

Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Two Literary Lives in Letters

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IN MEMORY OF J. LAUGHLIN, 1914–1997

I.

Your letters are quite the most stimulating that I receive.

—James Laughlin to Thomas Merton, 11 August 1959¹

If making close friends is part of the hard work of becoming a whole person, the friendship of Thomas Merton and James Laughlin reveals a remarkable labor of mutual self-completion. The story of their friendship begins in the early 1940s when Laughlin inaugurated his New Directions publishing enterprise in Greenwich Village and Merton forsook all worldly enterprise for monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery hidden in rural Kentucky's knob country. Merton and Laughlin continued to write each other's lives in letters until Merton's death in 1968.

During their twenty three-year friendship and literary collaboration, Merton and Laughlin, in addition to meeting annually at Gethsemani, exchanged 739 letters: 403 letters from Merton to Laughlin (dated 28 September 1945 through 28 November 1968) and 336 from Laughlin (14 May 1945 to 4 December 1968). Thomas Merton's letters to James Laughlin are preserved at the New Directions

1. The Thomas Merton Studies Center Archives. Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

Archive in the basement of Laughlin's home in Norfolk, Connecticut. Those original letters will eventually be deposited, along with the entire New Directions Archive, in Harvard University's Houghton Library. In the early 1960s Thomas Merton began making single carbons of his letters to Laughlin. Ninety carbons (dated 29 January 1960 to 19 July 1968) are collected in the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. The Bellarmine collection also includes 201 original Laughlin letters to Merton, dated 15 March 1949 to 4 December 1968. The balance of Laughlin's letters are filled out by carbons and photocopies from the Norfolk archives.

Drawing on the entire extant correspondence, I edited *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, published by W. W. Norton in 1997 as the sixth volume of James Laughlin's correspondence with principal New Directions writers, including William Carlos Williams, Delmore Schwartz, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, and Henry Miller. For that edition, I chose 176 Merton letters and 40 letters from Laughlin. I included one letter from Merton to Robert M. MacGregor, long-time managing editor at New Directions, and a letter from Laughlin to a special friend of Thomas Merton's written after Merton's death and included as an Epilogue. In addition to respecting Mr. Laughlin's desire that the volume include many more Merton letters than his own, I also cut and abridged material from the extant correspondence that pertains to banal business detail, routine copyediting matters, dead-end projects, or extreme marginalia. In selecting letters for the Norton edition, I linked certain narrative lines in Merton and Laughlin's long and fulsome correspondence that shed light on the following: (1) their personal and professional relationship, especially the bearing Merton's strong sense of moral imperative as a writer had on Laughlin's vision of social purpose and ethical accountability as a publisher; (2) the role that Laughlin played in facilitating Merton's development as a poet and writer, including discussions of books Laughlin frequently posted to Gethsemani, the writers he encouraged Merton to read, and the visits Laughlin arranged for Merton with other New Directions authors; (3) critical incidents in their private lives balanced by renderings of their ordinary routines, especially Merton's at the monastery; (4) their comments and reflections on important public events—literary, social, and political; and (5) the genesis and evolution of Merton's books published by New Directions. I tried to make selections that forge these narrative lines together into a coherent story of two literary lives told in letters.

II.

The little paperback anthology celebrating your [New Directions] anniversary sounds good. Twenty fifth! I got in pretty near the ground floor, didn't I? It makes me feel good to realize that I have been with you all the way since the first little man and the funny horse appeared on your letterheads. In fact long before Mark [Van Doren] sent you my poems I had sent you some from St. Bonaventure in 1940 or 41.

