

Introduction

When twenty-year-old Thomas Merton entered Columbia College on New York's Morningside Heights in January 1935, he brought with him a remarkable background few of his American fellow students—certainly not Robert Giroux—could easily have fathomed. Born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France, Tom, as his mother preferred to call him, did not spend his childhood enjoying life in the picturesque foothills of the Pyrenees. Rather, his seemingly mismatched parents—his father Owen, an artist, native New Zealander, and member of the Church of England, and his mother Ruth, likewise an artist, native Ohioan, and confirmed pacifist in the Quaker tradition—attempted to eke out an existence in a country they little knew. Though the French Catalans of this region tended to identify themselves with their non-Francophone neighbors, they nevertheless felt at this time the impact of the German invasion on their native French soil in the Northeast. The advance of war impelled the Mertons to move on July 16, 1916, to Flushing, New York, not far from Douglaston, where infant Tom's maternal grandparents lived. The Mertons followed the war news on the radio intensely as the German military commanders vowed to “bleed France white” at Verdun, an apparently vulnerable target northwest of Strasbourg on the way to Paris. Though able to halt the German advances here during the heavy snows of February 1916, French and British troops nevertheless suffered over five hundred thousand casualties at the Battle of the Somme. From Flushing, the Mertons could only have felt relieved by President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war on Germany on April 6, 1917, followed by the arrival of General John J. (“Black Jack”) Pershing's American Expeditionary Force in June.

Amid the traumatic events of the war, the physical and emotional dislocation of young Tom soon increased, made more intense by the death of his mother on October 3, 1921, just as his brother John Paul was about to celebrate his third birthday. Owen sometimes took his older son on his painting excursions up and down the Long Island Sound and Cape Cod, and then, in October 1922, to Bermuda, where Tom's father had an amorous affair with the novelist Evelyn Scott, whose name Merton does not mention in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Without a family, a school, or a

church, young Merton lacked comforting, customary routines, a situation further aggravated when his father took him, at age ten, back to southern France in July 1925 and enrolled him in the Lycée Ingres, a boarding school in Montauban, near St. Antonin, where his father took up residence. Though the adult Thomas Merton had a tendency to see France as an ideal place, in *The Seven Storey Mountain* he sometimes revealed his childhood scars: “And I would plead with Father to let me out of that miserable school, but it was in vain. After about two months I got used to it and ceased to be so unhappy. The wound was no longer so raw: but I was never happy or at peace in the violent and unpleasant atmosphere of those brick cloisters.”¹ The isolation from his grandparents and brother—and, to some extent, his father, especially when his father moved to Murat in the province of Auvergne in the winter of 1926—must have taken an additional toll on his young psyche. Most likely because his father sought a better environment to sell his paintings, Merton was taken in 1928 to Ealing, England, to live with his great-aunt Maud Pearce, a sprightly and charming woman, and her husband Benjamin. He later reflected that his father’s death in a London hospital on January 18, 1931, brought him to a low point in his life: “I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs.”² In the summer after his father’s death, he returned to Douglaston briefly and then sailed back to England for his final schooling at Oakham in the East Midlands beginning in 1929.

Once finished with his secondary education at age eighteen, and having enjoyed a vacation by himself in Italy, he obtained, in 1933, a prized scholarship to Clare College, University of Cambridge. Yet, his academic year there proved to be disastrously bitter—exacerbated by the emptiness he felt; no doubt the bitterness was related to fathering a child out of wedlock, a situation that has never been fully explained. Merton’s biographer cryptically states, “Whether the matter was a threatened breach-of-promise case or an affiliation order (paternity case), it seems clear that some legal settlement was made.”³ And his close friend, Edward Rice, believed that the mother and child were killed in the Blitz. Yet, according to Paul Pearson, director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Rice, when interviewed by Michael Mott, would only admit that a woman Merton knew had a child.⁴ (Giroux never knew about this situation while Merton was alive.) Merton’s self-evaluation at Cambridge, especially after he had lost his scholarship for poor grades, clearly indicates that he was ready for a change of heart and behavior: “I . . . had turned out to be,” he says in his autobiography, “an extremely unpleasant sort of person—vain, self-centered, dissolute, weak, irresolute, undisciplined, sensual, obscene, and proud. I was a mess. Even the sight of my own face in a mirror was enough to disgust me.”⁵ This time, his return to Douglaston reflected an intense desire to find some type of liberation. One thing

became eminently clear to him: he had broken all physical ties with England and would never return there again. Enrolling as a sophomore at Columbia College in upper Manhattan might offer him, in spite of the Great Depression, an elite education, new friends, and an opportunity to pursue his talents—and maybe even an opportunity to develop a latent spirituality.

