



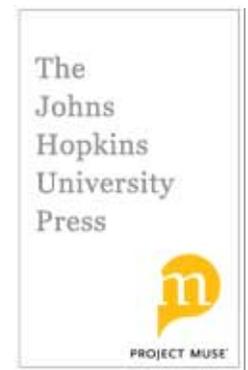
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In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality by Ephrem Arcement, and:
The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton by Patrick Samway (review)

Chris Staysniak

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In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality. By Ephrem Arcement, OSB. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-87907-265-0. Pp. 248. \$24.95.

The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton. By Patrick Samway, SJ, ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-268-01786-6. Pp. 408. \$29.00

Starting with the extraordinary and unexpected popularity of his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), the Trappist monk Thomas Merton became one of America's most significant and prolific spiritual writers of the 20th century. It remains an enduring point of irony that he became such a widely known public and prophetic voice while living in the relative seclusion of Gethsemani Abbey in rural Kentucky, and that from behind those walls he became a font of wisdom on matters of social justice and active engagement in our complex modern world.

Merton was indeed a miraculous man with a miraculous mind. His myriad interests ranged from ancient Scripture and early church history to poetry, the (im)morality of nuclear warfare, intersections of Christian monasticism and the Zen Buddhist tradition, and the spiritual roots of political and social protest, to name only a few of the weighty matters he wrote on. Further, his manifold interests never seemed at odds with one another. Rather than a jumbled hodge-podge, these various pursuits all fit into Merton's dynamic and evolving spiritual and intellectual journey. Like shards of a mosaic, the individual pieces helped shape and color a larger effort to understand and find unity with the divine.

During his lifetime Merton kept up a high rate of productivity, a testament to his abilities as well as the privileges afforded by the contemplative space of a monastic life. After his untimely death by electrocution in 1968, his many published works, as well as his extensive written correspondence and journals, have powered a cottage industry of Merton studies. A quick library search will reveal the depth of this constant stream of books, dissertations, and articles. Jesuit and social activist Daniel Berrigan, SJ, once complained of this phenomenon at its most extreme, calling it "Mertonmania," and further observed how in the years following his friend's death, "PhDs proliferated and the lode of Merton's life was mined to exhaustion" (*Testimony* [Orbis, 2004], 103). While at times the flow of Merton books may seem overwhelming or even excessive, particularly to a newcomer, this is not to say that Merton is undeserving of such extensive study. Two recent books have joined this parade of Merton works. While both are geared more toward the Merton enthusiast, each has unique contributions to the study of the monk's life and thought.

With *In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality*, Ephrem Arcement has offered a nuanced analysis that explores the origins and evolution of Merton's prophetic spirituality. Arcement pays particular

attention to this vein of Merton's thought as it unfolded in the last decade of the latter's life following his profound 1958 epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. As Merton wrote, while running errands he gazed at the strangers around him and, "was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers" (xv-xvi). Arcement acknowledges that the prophetic nature of Merton's spirituality is by no means a new topic. But he argues that the majority of works in this area have focused on Merton's writings on peace and monastic renewal. In contrast, Arcement's study constructs a genealogy of what he calls the "underlying impulses and motivating and formative forces of this prophetic ministry, namely, its spirituality" (xv), and expertly draws on Merton's letters, journals, and published writings, and navigates the monk's diverse intellectual interests and evolving curiosity and appetite for new ideas and thinkers.

Throughout the book Arcement presents an impressive cataloging of the many interwoven thinkers and writers that Merton read—in some instances wrote to—and examines how they shaped his evolving prophetic thought and spirituality. For readers of *Christianity and Literature* interested in Merton, *In the School of Prophets* may be of particularly interest as it is awash in literary voices. For instance, Arcement begins the book by examining Merton's interest in the English poet William Blake, with special emphasis on Merton's rediscovery of Blake's work in the latter years of his life. Arcement asserts that in works like the introduction of *Religion in Wood* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1966), Merton "gave concrete application to his appreciation and understanding of Blake's prophetic vision and imagination" (26). In the following chapter Arcement examines Merton's exploration of contemporary Latin American poetry, particularly Nicaraguan poets Ernesto Cardenal and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, and the Peruvian César Vallejo. In later parts of the book Arcement further ties in Merton's readings of Faulkner, Camus, and Pasternak (particularly *Doctor Zhivago*).