Thomas Merton to James Laughlin, 5 April 1961²

Son of New Zealand-born watercolorist Owen Merton and American art student Ruth Calvert Jenkins, Thomas Merton, born in 1915, never knew the emotional stability or financial security that cushioned James Laughlin's childhood. Laughlin's father, Henry Hughart Laughlin—whose grandfather, along with five uncles, founded the prominent Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation in 1856, a bulwark of Pittsburgh's booming Gilded Age steel business—sent his son to the finest schools. From his birth in 1914 James Laughlin rode a predictable American trajectory of upper-class status and success. He first attended the private Arnold School in Pittsburgh. In an effort to spare their sons the unpleasantness of the Depression in America, Laughlin's parents sent James and his brother to the exclusive boarding school Le Rosey near Geneva, Switzerland, where his classmate, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, future Shah of Iran, was whisked off by his bodyguards every Saturday night for amusement in Geneva. Next came terms spent at the Eaglebrook School in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Laughlin's admittance into Harvard University in 1932 was virtually guaranteed by his prep school tenure at the famous Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut (not far from his wealthy aunt's country estate near Norfolk), where his teacher Dudley Fitts first introduced Laughlin to as yet uncelebrated contemporary authors and poets like Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein.

Thomas Merton's boyhood is a study in contrasts. On the opening page of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), his best-selling autobiography, Merton chronicled the year of his birth in the chilling and stark imagery of a world war convulsing the French landscape a few hundred kilometers north of his birthplace in Prades, the South of France. He noted the corpses of soldiers strewn among rotting horse carcasses

2. David D. Cooper, ed., *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997) 157.

along the river Marne and the French forests denuded by artillery barrages. Faced with chronic money problems and the uncertainties of a violent war being waged in Europe, the Mertons moved to America, launching a long period of geographic instability, financial insecurity, and emotional disruption that would affect Thomas Merton's early years. After his mother died when he was only six years old, his father set out on a restless quest for artistic inspiration. On occasion Merton would accompany Owen on painting trips to Bermuda, Provincetown, and back to the South of France. Most of the time the boy was left with maternal grandparents on Long Island or with family friends in France or an uncle and aunt in England.

Merton's boyhood, in a word, was rudderless, without fixed horizon. His early education was frequently and unpredictably disrupted. He bounced from public grade schools on Long Island to a local school on Bermuda where he often skipped class, to a French lycee in Montauban where the French boys ruthlessly picked on him because of his big ears, and back to middling boarding schools in England. By the time Merton was seventeen, the last of the weak blocks of familial security had been knocked from beneath him by his father's particularly debilitating death from a malignant brain tumor. "As an orphan," he later confessed poignantly, "I went through the business of being passed around from family to family, and being a 'ward,' and an 'object of charitable concern,' etc. etc. I know how inhuman and frustrating that can be—being treated as a thing and not as a person. And reacting against it with dreams that were sometimes shattered in a most inhuman way."³

By 1933, when Thomas Merton entered Clare College to begin a short-lived university career at Cambridge, James Laughlin, nineteen years old and in mild rebellion against the commercial ethos of his wealthy family, took a leave of absence from Harvard. He traveled to Rapallo, Italy where, in August 1933, he met and later studied with Ezra Pound. Pound dashed Laughlin's desire to join the fledgling modernist literary movement when he unceremoniously dismissed Laughlin's poems and told him that he'd never make it as a poet. Instead, Pound encouraged Laughlin to use his family's means to good end and become a publisher. "I thought to myself," Laughlin

3. William H. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) 605.

later reflected calmly, "that if I couldn't be a writer, maybe as a publisher I could hang around with writers and have a good time."⁴ While the young student was no doubt shaken by Pound's snub, the incident at the "Eziversity" is often overstated. Nevertheless, as Kenneth Rexroth concluded, "Laughlin worked day after day, often till far into the night, himself, and hard, to publish writers who often were far less good than himself, year after year, for little thanks. He is an excellent and original poet, and might have been writing his own poems."⁵

In any event, Laughlin listened to Pound's advice. With financial backing from his aunt, Mrs. Leila Carlisle, who also provided an unused stable on her Norfolk estate that housed New Directions' first offices, and a \$100,000 graduation present from Henry Hughart Laughlin (which the young graduate promptly used to purchase a ski lodge in Alta, Utah, that would reap enough return on investment to bankroll his publishing company for many years), Laughlin launched the New Directions Publishing Corporation. From the very beginning he published the poets who would spur the modernist literary revolution in America and form a stable of new writers Laughlin would publish for many years to come, which included Pound, William Carlos Williams, Kay Boyle, Dylan Thomas, Djuna Barnes, Henry Miller, and Merton.