Little did Merton know that when he entered the *Columbia Review* office on the fourth floor of Columbia's John Jay Hall most likely during his first year on campus, he would meet someone who would have a great impact on his life: Robert Giroux, then a college junior and the *Review's* coeditor. The first thing Giroux noted, as related in an unpublished talk on Merton, was Merton's overall demeanor: "Blond and blue-eyed, his height was average, he had a stocky and solid build, and even . . . was beginning to bald. He was good-natured, extremely articulate, and laughed a lot." Since Merton and Giroux were taking one of Mark Van Doren's courses, the two students soon felt comfortable discussing with one another Van Doren's approach to literature and Renaissance drama. Giroux undoubtedly read Merton's story, "Katabolism of an Englishman," in the September 1935 issue of the *Jester*, the college's humor magazine, and perhaps wondered whether the desire of the story's narrator to transfer from Cambridge to Columbia had any autobiographical basis. When Merton handed Giroux another story, entitled "In the Street," Giroux never forgot, as he says in his talk, the significance of the moment:

It was a description of an auto accident he had seen on Broadway with a dead man's body lying in the street, his pack of cigarettes in a pool of blood. It was vividly written, the language was alive, and I said I would print it if he shortened it by one-third. He said, "Fine, but *you* do the cutting," and we shook hands. Without knowing it, I had become his editor.

Though Giroux had seen similar stories about street life and city vignettes, he knew instinctively then and there that Merton was going to be a serious writer.

Except for their interest in literature and publishing, Merton and Giroux seemingly had little in common. Born on April 8, 1914, Giroux grew up in a decidedly blue-collar Jersey City, New Jersey, where his father, Arthur Joseph, suddenly stopped working as the foreman of a local silk factory, thus causing great financial and emotional strain on the family. His mother, Katherine Regina Lyons Giroux, provided for the family's needs by doing fine sewing to support her five children, as her husband spent many of his idle days handicapping the horses. Young Robert excelled in grade school and was selected to attend the all-scholarship,

Jesuit-run Regis High School on East Eighty-Fourth Street just off Park Avenue in New York. He eventually received a partial scholarship to Columbia in 1932. In fact, he felt so confident in his ability to succeed academically that he left high school during his last semester to work as a copy boy on the *Jersey Journal*, giving him valuable work experience he cherished throughout his life.

On and off for a year and a half, Giroux worked at the *Jersey Journal*. His mentor there, editor Lillian Brown, early on recognized and appreciated his incipient talents, and took him and his friends to concerts, various museums, and sites of historical interest—and even, as he recalled, to cocktail parties! She was the one who had encouraged him to apply to Columbia; his mother, perhaps because she was thinking of the cost connected with sending her other children off to college, had serious reservations about his continuing his education (none of Giroux’s four siblings went on to college). Giroux, in the year between high school and college, assisted Brown in collecting and editing engaging and informative articles in the “Club Section,” a part of the paper oriented to both young adults and older readers that discussed the social and literary gatherings, on topics ranging from chess to cartooning, from editorial writing to drama (see the issues of April 30, 1932, and May 7, 1932, for examples). In retrospect, he saw his work at the newspaper as the perfect type of apprenticeship for entering the world of publishing, and he cherished throughout his life this valuable newspaper experience, focusing as it did on daily communication and the value of the written word. If anything, this was a marvelous formative time for him, particularly as it instilled in him a sense of his own worth. Though the larger world was quickly opening up in front of him, he knew he would still have to live at home as a college student. In fact, he lived almost his entire life in Jersey City, except for short stints in New York City and when he served as an administrative officer from 1942 to 1945 for Carrier Air Group Nine aboard the USS *Essex*.

