

The Process behind the Product

Review of

The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick Samway, SJ

Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo

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Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

The already published correspondence of Thomas Merton takes up a fair amount of shelf space in my study. This recent publication of the letters between Merton and Robert Giroux (1914-2008), his old friend from Columbia University and longtime editor, is of particular interest because Giroux either edited or oversaw the publication of more than two dozen Merton titles including, famously, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. These letters, then, fill out the picture of Merton's literary life since they complement the published correspondence between Merton and his other principal editor, James Laughlin of New Directions (Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: *Selected Letters*, ed. David D Cooper [New York: Norton, 1997]). To that collection I would also add *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer: Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, ed. F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Holbrook (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), with the interesting discussions found there on aesthetics, the nature of books and the fine art of printing.

Jesuit Father Patrick Samway, a close personal friend of Giroux, has done an exemplary job in editing this long and generally affectionate exchange of letters. He provides an informative introduction to the correspondence as a whole and a very moving afterword. He is unobtrusively helpful with apposite notes explaining the less obvious allusions in the letters. While the letters themselves deal not infrequently with the tedious business of getting a book from manuscript to publication (even spending ink on typefaces and cover art) we are also treated to the human dimensions of their long friendship as well as their mutual interest in poetry in particular and literature in general. Early in his friend's writing career Giroux even sent Merton typing paper and typewriter ribbons. Late in their dealings Merton confessed to his love for the style of the "new journalism" of Tom Wolfe (Giroux sent him some of Wolfe's work) with Merton confessing that this pop style was rather like the kind of writing he and Bob Lax wanted to do early in their writing life before he went into the monastery and Lax decamped to Europe.

A constant issue in their exchanges had to do with the fact that Merton had become famous in a way quite singular for a Trappist monk. One particular issue involved censorship. Merton needed both to pass through the Cistercian hoops and, in addition, to receive a *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*

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from the censor and bishop of the diocese where the work was to be published. In many instances the readers' reports were slow in coming and, in the case of the Cistercian censors, even had suggestions about style or concerns that certain passages might "cause scandal." As Merton gained greater fame it was not unknown for the Cistercian Abbot General to intervene personally in matters of publication. Another issue that must have given Giroux a bit of dyspepsia was Merton's cavalier attitude towards contracts which involved not only competing publishers in the United States but also publishers in Latin America and in Europe.

What most interests me and, I suspect, Merton lovers in general is the care and devotion which Giroux put into the editing of his friend's manuscripts. It has always struck me how original the titles of Merton's books are. It was interesting to learn that those titles were often the fruit of exchanges between monk and editor with, for example, Giroux being the one who trimmed down a mouthful of a title to the apt one: *The Sign of Jonas*. Further, there is an interesting exchange between the two as they assembled Merton's scattered essays into coherent volumes like the wonderfully titled *Disputed Questions*. In that sense, these letters provide us with a rich background for understanding how Merton's books came to be, how anthologies were assembled, and how some (notably a proposed book on religious art) came to naught.

In the final reckoning, this is a volume best suited to those who know Merton's life and primary works; but for those so equipped, this collection provides a useful context for the "how" of Merton's publications. It is enhanced by a good bibliography of sources as well as an excellent index. I personally found it an instructive and illuminating text.