While Pound counseled Laughlin in Rapallo on how to spend his money, Thomas Merton, emotionally anguished by the cruel death of his father, set out on his own journey to Italy that, like Laughlin's, would have a lasting impact on his future life course. Merton made a solitary sojourn to Rome in the summer of 1933, where he underwent a wrenching psychotic break in a lonely hotel room one night that he later characterized as a religious conversion experience. Cut to the quick by an intense, sudden, and painful insight into the corruption of his own soul, mysteriously linked to a deep interior peace inspired by the religious art of Rome, that he had never felt before, the episode became the benchmark of Thomas Merton's religious life. The summer in Rome set Merton upon a course that would establish him as one of the twentieth century's most significant religious personalities and place him among its most prolific writers and poets.

4. James Laughlin, "For the Record: On New Directions and Others," *American Poetry* 1.3 (Spring 1984) 56.

5. Kenneth Rexroth, ed., *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 126.

In Italy, in the summer of 1933, Thomas Merton and James Laughlin—unknown to each other at the time and separated by what may seem an unbridgeable chasm of class, family background, education, spiritual bearings, social privilege, and promise—began what to both of them would be their life work in which each would play formative and prominent roles for the other.

But first, for Merton at least, there would be more searching and more trial. Returning from Rome, he entered Clare College at Cambridge University. Shortly afterwards, he was invited to leave under threat of a palimony suit. The spiritual malaise and moral searching that began in Rome continued to agitate deeply within him. After being received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1938 and not long after graduating Columbia University with a master's degree in English Literature the following year, Merton awakened to a calling to priesthood and the monastic life. He visited a Trappist monastery for the first time on the day after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. As the world inched toward another conflagration, Thomas Merton had finally arrived home. He imagined a future far different than his past. "[T]here will be no more future," he reflected enthusiastically, "not in the world, not in geography, not in travel, not in change, not in variety, conversations, new work, new problems in writing, new friends—none of that, but a far better progress, all interior and quiet!!!"⁶

III.

I don't exactly know what to think or say about your idea of giving up writing poetry. Most poets with your gift just wouldn't be able to stop if they wanted to. . . . [I]t really just seems to me impossible that you won't write poems later on. A faculty like that is just part of your being, and I don't see how any amount of will power can cut it off. . . .

James Laughlin to Thomas Merton, 6 April 1949⁷

On December 13, 1941, Merton, twenty-six years old, was officially accepted into Gethsemani and given the robes of a Cistercian oblate. He met the abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, who gave Thomas Merton his new name in religious life—"Louis"—thereby completing a transformation from poet and would-be novelist, English professor,

6. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 458.

7. Cooper, *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, 51.

erstwhile fellow traveler, and jazz aficionado into a potential contemplative aching for silence, solitude, wordlessness, and freedom from human suffering and worldly folly. Dom Frederic, the gentle abbot who received Merton as a postulant and later presided over Frater Louis's profession of simple and solemn vows, quickly became Thomas Merton's Ezra Pound, guiding and encouraging his literary pursuits. This was a quiet but formative irony that Merton and Laughlin would never fully appreciate in spite of its critical importance to a personal friendship that spanned a quarter century, a literary relationship that spawned more than twenty books, and a commercial partnership that would reap the sort of profits that made it possible for New Directions to publish important but notoriously unprofitable poets.

