

## **“Life in the Damned Thing”:<sup>1</sup>**

# **The Letters of Thomas Merton to Reginald Marsh**

Introduction by **Paul M. Pearson**

When Thomas Merton, with his parents, Ruth and Owen, was living on Long Island at 57 Hillside Avenue, where his brother John Paul was born in November 1918, the curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bryson Burroughs, was a close neighbor. Burroughs himself was a respected artist, his wife Edith, a sculptor; their daughter Betty was also a sculptor, and her brother Alan later became a painter and restorer. Bryson Burroughs, according to Michael Mott, advised Owen on marketing his paintings, and his son, Alan, worked with Owen in landscape gardening for a time (Mott 19). Among the group of young people associated with Betty was Reginald Marsh, whom she later married. Through the Burroughses both Owen and Thomas Merton met, and became friends with, Reginald Marsh.

Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) was born in France of American parents who were themselves both artists, but unlike Owen and Ruth, financially well-off. They returned to the United States shortly after his birth. Marsh showed an early aptitude for drawing. He illustrated school yearbooks and then at Yale University he provided illustrations for the college magazine. After graduating from Yale in 1920 he moved to New York to pursue a career as an illustrator and was inspired by many of the political cartoonists of the time. Between 1922 and 1925 he produced more than 4000 illustrations for the New York *Daily News* alone and, when *The New Yorker* was founded in 1925, he became one of its first cartoonists. In 1921 he began to take painting classes at the Arts Students League with John Sloan and though his marriage to Betty Burroughs and contact with her father, along with a trip to France in 1925, he developed an interest in Old Master painting which was encouraged by another of his art teachers, Kenneth Hayes Miller.<sup>2</sup>

Reginald Marsh is now best known for his paintings of New York City – burlesque shows, the Bowery, taxi-dance halls, movie houses, and elevated trains. A favorite place for Marsh was Coney Island, and he estimated that more than a sixth of his work came from there. Marsh was radical in his political views and provided drawings for journals such as *The Masses*, *The Liberator*, and *The Unemployed* as well as associating with a group of left-wing artists. Influenced by the ideas of Robert Henri, that an artist’s work should be a social force that “creates a stir in the world,”<sup>3</sup> much of his work depicts subjects from modern urban life.

In 1925 Reg Marsh and Betty Burroughs, now married, had met up again with Owen and Tom in Paris, traveling together with them for a time until they separated at Caussade. In *Run to the Mountain* Merton recalls them “getting on their bicycles and riding away on to the wintry causses”<sup>4</sup> whilst he and his father continued to Montauban. Merton, more than likely, met up with Marsh again in the summer of 1931 when he spent the summer after Owen’s death with his maternal grandparents in Douglaston, Long Island. Although not mentioned elsewhere, in an undated letter to Marsh from late 1931 or early 1932 Merton refers to a speak-easy they had visited on 13<sup>th</sup> Street. Two years later Thomas Merton spent the summer of 1933 back in the United States after having completed his studies at

Oakham School. During that summer Marsh became a guide for him to the New York scene with which he was familiar – Coney Island, galleries and burlesque theaters – as Michael Mott records:

Tom spent much of the summer in New York, at Reg Marsh's studio on Fourteenth Street, becoming a citizen of Greenwich Village, going to the Irving Place Burlesque, to prize fights, to Coney Island and Jones Beach, to movies that were so bad they were good, or, rarely, so good they were good, drinking, arguing Archibald MacLeish's ideas about pacifism, deciding . . . that he was really a bohemian, a journalist, or a cartoonist like Marsh, a cartoonist with both a social conscience and a zest for celebrating the lives of the victims of the social system (Mott 73).

Merton felt that his views were very much in harmony with those of Marsh – "I worshipping life as such, and he [Marsh] worshipping it especially in the loud, wild bedlam of the crowded, crazy city that he loved."<sup>5</sup> In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton recalls meeting up with Marsh again in 1934 after his disastrous year at Clare College, Cambridge. Merton expressed an interest in journalism, attending interviews at both the *Tribune* and the *Daily News* and, according to Mott, Marsh was trying to interest people in Merton's cartoons (Mott 86).

Although Thomas Merton makes no further references to Marsh it is interesting to note firstly Merton's continued interest in drawing cartoons, many of which included political comment, frequently published in the *Columbia Jester* for which Merton served as Art Editor in his senior year at Columbia. Even as late as February 1938, when Merton completed his "Declaration of Intention" for the U. S. Department of Labor, he described his occupation as a "cartoonist and writer."<sup>6</sup> Secondly, his images of female nudes – images full of life and energy, at times provocative – are also reminiscent of the "powerful, sexual Sabine women" (Cohen 24) who crowded Reginald Marsh's sketchbooks.

