

*The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton*



THE LETTERS  
*of*  
ROBERT GIROUX  
*and*  
THOMAS MERTON



*Edited and Annotated by*  
PATRICK SAMWAY, S.J.

*Foreword by*  
JONATHAN MONTALDO

*University of Notre Dame Press*  
*Notre Dame, Indiana*

© 2015 UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

Copyright © 2015 by the University of Notre Dame  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
www.undpress.nd.edu  
All Rights Reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Giroux, Robert.

The letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton /  
edited and annotated by Patrick Samway, S.J.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-268-01786-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-268-01786-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Giroux, Robert—Correspondence. 2. Editors—United States—Correspondence.
3. Book editors—United States—Correspondence. 4. Merton, Thomas, 1915–1968—Correspondence. 5. Trappists—United States—Correspondence. 6. Authors, American—20th century—Correspondence. 7. Authorship—Correspondence.
8. Authors and publishers—United States—Correspondence. 9. Publishers and publishing—United States—Correspondence. I. Merton, Thomas 1915–1968.
- II. Samway, Patrick H., editor. III. Montaldo, Jonathan, writer of foreword. IV. Title.

PN149.9.G57A4 2015

070.5'1092—dc23

2015017675

*∞ The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence  
and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines  
for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.*

# *Contents*

Foreword <i>Jonathan Montaldo</i>	vii
Notes on the Text	ix
Introduction	1
Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton	21
Epilogue	369
Appendix: A Chronological Listing of the Books of Thomas Merton for Which Robert Giroux Served as General Editor	373
Index	375



## *Foreword*

JONATHAN MONTALDO

Although I had begun reading Thomas Merton's autobiography in 1958, ten years after its publication when I was thirteen, and then proceeded to read Merton methodically until I caught up with his latest book, I never entertained a notion to visit him at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. A friend, also in his early twenties and an avid Merton reader, did indeed maneuver a fifteen-minute conversation with Merton in Kentucky. I never envied his opportunity. Merton's literary "voice" and transparent spiritual journey attracted me. I never thought of writing him a fan letter or encountering his celebrity in the flesh.

On the other hand, I was enthusiastic when in the 1980s I had the chance to meet Robert Giroux, the editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and twenty-five other Merton books. I realized his handshake placed me one degree of separation from T.S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Virginia Woolf, Flannery O'Connor, and a host of other literary luminaries whose books Giroux had edited. After maneuvering myself into knowing him better, I also learned the hand I shook had greeted famous friends, such as Maria Callas, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, and Igor Stravinsky. A few years before his death on September 5, 2008, at age ninety-four, Giroux allowed me to record extended interviews with him on camera, sixteen hours of interviews in all! I prompted him off camera, which was a good thing: my being on film, often open-mouthed and wide-eyed, would have been distracting as Giroux reminisced with gusto about his long history as an editor, recounting his favorite stories about writers and friends he had known. I marveled as he detailed his exceedingly rich experiences as a major American literary editor and publisher, first at Harcourt, Brace and then at the New York house that eventually bore his name, Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

I have long anticipated this edition of the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Robert Giroux ably edited and annotated by Patrick Samway, S.J., one of Giroux's closest friends and confidants, and a university professor of American literature. Father Samway has more than rewarded my patience. These letters, produced in the trenches of hard

labor, bring to light a reluctant but creatively facile monastic writer and his hands-on-the-business-tiller editor, yet always the writer's true advocate. They reveal the necessary shaping of a text that would hopefully excite its readers to ponder God and garner profit for all concerned. The reader is present at the creation of a book from pages of often undisciplined but highly evocative writing. Talk of deadlines and of royalties are continuing subjects here, but what fascinates is realizing how much Giroux contributed to honing the monk's prose and developing Merton's brand, as he often gave Merton's writing its form and more than twice crowned his books with great titles: *The Sign of Jonas* and *No Man Is an Island*. Giroux's letter to Merton dated February 13, 1951, offers particularly good evidence of his deft editorial hand as he critiques the development of *The Ascent to Truth*. This behind-the-typewriter view of their collaboration also reveals how little glamour attends the making of what will become a classic text, which Giroux once defined as a book that remains in print. He and Merton collaborated to produce many of these.

Beyond the business of publishing, these letters are studded with personal revelations. Merton often expresses to his editor that he should write "slower and more prayerfully" (September 9, 1949). Rather than become famous, Merton wanted to become "the simplest of all priests" (May 12, 1949). He longed to work in the fields and "be a monk for a while" (February 15, 1951). Giroux was always sympathetic. He knew firsthand the cost of Merton's writing career to his genuine, monastic vocation, yet he remained confident that Merton would work out the paradoxes of being a Trappist monk and famous writer. He defended Merton's writing against critical readers who wrote personally to him against a supposedly silent monk publishing so prolifically. In response, Giroux would send them a preprinted card (thus, this critique must have been a frequent occurrence): "Writing is a form of contemplation."

This collection admirably joins other volumes of Merton's correspondence that have been gathered in books, a genre of his that should continue to proliferate since Merton was an inveterate letter writer to persons both famous and unknown. While his journals are naturally important for intimate background, his letters offer epiphanies of his broad and hospitable humanity that are hard to come by in any other format. I commend this well-edited dialogue with enthusiasm as another perspective into the man whom Giroux described simply as "a great and important American thinker and writer."

## *Notes on the Text*

The letters are arranged chronologically, as far as it is possible to determine dates with accuracy. Where dates are incomplete or missing, I have relied mostly on the evidence within the letters to assist me in determining the dates as accurately as possible. I have tried to preserve the physiognomy of the letters in order to allow the reader to appreciate the stylistic habits and preferences of the writers. Minor typographical infelicities have been silently corrected, but I have made every effort to retain creative spelling and usage wherever the meaning can be gleaned from the context. Handwritten marks are presumed to be made by the sender unless otherwise noted. Editorial interpolations—missing words and corrections of obvious errors affecting sense—are enclosed in [square brackets], as are any contextual annotations other than footnotes. I have made uniform the format of the dates of the letters and have occasionally stylized some of the letters, mostly by correcting spelling mistakes and regularizing punctuation. These letters, either originals or duplicates, were found in the following locations: the private archives of Robert Giroux; the archives of Harcourt, Brace; the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville; and the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library.

In preparing these letters for publication, I am most grateful for the assistance of the following persons: Robert Giroux; Charles F.X. Reilly; Dom Damien Thompson, O.C.S.O.; Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.; Hugh James and Dorothee McKenna; Thomasine O'Callaghan; the Merton Legacy Trust (Anne McCormick, Mary R. Somerville, Peggy Fox); Paul M. Pearson and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky; my student assistants at Saint Joseph's University (Cara Donaldson, Christine Skalka, and Mary Sarajeon Black); Dominic Roberti; Professors JoAlyson Parker and Peter Norberg; the Saint Joseph's University English Department; the Jesuit Community at Saint Joseph's University; Tina Smith and the staff of the Archives of Harcourt, Brace; the staff of the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library; and especially my thoughtful literary agent Albert LaFarge. The Estate of

Robert Giroux gave permission to publish his letters, and the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust gave permission to publish Merton's letters.

Sigla:

Naomi Burton: NB

New Directions: ND

Farrar, Straus & Cudahy: FSC

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: FSG

Robert Giroux: RG

Harcourt, Brace: HB

James Laughlin: JL

Thomas Merton: TM

Patrick Samway, S.J.: PS