Merton was less prepared to accept the insistent urgings of Dom Frederic, however, than Laughlin had been to follow Pound's career counseling. Convinced that his literary instincts could only disrupt a life of prayer, Merton's misgivings and ambivalence over his identity as a poet and writer grew intense and divisive upon entering the monastery, a motif that surfaces in both Merton and Laughlin's letters during the 1940s and early 1950s. Dom Frederic's warm support and determined encouragement of Merton's literary talents—cresting early with the phenomenally successful autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*—provided emotional shelter from Merton's storms of self-doubt. When Dom Frederic died in 1948, Merton lost an important mentor whose wise guidance helped to quiet the turmoil of Merton's inner divisions. This support was critical during Merton's early years in the monastery, when he was not only wracked by persistent conflict between his literary instincts and his new identity as a monk but had to adjust as well to the formidable rigors of monastic life in the 1940s, a communal life of extreme hardship, sacrifice, and asceticism. Even though the Cistercians are a communitarian or "cenobitic" monastic order, the monks lived in strict silence before the reforms set in motion by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Their lives were punctuated daily by communal prayers, meals and minimal sleep, reflective study and spiritual reading, and plenty of manual labor in the monastery fields.

Fortunately, James Laughlin stepped into the breach after Dom Frederic's death. From the moment Mark Van Doren, Merton's Columbia University professor, mentor, and thesis adviser, sent Laughlin an uneven collection of Merton's first poems, published as

Thirty Poems in 1944, New Directions issued a virtual *carte blanche* to publish just about anything and everything the young monk/poet submitted. It is no exaggeration to say, in fact, that James Laughlin and New Directions *made* Thomas Merton as a poet, and—along with Robert Giroux and Merton's literary agent, Naomi Burton Stone—contributed considerable impetus to Merton's still-swelling reputation as a writer, social critic, autobiographer, ecumenist, spiritual guide, and commentator on our life and times. Laughlin and his staff, for example, routinely brokered Merton's poems to leading literary magazines like the *Saturday Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *Poetry*. They underwrote some of Merton's most controversial political writing—notably, *Breakthrough to Peace* (1962), whose difficult road to publication is mapped in Merton and Laughlin's letters of 1961 and 1962, and the trenchant *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966). The New Directions office also organized a *samizdat* of influential figures, including W. H. Ferry of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, to read Merton's mimeographed essays on peace, nuclear weapons disarmament, and social justice issues during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War after Merton's Trappist superiors flatly ordered him to stop writing about faith and social witness as they bore directly on the political turbulence and social unrest roiling an anxious and troubled era. Laughlin even made it possible for Merton to set out on his ill-fated Asian trip in 1968 by arranging for his American Express card and traveler's checks and coaching Merton on the fine arts of foreign travel.

IV.

[T]he thing is to be heard. And everything is perfectly soundproof and thought proof. We are all doped right up to the eyes. And words have become useless, no matter how true they may be. But when it comes to action, then I am more helpless than anyone: except within my own very limited sphere of prayer, with which I have no quarrel at all. That is perhaps the last great power that can do anything: and the less said about it the better.

—Thomas Merton to James Laughlin, 18 August 1961⁸

Viewed strictly from a literary vantage point, it may seem odd that Thomas Merton became one of James Laughlin's most favorite

8. *Ibid.*, 166.

New Directions poets. Given his philosophy of publishing, it is even surprising that Laughlin pressed ahead so quickly and unequivocally in publishing Merton's early work. Laughlin frankly admitted that "Merton's early religious poems, except for their color and vigor of imagery, do not particularly interest me. There is something facile about them."⁹ Merton's pious early verse ran radically counter to the hallmarks of literary modernism that Laughlin actively sought in the hard-edged, experimental writing of early New Directions poets like Pound, William Carlos Williams, Henri Michaux, George Oppen—and Gertrude Stein, whose *Three Lives*, reprinted by New Directions in 1941, makes Merton's *Thirty Poems* (1944) seem, in comparison, too glib indeed.