Giroux recalled that during his senior year, he saw Merton occasionally; they became friends, but did not have the close friendship Merton had with fellow classmates Robert Lax (a semester ahead of Merton, with whom he carried on a lifelong zany correspondence, collected in *A Catch of Anti-Letters* [1979] and *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax* [2001]), Adolph (“Ad”) Reinhardt, Robert Gerdy, Seymour (“Sy”) Freedgood, and Edward Rice. Merton’s recollection of Giroux in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is understated, to say the least, given the fact that Giroux edited the very words that Merton wrote: “Giroux was a Catholic and a person strangely placid for the Fourth Floor. He had no part in its feuds and, as a matter of fact, you did not see him around there very much.”⁶ Yet Giroux had a good reading of his friend. In Giroux’s eyes,

Columbia for Merton resembled what it was to most American college students then: the hot jazz records of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, fraternity beer parties, athletics, student publications, dating, smoky bar-room seminars in the early hours of morning, Alice Faye, W.C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, Don Ameche, and the Marx brothers movies at the local movie house, called the Thalia, and, in between, classes. He saw Merton preoccupied with jazz, French literature, running track, the fiction of James Joyce, and especially the new poetry of W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender. He sensed, too, that Merton was ripe for the rejection of established authorities, a mind-set that prompted him to flirt with communism. "But he was an intelligent person as well as a restless one," Giroux observed in his talk, "so that when it began to bore him and he took an objective view of the situation, he was able to see the lack of logic in its methods and objectives. His Communist activity soon ceased."

In his book on Merton, Ed Rice described his friend from a slightly different perspective, as someone "dressed like a businessman, in a neat suit and a double-breasted chesterfield topcoat, carrying a leather briefcase full of papers, articles, books and drawings."⁷ In all, Merton's classmates seem to agree that he was articulate, energetic, and decisive when he had to be, and full of himself. Despite Merton's affability and great sense of humor, Giroux, however, sensed that, underneath it all, he was lonely and rather sad.

In addition to Mark Van Doren's humanistic influence on Merton and especially Giroux, who later wrote *The Book Known as Q: A Consideration of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1982), Daniel Walsh (1907–75), a visiting faculty member in philosophy, introduced Merton to the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and two contemporary Thomists: Étienne Gilson, whose recently published *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* Merton read in the winter of 1937, and Jacques Maritain, whose *Art and Scholasticism* (1930) proved essential while Merton pursued his graduate studies. Walsh had done his BA and MA at the University of Toronto, as well as a PhD at Toronto's Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies; while there, he had come to know Gilson, one of his professors. Gradually, Merton began to re-adjust his values and read and wonder about the Catholic Church. Gilson caused a radical shift in Merton's way of looking at life, as he records in his autobiography:

The result was that I at once acquired an immense respect for Catholic Philosophy and the Catholic faith. . . . When I put this book down, and had ceased to think explicitly about its arguments, its effect began to show itself in my life. I began to have a desire to go to church—and a desire more sincere and mature and more deep-seated than I had ever had before. After all, I had never before had so great a need.⁸

From Maritain, he learned, as Giroux said in his talk, “the real concept of virtue without which there can be no happiness because virtues are precisely the powers by which we can come to acquire happiness that in the end constitutes everlasting peace. And soon he accepted all the full range and possibilities of religious experience right up to the highest degree of glory.” Curiously, during their college years, the subject of religion never came up between Giroux and Merton; the former never had any idea during this time that the latter would ever have considered becoming a Catholic. And when Giroux graduated in May 1936, he never expected to see his friend again.

When Merton entered his senior year at Columbia, he became editor of the yearbook, which noted that an in-house poll had cited him as the college’s “best writer.” His work on the *Jester* as the art editor helped pay for his college tuition. Because of the recent deaths of his maternal grandparents Samuel Jenkins and his wife Martha, Merton had vacated his grandparents’ house on Long Island in early summer of 1937 to take an apartment on West 114th Street near the Columbia campus. Because he had a few more courses to take to complete his degree, he did not graduate until early 1938, after which he decided to stay on at Columbia to pursue an MA in English, fascinated, as he had been since his youth, by the poetry of William Blake, the subject of a thesis he started writing in September 1938.

Writing, reading intensely, taking summer school classes, and having a chance to reflect on his past and future, Merton decided one day in August 1938 to go to Mass, as he said in his autobiography, for the “first time in his life,” at Corpus Christi Church adjacent to Columbia.⁹ When asked what there was in Catholicism that drew Merton to it, Robert Lax stated succinctly, “I think the feeling of God’s concern for the world, God’s mercy toward sinners, actually made a strong appeal.”¹⁰ That November, in the same church, Merton was baptized and received his first Communion. Ed Rice acted as his godfather. More and more, Merton was finding a part of his life that had, up to this point, evaded him. After he received his MA in February 1939, he moved to 35 Perry Street in the West Village and decided to pursue a doctorate, with a projected dissertation on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. While the strictly academic life had its appeal, Merton was not totally convinced it was for him. In April, he took a trip to Bermuda, where he had lived with his father in the winter of 1922–23. It was at this time in his life that he confided in Dan Walsh that he felt he had a vocation, perhaps to the Jesuits—even attempting to follow Saint Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises on his own. Merton rejected the Jesuits, as he wrote in his autobiography, because they were “geared to a pitch of active ministry and military routine.”¹¹