Both Owen and Thomas Merton corresponded with Reginald Marsh. The only surviving pieces of correspondence are a number of Owen's letters from 1927 and 1928 and two letters from Thomas, all to Reginald Marsh, preserved in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. The first of Thomas Merton's letters is undated, but typewritten at Oakham School sometime after Merton's summer visit to the United States in 1931 and probably prior to the second letter which is dated April 6, 1932 and handwritten, in Merton's unmistakable writing, on headed writing paper from the Hotel Continental in Cologne.<sup>7</sup> These letters are some of the earliest extant letters of the Thomas Merton corpus, pre-dated by just one letter of 1931 to Percyval Tudor-Hart,<sup>8</sup> and contain insights into Merton's life at Oakham, his sense of worldliness as compared to the staff and many of the other students at the school, and his broad and eclectic reading tastes.

1 In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), Michael Mott suggests that Reginald Marsh's search for "life in the damn thing" was what counted and uses this phrase a number of times (74, 138, 241, 513) as a leitmotif for Thomas Merton's quest; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" parenthetically in the text.

2 For further information about Marsh, along with examples of his work, see Marilyn Cohen, *Reginald Marsh's New York: Paintings, Drawings, Prints and Photographs* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Dover Publications, 1983); subsequent references will be cited as "Cohen" parenthetically in the text.

3 Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1951) 74; Henri, who was a strong advocate of realism in art, has been described as the leader of the Ash Can School.

4 Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 291.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 117.

6 Thomas Merton's "Declaration of Intention," February 4, 1938 (Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky).

7 Brother Patrick Hart, OSCO and Father Chrysogonus Waddell, OSCO both gave excellent assistance in transcribing this letter.

8 Thomas Merton to Percyval Tudor-Hart, January 20, 1931, in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 56-57.

## Thomas Merton to Reginald Marsh (undated)

Dear Reg,

Excuse my writing to you on the Editorial Typewriter.

Thanks ever so much for your welcome epistle. I was interested to hear of the sad fate of the Speak. in 13<sup>th</sup> St. It was indeed surprising. I remember well how quiet it was that day!

My life as a prefect here is not too bad. At least I get a fag to do the dirty work about the study. It is rather a bore having to keep small boys in order, and I fear that I am rather too lenient with them at times. I have beaten one objectionable youth already, and I intend to beat another two tomorrow, for trivial offences. Nevertheless I am much too lenient, I am told.

I have been working very hard, reading loads of French literature, of the classical period, which is exceedingly boring. I have had to read a lot of Corneille, whom I hate more and more as I read the stuff. *Le Cid* is perhaps the least objectionable of his works, but Horace, for instance, and *Polyeucte* are frightful. The letters of Mme De Sevigne are rather amusing to read, and one occasionally meets an amusing anecdote.

I have dipped into Ronsard a little, although he comes before the classical period, and he is rather entertaining.

I read a fairly good novel by a modern Russian, Kataev by name, which was humourous, if slightly crude. I have also read various Michael Arlens, which I liked well enough. None of them are anything wonderful, however.

My labours as editor of the magazine become more onerous as the term goes on. It appears once a term, and hitherto it has been as dull as it possibly could be, containing little more than diluted news written in insipid style, and a poem by a master. However there is a movement on foot to brighten it up, and I have been made editor and have put heart and soul into the job. Unfortunately the whole affair is supervised by a master with somewhat conservative ideas, and he successfully checks most of my efforts to be bright. He seems to think I am a person of violent, not to say iconoclastic temperament. Anyway my muse has had to become very conventional and respectable. They regard her, poor creature, as a shameless hussy, especially because of recent trans-atlantic influences, which have made her far from the proper, simpering muse that is allowed Englishmen, and prompts them to profer to narrow minded editors stuff that, to say the least of it, is lukewarm Keats at his worst.

However, there are tendencies towards emancipation at Cambridge, or Oxford: *The Granta*, a mag published at the former, has been known to be quite bright. Therefore, right minded people of the older generation regard it as tripe. I read a number of this lukewarm effort, and sought inspiration therein, and have managed to get past my supervisor. He, on the other hand comes out with awful bursts of poetry, mostly about the beauties of nature, as seen in the vicinity of Oakham. His muse is Wordsworthian. His muse wears flannel, and says: "Oh, the difference to me!" in a most discouraging manner. Still, he asked me to write an article on America, and I had the utmost difficulty in getting my opinion in instead of his . . . which is based on an article he read somewhere.

We have this in common: that the London editors do not like his stuff any more than mine, and the lot ends up in the school magazine after we have fought hard to keep each other out.