As a publisher Laughlin was instinctively drawn to experimental poetry that fulfilled the critical injunctions of the new literary modernism: mold-breaking innovations in literary forms and cut-to-the-quick, bare knuckles social commentary leavened with lassitude and angst. He sought out poets who rebelled against "the standardization of language," poets who searched "with all . . . ingenuity for a solvent to"¹⁰ conventional literary forms. This gave the early New Directions list an obvious house style and an unmistakable feel: unconventional, iconoclastic, nonconformist. Aesthetic experimentation merged with Laughlin's sense of place in literary history to produce a publishing philosophy he summed up in the preface to *New Directions 15*: "The theory was simply this: Literature, a whole culture in fact, goes dead when there is no experiment, no reaching out, no counter-attack on accepted values. Even if the experiment is a failure, it must exist as a force and be given a showing place."¹¹

The religious poetry that dominated Thomas Merton's earliest work, up to and including *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, published by New Directions in 1949, hardly fit the new style, to say the least. The early Merton was fundamentally a psalmist. For stylistic inspiration he looked backward to biblical and liturgical prototypes such as the aubade, the canticle, and the hymn. While the social commentary of Merton's religious verse counter-punched accepted values, it was a conservative and reactionary criticism, decidedly retrograde when compared to the social critiques launched by other New Directions

9. James Laughlin, *Random Essays* (Mt. Kisco, N.Y.: Moyer Bell, 1989) 8.

10. *Ibid.*, 78.

11. James Laughlin, "Preface," *New Directions in Prose and Poetry 15* (1955) ii.

authors at the time. Expressing a disdain for worldly living undoubtedly connected to his bohemian youth, tempered by a theological legalism Merton embraced upon entering the monastery, his early poems lashed out at the godlessness and apostasy that he uncritically associated with secular America, making for, quite frankly, some forced and clumsy poetry characterized by severe vacillations between sentimentality, sarcasm, righteousness, and rage.

In addition, there was a moral angle to consider in the publishing relationship. By the early 1950s, as Merton explained in an unpublished letter to his agent, he began considering "a moral question which would confront me if I were found to be actively cooperating in the production of books by other people ([Laughlin's] protégés) who write what might be considered as morally undesirable material."¹² Merton had a good point. At a time when New Directions published the poems of a cloistered religious, it was also publishing Djuna Barnes and Arthur Rimbaud and issuing titles from Henry Miller, whose books were headed to the Supreme Court in a landmark pornography case. The second edition of Kenneth Patchen's *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* appeared under the New Directions imprint the same year Laughlin published Merton's own first volume of poetry. Patchen's journal—a descent, the jacket blurb boasted, into "the far boundaries of love and murder, madness and sex"—flaunted the traditional Christian moral concerns central to Merton's early work.

Nonetheless, Merton remained steadfastly loyal to Laughlin. As their letters indicate, they rarely broached any moral qualms that Merton might have harbored privately over other books New Directions published. Writing to Laughlin on June 26, 1950, for example, Merton skirts potentially serious questions of moral propriety by camouflaging them as matters of "monastery diplomacy."¹³ Merton and Laughlin's literary as well as personal relationship never broke stride over the issue of art and Christian morality. Merton and Henry Miller, largely at Laughlin's instigation, even became fast friends and mutual admirers of each other's writing.

For his part, although Laughlin privately faulted Merton's early poems for lacking range and technical severity, he still found something extremely likable and approachable in Merton's verse from the