With a good bit of time on his hands, he joined Bob Lax and Ed Rice for a short vacation that summer in Olean, New York, the site of the

Franciscan-run Saint Bonaventure College. While there, Merton plotted out and wrote three variants of the same novel, all romans à clef: *The Straits of Dover*, *The Night before the Battle*, and *The Labyrinth*, as well as *The Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, published in 1969 as *My Argument with the Gestapo: My Macaronic Journal*. Talking to a number of Franciscans and seeing their manner of life, he applied for admission to the order, hoping to enter their novitiate the following fall, but once his interviewers learned what had happened at Cambridge, he was turned down by them in July 1940. (It should be pointed out, too, that Merton had not, from a canonical point of view, been a Catholic long enough to be accepted into a religious order.) He taught English composition for a semester at Columbia for the fall 1939 semester and then taught as an assistant professor of English at Saint Bonaventure from the fall of 1940 to December 1941, earning forty-five dollars a month plus room and board.

When Robert Giroux started working at Harcourt, Brace & Company in January 1940, he learned that the typescript of *The Straits of Dover* by Thomas James Merton had arrived. As one of the readers, Giroux was one-third of the way through it before he realized it was written by his friend. "It was the story of a young man floundering around in Greenwich Village," he recalled in his unpublished talk. He believed it was well written but that, in the end, it failed to add up. "There was little drama in it and it lacked a resolution. During the next six months Naomi [Burton, Merton's agent at Curtis Brown, Ltd.] submitted two other novels, neither of which worked. They were actually rewritings of the first novel and at the end the hero was still floundering around."

Giroux was not alone in his evaluation. On February 7, 1940, an anonymous in-house reader at Harcourt, Brace gave his opinion of *The Straits of Dover*:

One of those strange novels which seem to concern lots of people, and have no particular plot. The most constant figure in this is a boy who was in school in England, went to Cambridge for a bit, and ended up at Columbia. Also involved are a stupid millionaire, his wife, a show girl who was after him, a left-wing intellectual, a Hindu mystic, etc., etc., etc. I think Mr. Merton's got something, but not quite enough to do anything about. No.

Stanley P. Young, a senior editor at Harcourt, Brace, added his typed personal comments seventeen days later: "Some interesting writing here, but it wobbles around as a story and never hits a strong narrative line. No."

At Perry Street, Merton must have been upset by Young's brief letter of the same date, which noted that while the editors had read *Straits of Dover* and enjoyed much of the writing the firm had decided not to publish it. Young had added, however, that he would like to consider any work that

Merton might send him in the future. Young's handwritten notes about *The Labyrinth*, dated March 26, 1940, are equally direct: "This is a revised version of 'The Straits of Dover' which came in and was rejected (with interest!) several weeks ago. It will still need to be rejected (with interest!). Merton is a talented young man but his story moves with a mazy motion even though there are many isolated passages of insight and strength." The same day, Giroux wrote a short note to Young: "I will write Merton, independently, in about a week, after you've had a chance to reject—encouragingly, I hope." On March 29, Young wrote a second letter to Merton, care of his Douglaston address:

As I told you over the telephone, my vote on your manuscript was no, but as this was a revision, I checked it against others here and all of us feel about the same way: that our interest in you is sufficiently galvanized by your manuscript to make us want to see anything you may do. Whether or not you enter the Franciscans, I think you will go on writing novels. From what I can gather from this manuscript, the bug is working under the skin. I am really sorry that we don't feel that this is the one to launch you with, but let me hear from you.

In all, the editors of Harcourt, Brace (*including* Robert Giroux) turned down Merton's earliest sustained creative efforts, including the version of the novel entitled *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* that Burton sent Giroux in April 1941, as Giroux mentions in an interview with Paul Wilkes.¹² Merton, likewise, received rejections for his early fiction from Farrar & Rinehart, Macmillan, Viking, and Knopf.