I have just read Michael Arlen's "Men Dislike Women" which is laid in N.Y., and I found it an entertaining book. His style is pleasing, I find, and restful. In short it is welcome recreation after a days floundering among the classics.

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The head has a craze for making us write poetry, nowadays, and he is a Greek scholar. He does his best short of making us write it in greek, by giving us such subjects as "a sonnet on the 'Death of Dido'" I bet Dido was a frightful woman. Large, and hefty, of the type known as voluptuous, meaning she has a hell of a lot of flesh and bone, no brains, but the stubbornness of a mule, and the mind of a wart hog.

Consequently I don't mind reflecting upon her death, but I shrink from writing a sonnet on the emotional outbursts that accompanied it.

The master who looks after my extensive excursions into the realm of French classicism had got a lot of French novels which have a certain literary value, but which he bought because he thought they were going to be pornographic. He is going to lend me a few, I hope, and I may thus get out of this mire of Corneille.

I am going up to Oxford next month, to take an examination more for the experience that is to be gained from a shot at it than with the hope of getting anywhere. I am afraid I am not due to reach the standard for another few months. Still people do grudgingly admit that I have a faint hope.

If you come over to Europe, and are anywhere near England please let me know. As a matter of fact, I am generally on the Continent somewhere in the holidays, in France, usually.

Please give my best regards to Bett, and also to Mr & Mrs Boroughs.

Ever yours

Tom.

### Thomas Merton to Reginald Marsh (April 6, 1932)

Dear Reg,

I have gravitated here by way of an Easter Holiday. I had a pretty normal athletic term. I gained a petty & very ordinary form of distinction known as an athletic badge, which is only a token of being able to conform with the worst medieval standards – i.e. do 100 yds in under 12 secs, the quarter mile in under 65 or something ridiculous like that, 120 yds high hurdles in under 22, jump about 16 ft in length . . . and thoroughly despicable things of this nature.

Well, the next edition of the magazine came out, and was so sarcastic on some points that it created quite a stir: The idea of caricatures of people being altogether unprecedented in a school magazine, people don't know what to make of it, & I am looked upon as a dangerous character by that small & conservative body which clucks at my efforts with old-maidenly concern. On the other hand, the school is more or less in favour, because I have attacked

(a) a few of the masters – (mildly enough, yet in such a way that the younger members of the staff are rather pleased)

(b) The captain of Football.

(c) The Cadet Corps.

(d) The VI<sup>th</sup> form – the highest in the school, although I happened to be a member thereof (note the editorial magnanimity!)

(e) Most of the Britts of the school.

When I send you one of these magazines, however, the first thing you will notice, judging by the standards of respectable literature, is that it is completely tame and subdued, & really rather uninteresting, the humour being rather childish, & very polite indeed, considering the circumstances! Still, it is such a departure from the average idea of the mere chronicle, that I am viewed, as mentioned above, with some disapproval.

The play went off all right; I actually knew quite a lot of my part!

I left London on April 7<sup>th</sup> and came on to Brussels, but here it drizzled, and it was so much like a 3<sup>rd</sup> rate edition of a northern French provincial town that I got fed up on the spot. Further. The darn non descript Flemish pictures in the so called art gallery got on my nerves to such an extent that, had there not been one room full of gigantic Rubenses, I should have stood up & howled!

But perhaps Brussels wasn't so bad after all: I think it must have been the weather, or my dinner or something, anyway I had a cold!

Nevertheless I got fed up & escaped from there on Monday morning & got here by lunch time. This is quite a lot better. The cathedral is a most elevating sight. When I come to consider it, I believe it is the most magnificent gothic building I have ever seen: I put it above Notre Dame & Strasbourg; but I think there is no Cathedral I like better than Canterbury: I do not like Cologne Cathedral: it rather frightens and awes me. It is more appalling than likeable. Of Canterbury on the other hand, I am really fond, not only its architecture – far less pretentious – but its atmosphere, and the glorious colours it has in the changing light.

Cologne is not a bad place, at all, but here also the weather is foul & that makes me slightly mad. I rather like the Germans; they are very eager to please me, it appears, also to sell me anything or everything upon the slightest provocation. Anyway, I understand their language, & my version seems to get across, which is really what I'm here for.

I have been reading Virginia Woolf "To the Lighthouse" & find it really extraordinary. Although I had my moments of impatience to begin with, I now am filled with great admiration for it. It seems to me to be a tremendous achievement. She is uncannily successful at producing the most vivid picture of everything she writes about, & surrounding it in extraordinary atmosphere. I like it very much.

Well, please give my best regards to Betts and to Mr & Mrs Burroughs when you next see them.

Ever yours

Tom Merton.