12. Thomas Merton to Naomi Burton Stone, 27 January 1951. Thomas Merton Studies Center.

13. Cooper, *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, 69.

very beginning, even if the monk's early poems had little resonance in the New Directions canon. Laughlin stuck with him. It is a testament to Laughlin's devotion to Merton and his sharp instincts as an editor that he continued encouraging Merton to write poems even during a fallow period in the early 1950s when the monk swore off poetry writing. It is also a testament to Laughlin's prescience as a reader that Merton, beginning with the publication of *The Strange Islands* in 1957, would blossom into one of New Directions' most experimental poets. From the drafts of new poems Merton began sending him in 1956, Laughlin sensed an important new direction in the writing, the beginning of what he considered the secularization of Merton's poetry. Laughlin applauded, he writes in *Random Essays*, "the new verbal tone, a mixture of satire and irony, fused into black humor, and a structure of depersonalization . . . in which the speaker is much withdrawn from the content of the poem"¹⁴ that began to energize the new poems, cresting in the deadpan prose poem *Original Child Bomb* (1962) and the chilling "Chant To Be Used in Processions Around a Site With Furnaces" (1961), which Laughlin considered Merton's most remarkable poem. Suddenly freed from restraint, Merton combusted into an experimental poet *par excellence*. He "wrote" found poems. He translated contemporary and ancient poetry from the Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Chinese. He began exploring the possibilities of an "anti-poetry" based on the mass culture criticism of the leftist critic and philosopher Herbert Marcuse and the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra. Other new modes of writing breached from the depths of Merton's creative unconscious: satire and pseudo-comedy, prose poetry, long poems, collage, surrealistic word play, mosaic, ethnographic verse, parody, and pseudo-myth. It took a horrible accident in Bangkok to shut off the faucet, leaving behind two volumes of fascinating and multi-layered poetry—*Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1969)—for a new generation of literary critics and Merton scholars to sort out.

V.

I am really excited about all this. All sorts of really dizzying prospects are opening up. Maybe get invited into Bhutan . . . etc. Wow.

14. Laughlin, *Random Essays*, 11.

If I just die of amebic dysentery on the banks of the Ganges, that in itself would be superb. Though doubtless unpleasant.

—Thomas Merton to James Laughlin, 5 September 1968¹⁵

Part of the reason for James Laughlin's continued devotion to Merton-the-poet was Laughlin's extraordinary affection for Merton-the-person. Considering the often difficult, frequently volatile, and sometimes outright nasty episodes Laughlin suffered at the hands of other New Directions writers, Thomas Merton must have seemed a saint. Even the gentle pediatrician could be a pain. Hugh Witemeyer reports in his Introduction to *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* that certain tensions trailed through the long relationship between Laughlin and Williams. Frustrated by Laughlin's frequent travels abroad and his domestic ski trips, Witemeyer writes, "the workaholic doctor sometimes envied and resented the globe-trotting . . . jaunts and bachelor freedoms of his wealthy young friend,"¹⁶ a resentment that came to a head in 1950 when Williams turned to Random House to publish his poems. Although he eventually returned to the New Directions fold, Laughlin was hurt by what he considered Williams' betrayal, and their relationship became awkward and strained for many years. It is painfully clear from *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (1993) that Schwartz also resented Laughlin's frequent absences from the Greenwich Village office and his laid-back lifestyle. He even accused Laughlin of conspiring with Nelson Rockefeller to have an affair with Schwartz's second wife. Unhinged from reality, Schwartz's letters, according to Robert Phillips, "developed into dark and obsessive harangues. . . . He accused Laughlin of disaffection, even of cheating him on his royalty statements. . . . [I]t must have been extremely painful to Laughlin to receive such attacks."¹⁷ The mercurial Kenneth Rexroth (whose letters to Laughlin were edited by Rexroth's biographer Lee Bartlett and published in 1991), populist to the core, often pounded Laughlin with invective during fits of impatience, and on occasion he accused Laughlin of being a puppet for New York literati. Henry Miller—chronically broke—habitually complained about his contracts, accusing Laughlin,

15. Cooper, *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, 335.

16. Hugh Witemeyer, ed., *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989) xi.

17. Robert Phillips, ed., *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993) xv.

as George Wickes recounts in his Introduction to *Henry Miller and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (1996), of taking "unfair advantage of him."¹⁸ And, of course, the deeply complicated Ezra Pound, to whom Laughlin remained steadfastly devoted even while weathering Pound's storms of political rage, forced Laughlin to take strong public stands against the poet's anti-Semitism and pro-Fascist diatribes.

For Laughlin it must have felt like an interpersonal retreat of sorts from the bruising relationships with other New Directions writers when he flew down to Louisville and rented a car for the hour long ride south to Bardstown for annual visits with Thomas Merton at Gethsemani. Laughlin recounts those trips with simple affection in his essay about Merton. That Laughlin selected the piece to lead off *Random Essays* says something about his esteem of and affection for Thomas Merton.

