was clowning like that. He was really very lovable. He was a clown, you know. I just am embarrassed when people think it’s my whole life, and I think if you’d been in the agency business – I was nineteen when I went there to Curtis Brown as a secretary, and I was in publishing in one form or another until I was . . . I don’t know



how old, but just millions of years – forty years, something like that.

PW: What about these two – once you say he’s not the center of your life, which he isn’t, of course, and yet you thought of him as a saint . . .

NS: I thought of him as a saint?

PW: Didn’t you say that before?

NS: No, I didn’t.

PW: Didn’t you . . .

NS: Oh, oh, yes, yes, I did. That was a terrible mistake I made. I wanted him to be a saint, because I had just become a Catholic, and I behaved just like all converts tend to. You know, they’re overenthusiastic; I had the most extraordinary ideas. I came across an old book in which I said, “Perhaps it is always wrong to question the words of a priest.” Ah, goodness me, that’s a perfectly terrible thought. I soon grew out of that. But I didn’t think he was a saint. I was disappointed in him because he did not go around with downcast eyes and all the traditional trappings of a saint. Of course I know better now. The saints – he may be one because of what he did have, this great perseverance. I probably wrote as good a piece about him right after his death as I would ever be able to write in my lifetime, because I’d just come back from the funeral. And I remember saying in that, that sanctity is not just not doing bad things and being very holy and all that, but it’s this terrific perseverance that will keep you going, and he endured. And I think this is the most marvelous thing you could say about him. And I think it’s that his writing reaches so many people. Lots of it I really don’t understand too well myself, or it doesn’t happen to hit me. I love a lot of his poetry; I think *Geography of Lograire* is an absolutely fascinating book. And I suppose I like *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* better than any book that he wrote – prose book. But he’s not that kind, you know, he’s a different kind of a saint. He’s a person who does endure. It happens that he has had a lot of glory; out in the world, that would have been a dreadful thing for him to handle. I’ve seen too many people ruined by that kind of adulation. I often think how I admire Dan Berrigan because he hasn’t been spoiled by that. At one time when he first got out of prison – I was at big religious ed. congress – and people were coming up, really touching the hem of his garment, almost literally, and he’s managed to survive that and make his life over and do something. And I think he digs Merton very, very well. I’ve always felt that they would have understood each other enormously well.