One summer day in 1941, as Giroux was browsing in the Scribner's Book Store on Fifth Avenue, someone touched his arm. It was Tom Merton, whom he had not seen since he had left Columbia. Merton explained that he had just been to the offices of the *New Yorker*, where their Columbia classmate, Robert Gerdy, was on the staff, to submit some of his poems, though Gerdy encouraged him to write instead about Gethsemani. Giroux squinted a bit in wonderment. "Oh, it's a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, where I recently made a retreat at Eastertime," his friend explained. "Well, I hope you'll write about Gethsemani," Giroux said with a slight note of encouragement. "It sounds fascinating." Merton indicated that he had no intention of writing such an essay. As they shook hands in parting, Giroux said, "Tom, I hope you'll go on writing." Giroux was most surprised to receive a phone call in early December from Van Doren saying that Merton had left his job at Saint Bonaventure College and had entered, at age twenty-six, Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, taking the religious name of "Maria Louis." None of Merton's friends thought they would ever hear from him again, especially as they incorrectly believed

that Merton had taken a vow of silence. Since Merton had left the manuscripts of his poems with Van Doren with the intention of sending them to James (“Jay”) Laughlin at the publishing firm called New Directions, his voice, albeit a poetic one, would be heard and read in *Thirty Poems* (1944).

The years passed, as Merton adjusted to his life as a Trappist monk in rural Kentucky and as Giroux, returning from his career in the Navy in early 1946 and soon becoming editor-in-chief at Harcourt, Brace, started editing the works of Hannah Arendt, W.E.B. DuBois, T.S. Eliot, William Gaddis, Randall Jarrell, Jack Kerouac, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O’Connor, William Saroyan, Jean Stafford, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Edmund Wilson, and Virginia Woolf, among others. Unknown to the outside world, Merton with the encouragement of Dom Frederic Dunne, O.C.S.O., the abbot, wrote his autobiography. The impression that Merton gave Giroux was that he really did not want to write this work, but was obliged to do so. Yet, according to Michael Mott, the original impetus for the autobiography seems to have come from Merton, not the abbot.¹³ He was not alone in his willingness to write about his early life as a religious. Little did he know that his contemporary, Avery Dulles, the son of the U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles—a position previously held by Avery’s great-grandfather, John W. Foster, and his great-uncle, Robert Lansing—had converted to Catholicism in 1940, while a student at Harvard College. He had entered Harvard in the fall of 1936, about the same time that Merton had encountered Giroux in his *Review* office. After a year and a half at Harvard Law School, Dulles served in the Navy, doing liaison work with the French Navy, for which he was awarded the *croix de guerre*. In 1946, he entered the Society of Jesus, and as a novice wrote his *A Testimonial to Grace*, which recounts the story of his conversion and spiritual growth. Though Dulles approaches the story of his conversion less from a strictly biographical point of view, he and Merton intersect in their narratives at key points:

On apprehending the dignity of reason and its true relation to reality I all at once felt at home in the universe. It is impossible for me to exaggerate the sense of joy and freedom which came from this discovery. I soon found myself reading avidly the modern Aristotelians—Catholic authors such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson—and adhering to the logic of their doctrine with a fervor which I could hardly capture today.¹⁴

And, like Merton, Dulles went on to be a renowned figure in Roman Catholicism, mainly through his books and articles on systematic theology, for which he was made a cardinal in February 2001 by Pope John Paul II.

Both Burton and Merton thought it good to submit his 694-page manuscript (reduced from 800 pages by the Trappist censors) to Giroux, which

Burton did in December 1946. In great peace and solitude, Merton had a chance to review the events that led up to his arrival at Gethsemani and find a perspective that would later resonate with thousands of others, especially those who had been radically shaken by World War II. Giroux wondered whether he had gone out on a limb when he asked Donald Brace to read the manuscript. “Do you think it will lose money?” the senior editor asked. “Oh no,” Giroux replied, “I’m sure it will find an audience. I don’t think we’d lose any money, but whether we make any is problematic. Merton writes well, and I wish you’d take a look at it, Don.” “No, Bob,” Brace said, “I’ll read it in print. If you like it, let’s do it.” In his talk on Merton, Giroux gives a larger context to this particular text:

When the abbot suggested that he write his life story, Merton resisted. One reason he had become a monk was in order to reject his past life, of which he was anything but proud. But once he began to write, it poured out. He wrote freely, with no thought of the Trappist censors. “I don’t know what audience I might have been thinking of,” he admitted. “I suppose I just put down what was in me, under the eyes of God who knows what is in me.” He was soon trying to tone down the original draft for the censors of the Order, who had criticized it severely, especially the account of his year at Clare College, Cambridge, during which he became the father of an illegitimate son.