There is perhaps no greater testament to Laughlin's personal affection for Merton and his commitment to Merton's vision and continuing message as a writer than the long and painstaking labor Laughlin devoted to the posthumously published *Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. When the fragmentary notebooks and journals Merton kept during his Asian travels in 1968—often consisting only of nouns and verbs strung together into lists or cryptic shorthand reminders for entries Merton clearly intended to flesh out for later publication—fell into Laughlin's hands after Merton died, Laughlin was determined to make a book out of them despite a daunting editorial task that would take him the better part of two years. With the help of Naomi Burton Stone and Gethsemani's Br. Patrick Hart, Laughlin pieced together into a seamless narrative the disjointed prose fragments Merton recorded in three separate notebooks. He tracked down the names and addresses of the many people Merton talked to during his two-month travels. He traced arduous bibliographic leads in order to identify exact sources of quotations from Buddhist and Hindu spiritual texts that Merton randomly strewed throughout his notebooks. Laughlin even skillfully and tediously transcribed a poem Merton wrote, in a jiggly hand, into a small pocket notebook amid plane timetables and phone numbers while riding on a train; and he included "Kandy Express" in an eighty-page section of uncollected works he appended to the massive *Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, issued by New

18. George Wickes, ed., *Henry Miller and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996) xxi.

Directions in 1977. Due largely to a combination of Laughlin's editorial pertinacity and his continued devotion to a writer/friend, *The Asian Journal* nearly rivaled the critical attention and popular appeal of Merton's first chapter in a long autobiographical opus, the run-away bestseller *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Looking back over six productive and ambitious decades in the book business, Laughlin didn't hesitate to rank *The Asian Journal*, as he noted in a letter to me, "one of the most important things I did in publishing."

VI.

We are going through the grey, cold days that come just before Christmas, which seem empty but are really very wonderful. You miss their emptiness there, where you have stores all over the place. Here there are no shop windows, only the bare trees, and a marvelous silence, and the rain.

Thomas Merton to James Laughlin, 21 December 1953¹⁹

Throughout their nearly thirty-year friendship, Laughlin and Merton's relationship never strayed from intimacy and mutual understanding, respect and tolerance. From the beginning they shared a search for integrity as writers and as midwives to the voices of others along with a common desire to live meaningfully and fully in a world that often seemed to defy authentic living and real purpose. On a journey of very different life courses, Merton and Laughlin met on the commons of their frequent letters. More so than any other New Directions author with the possible exception of William Carlos Williams, Laughlin always made it a point to go out of his way to visit Merton personally at his remote monastery. Meanwhile, through their letters they invited each other into their moral struggles. They fed each other's moral aspirations. As important, they shared the simple rhythms of their felt worlds. Along the way, Merton nourished Laughlin's nascent spirituality,²⁰ deepened his ethical commitments as a publisher, and inspired a compassion for social justice in the Harvard-educated son of a wealthy Pittsburgh socialite. For his part, Laughlin, who longed from an early age to be the poet that his mentor, Ezra Pound, discouraged him to become, was instrumental in helping

Merton becoming the poet he never really wanted to be. Merton had the incredible good fortune, as Robert Coles, a friend of both men, has perceptively written in the inaugural number of the literary journal *Conjunctions*, dedicated to Laughlin, "to work with, to have the continual personal support of a very special person—someone who, maybe it can be said, finds satisfaction in enabling others to have their say . . . someone who . . . has been graced in a most special way, so that his own pride is that of the pastoral person—the one who is forever attentive to the needs of others."²¹

With the literary insight of a good editor, the insistence of a trusted friend, and the savvy of a successful publisher, Laughlin made it possible for Merton to look back later in life over his vocation as a writer and reflect disconcertedly in the Preface to the 1966 Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one."

19. Cooper, *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin*, 93-4.

20. See esp. Letters 11, 12, 13, and 19 in *Ibid.*

21. Robert Coles, "A Struggle for Humility," *Conjunctions* 1 (1981) 245.