Giroux did not cut much of the first edition, though he did spot one section that needed reworking.

After receiving Brace’s approval, Giroux phoned Burton and then telegraphed Merton at the end of December 1946: “MANUSCRIPT ACCEPTED. HAPPY NEW YEAR.” Merton then wrote to Burton on January 2, 1947, informing her that he gave Giroux a free hand with the editing. For Giroux, as he mentions in the introduction to the book’s fiftieth-anniversary edition, the main flaw was the essay, or sermon, with which the book opened—an example of misplaced “fine” writing:

When a man is conceived, when a human nature comes into being as an individual, concrete, subsisting thing, a life, a person, then God’s image is minted into the world. A free, vital, self-moving entity, a spirit informing flesh, a complex of energies ready to be set into fruitful motion begins to flame with potential light and understanding and virtue, and love, without which no spirit can exist. It is ready to realize no one knows what grandeurs. The vital center of this new creation is a free and spiritual principle called a soul. The soul is the life of this being, and the life of the soul is the love that unites it to the principle of all life—God. The body that here has been made will not live forever. When the soul, the life, leaves it, it will be dead.¹⁵

Giroux wisely said that Merton should explain right off who he was, where he came from, and how he got there. Merton's revised opening began: "On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world." For Giroux, it was personal, concrete, vivid, and got the reader involved in the story immediately. Giroux went on to suggest editorial problems with the conclusion of the book, to which Merton positively and enthusiastically responded, including the addition of five and a half pages of material that had recently appeared in the Catholic journal *Commonweal*. In addition, after Merton received the proofs on January 26, 1948, he cut at least eight thousand words.¹⁶ The celebrated author Evelyn Waugh, who edited the British edition under the title *Elected Silence*, wrote to Giroux on July 20, 1948: "I regard this as a book which may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience. No one can afford to neglect this clear account of a complex religious process." In light of this and other superb comments, Harcourt, Brace increased the first printing from 5,000 copies to 12,500, knowing that they might still need more copies. In fact, its pre-publication sale was 20,847 copies, with the original cloth edition exceeding 600,000 copies!

Behind the scenes, however, a crisis was developing. Merton told Burton that a final Trappist censor had refused to give his permission for the book to be published, unaware that a contract had already been signed. The censor objected to Merton's "colloquial prose style," and advised him to put the book aside. Giroux gave immediate and helpful advice: present the matter to the abbot general. According to Merton, the head of the order in France had told him to go ahead and write as he pleased and to use all the slang he wanted, but he would not countermand the judgment of any censor. Finally, the censor did an about-face, leaving Merton to his own devices concerning matters of style. After finished books were distributed in August 1948, Merton tried hard not to change his monastic routine, with more or less success. In Giroux's long and distinguished career, he never had a book as popular as this one.

When Abbot Dom James Fox, O.C.S.O. (1896–1987), invited Giroux and other Merton friends, including Jay Laughlin, Sy Freedgood, Dan Walsh, Bob Lax, and Ed Rice, to the monastery for Merton's ordination on May 26, 1949, Giroux brought along copy number 200,000 of the autobiography in a special leather binding. In his comments about editing this book, Giroux reflected on its worldwide appeal:

Why did the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* go so far beyond my expectations as an editor and publisher? Why, despite its being banned from the [*Times* "best seller"] list, did it outsell all other nonfiction books in the same months? Though few readers believe it, publishers

cannot create bestsellers. There is always an element of mystery when it happens: why *this* book at *this* moment? The most essential element of success is right timing, which cannot usually be foreseen. *The Seven Storey* appeared at a time of disillusion, following the Second World War, when another war—the cold war—had started and the public was ready for a change from disillusion and cynicism. Second, the story Merton told was unusual: an articulate young man with an interesting background leaves the world and withdraws into a monastery. Third, it was a tale well told, with liveliness and eloquence. No doubt there were other reasons, but the combination of the right subject at the right time presented in the right way accounts for a good part of the book's success.¹⁷

Giroux often talked to me about the success of this book, how it was lively and eloquently written, and of his friendship with Merton, particularly during the two pilgrimages I made with him from Jersey City to Gethsemani, where we were the guests of the abbot, Dom Damien Thompson, O.C.S.O., and Merton's former secretary, Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. Giroux believed that Merton's journey through life was one of exploration, keeping his eye on God, on the eternal verities, and on the world God created—thus seeing all the relationships and resulting congruities and incongruities. As Merton's books became known throughout the world, Merton, too, enlarged his imaginary mindscape. "Some people would say that Merton found a home in the monastery," Giroux explained in his interview with Paul Wilkes. "It may be true, but that doesn't take one iota away from his achievement. Many people have found homes in monasteries, but few have developed as remarkably as he did. The ambience never really explains the art itself."¹⁸ In short, Merton was very much a man of his own times, who had a deeply felt spirituality rooted in Cistercian forms of prayer and in the traditions and sacramental life of the Catholic Church. He flourished in the seclusion of the monastery, due in large part to his searching imagination and his desire to communicate through the printed word. To those who believed that a Trappist monk should keep silent both in and out of the cloister, Giroux would send them a succinct six-word card he had printed: "Writing is a form of contemplation."

During the early months of 1955, Giroux, increasingly dissatisfied with the interpersonal dynamics at Harcourt, Brace, decided that he needed to move elsewhere, especially given the desire of the firm's new president, William Jovanovich, to focus more on textbooks and less on literature. Giroux wrote to his friend, Paul Horgan, on March 27, 1955, that he was terribly upset by the anti-Catholic statements directed at him by some in the office. Once Giroux had made up his mind, he delayed leaving until early spring so that he would be in a position to collect his pension. Naomi Burton learned of Giroux's situation and, in turn, she introduced him to Sheila Cudahy, who set up a dinner meeting, where Giroux was formally

invited by Roger W. Straus Jr., John Farrar, and Cudahy in February 1955 to join Farrar, Straus & Company (soon to become Farrar, Straus & Cudahy). The conditions were not complicated; Giroux would start in April and have an initial contract for five years. According to the new arrangement, Straus was president and owner and Giroux would hold the position of vice president, become a member of the board of directors, shareholder, and editor-in-chief. Cudahy, having previously owned a publishing firm in Italy with her husband Georgio Pellegrini, would retain her post as vice president. She would continue to focus on children's books, as well as books that might appeal to Catholics.

When Giroux arrived at his new first-floor office at 101 Fifth Avenue, he found the firm poorly managed, and thus spent considerable time establishing a decent house library and archives so that copyrights could be properly filed. Approximately seventeen authors followed Giroux to his new firm, including John Berryman, T.S. Eliot, Paul Horgan, Randall Jarrell, Jack Kerouac, John LaFarge, S.J., Robert Lowell, Thomas Merton, Jean Stafford, Peter Taylor, and eventually Bernard Malamud and Flannery O'Connor. Just before Giroux left Harcourt, Brace, he was proud to have edited *The Recognitions*, by William Gaddis, an author whom he admired and who eventually received two National Book Awards, but who decided not to follow him. When Eliot cabled his desire to remain with Giroux as his American editor, Giroux saw this as a "rare act of generosity and friendship." Donald Brace simply handed Giroux the telegram that Eliot had sent and left his office without saying a word. Straus later said that Giroux's arrival in 1955 was "the single most important thing to happen to this company."¹⁹ Giroux already knew that Roger Straus, who came from a privileged background, could count on family financial resources; his mother was a Guggenheim and his father's family owned Macy's department store. His paternal grandfather, Oscar Straus, was secretary of commerce during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. While still serving in the U.S. Navy, Straus had begun planning to start his own publishing firm, and he enlisted James Van Alen to help get the firm started in 1945, but because of pressure from his own family, Van Alen never formally became involved and preferred to put his energies into playing professional tennis. In addition, Straus contacted another friend of his, John Farrar, a Yale graduate who had worked for the *New York World* and then became well known in publishing circles as editor of the *Bookman*. He was the founder of the Breadloaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont in 1926. Later as editor-in-chief of George Doran Company and then a founding member of Farrar & Rinehart, he had the publishing background Straus needed, and after finishing his assignment in the Office of War Information, he joined the new firm.

Straus and Giroux had met in New York during World War II when the latter was stationed on the aircraft carrier USS *Essex*, one of whose pilots,

Lieutenant George M. Blair, had been shot down at Truk, a Japanese base on the Caroline Islands, on February 18, 1944. After the successful U.S. attack on the Japanese base there, a large task force maneuvered to participate in the pilot's rescue. Later, Blair found it difficult to be interviewed about the situation, but with Giroux's assistance, he was able to tell his story. Giroux took his written account, "Rescue at Truk," to Lieutenant Straus, who was serving as a censor for the Navy. Straus approved the article and it was eventually published in *Collier's* (May 13, 1944), for which Giroux received a check for \$3,000, half of which he sent to Blair. Thus the Giroux-Straus friendship was formed, though not without serious ups and downs, as Giroux explained to me in some detail during the years I knew him. But in the beginning, both were eager to get started and make the firm successful, which they did with great éclat.

On Maundy Thursday, in early April 1955, Giroux wrote on Farrar, Straus & Cudahy stationery to Merton at Gethsemani:

I deeply regret the misunderstanding which occurred during my last weeks at Harcourt, Brace and which resulted, despite my promise to you, in the final corrections not being made in the first printing of *NO MAN IS AN ISLAND* (save for twelve specially made copies). I think now that the firm probably acted in good faith, though they still question mine. . . . I am grateful to Harcourt, Brace for having released you from their contract, and I know that their doing so is due mainly to Naomi's skill and tact in an extremely difficult situation.²⁰

P.S. Cable from T. S. Eliot confirming his leaving Harcourt, Brace and coming here [FSC] too!

Revealing a new energy and ready to start afresh, he also wrote an unpublished "private and personal" letter on April 21, 1955, to John Berryman in South Minneapolis, Minnesota:

As you may have heard, I have left Harcourt, Brace after fifteen years to join this firm. I had thought my troubles were over when [Eugene] Reynal resigned last December, but this was a miscalculation; his leaving only confirmed the ascendancy of the textbook people. William Jovanovich (or Don Giovanovich as I like to think of him) and John McCallum are The New Men. Denver Lindley, an old one whom I have always liked, will last as long as they can use him.

In any event, here I am loaded with honors (vice president, member of the board of directors, stockholder) and as excited as Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace must have been when they left [Henry] Holt in 1919. I've known Roger Straus since we were in the Navy together; John Farrar and Sheila Cudahy are old friends. We're a young

firm, and at the same time the oldest survivor (perhaps the only, now that [William] Sloane [Associates] has fragmentized) of the postwar publishers. We publish [François] Mauriac, Edmund Wilson, [Alberto] Moravia, Colette, [Marguerite] Yourcenar, Alec Waugh, and [Giovanni] Guareschi among others.

I want to build up the American list in general (I think our European list has great distinction), and the poetry list in particular. I would like to start with *Homage to Mistress Anne Bradstreet*. I can now sign contracts myself, and there will be none of the Harcourt, Brace ambivalence—editor proposing and management disposing. May I publish your poem . . . ? We are going to do Eliot's new play (he staggered me by calling "I will come along with you"), and Cal Lowell has agreed to publish the prose book he is working on (a memoir) with us; his poetry, alas, is tied up (I tied it up, of course).

So come on, and join your friends. Will you wire me collect and tell me we can submit a contract for the Anne Bradstreet; I'll offer you good terms.

I plan to come out your way [Minneapolis] in early May for a brief visit; I have to get back by May 11th when Uncle Tom [Eliot] arrives from London to stay at my apartment. It will be good to see you, and to talk over lots of things, but meanwhile let me know about the poem, by telegram preferably.

With so many talented authors aboard, Giroux wasted no time getting back to editing, including that spring some notable works: *The Vagabond* by Colette; *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov*, edited by Lillian Hellman; *Flesh and Blood* by François Mauriac; *A Ghost at Noon* by Alberto Moravia; *Keats* by John Middleton Murry; and *Island in the Sun* by Alec Waugh.

Giroux, however, was not the only one adjusting to change. As anyone who has lived for a long time in a religious community knows, life within the cloistered walls is far from easy. In addition to the books and essays he wrote, Merton not only dealt for ten years (1955–65) on a very personal level with the Trappist novices in his charge—listening to them and discerning how they could become the Trappists they were called to be—but also carried on an extensive correspondence. Paul Pearson estimates that Merton wrote to approximately twenty-one hundred correspondents between the years 1963 and 1968, though, admittedly, not all of their letters are of major import. At the same time, it should be mentioned that for many years Merton's letters were read for the most part by his abbot, who often had to pass judgment on what Merton was trying to accomplish. From a spiritual point of view, the abbot, as the superior of all the monks in the abbey, knew where Merton wanted to go, but given the complexities of the situation, he had no road map to guide him, as a