Arcement compellingly shows how these many authors helped inform Merton's sense of prophetic spirituality in some way or another, and while these passages are instructive, the richest and most original sections of *In the School of Prophets* come later in the book where Arcement looks at how Merton grappled with existentialist thinkers, including Christian existentialists Soren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, as well as philosophers in the wider school of existentialist thought such as Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. As Arcement asserts, "It is not too bold to assert that what mattered most to Merton was the discovery of truth and the freedom found hidden within it" (130), and as such, why Merton found these thinkers so convincing. While Merton did not agree with all of their conclusions, especially the atheistic veins found in writers like Sartre, he found support for his own prophetic thoughts by drawing on these writers' protestations against anything that robbed human beings of authentic living. Though for Merton, truly authentic living for meant "a proximate end for the truly ultimate goal of life in

God” (131). As Merton understood it, this search for authenticity, when pursued through a Christian lens, led towards an inevitable transformation of both self- and social consciousness. Existentialism, Arcement argues, gave Merton a “paradigm for understanding authenticity as a type of catalyst in the transformation of the self and in the world around” (152). He further argues that Merton found in existentialist thinkers a case for monastic renewal, as the contemplative nature of a monastic lifestyle offered insights into “the reality of things” (140), making a monastic life like his own a fruitful means of providing “prophetic witness to the kingdom of God” (140).

Ultimately, *In the School of Prophets* is a careful, contemplative, and nuanced work. The analysis is expertly researched and finely detailed. Arcement demonstrates a rare fluency in his ranging over so many different writers and thinkers, and how they all fit into a worldview as complex as Merton’s. Arcement’s ability to guide the reader through this complex web of influences is a remarkable triumph unto itself. Further, Arcement is careful to maintain a sense of ongoing development throughout his writing, as he explicitly emphasizes the evolving openness to new ideas and “unending growth” (xi) that he argues was a pillar of Merton’s understanding of monastic life.

The only major shortcoming of this book is a common one for works within Merton studies. Arcement’s detailed analysis will be of greatest interest to Merton specialists. The book assumes a high degree of familiarity with Merton. Even for the better-prepared, the read is rich and as such moves more slowly than other works on aspects of Merton’s prophetic ideas, such as John Dear’s relatively recent *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker* (2015). Arcement definitely offers some new insights into the formation of Merton’s prophetic spirituality, but at such a level that puts this work out of reach to any Merton beginners.

In contrast to the often soaring theological, philosophical, and literary heights examined *In the School of Prophets*, Patrick Samway’s *The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton* offers a look at the relationship between Merton and his friend and esteemed publisher, Robert Giroux. Samway is best known for his work on Walker Percy, for which his biography was a *New York Times Book Review* notable book of 1997. As he explains in the introduction, Samway came to this project not so much because of Merton but because of Giroux, who served as Samway’s publisher and friend for 25 years.

Published correspondence has become a subgenre of Merton studies unto itself, one that includes larger general and more focused collections of letters between Merton and one other individual, such as Japanese Zen authority D. T. Suzuki, Polish poet and writer Czesław Miłosz, American poet Robert Lax, and French Benedictine Jean Leclercq, to name a few examples. As Samway shows, the rapport between Giroux and Merton was indeed one of the more exceptional, and the letters shed light on a long relationship that was both personal and professional. Giroux and Merton first met during their college days at Columbia through the former’s editorial position at the *Columbia Review*, where Merton submitted some

work. In later years Giroux, from his editorial position at the New York publisher Harcourt Brace, helped shepherd the acceptance of the *Seven Story Mountain* manuscript that launched his public literary career. Merton would later follow Giroux when the latter left for Farrar, Straus, and Company (later Farrar, Straus and Giroux, of course), where Giroux continued to help Merton despite the other notable writers he worked with, including T.S. Eliot, Jack Kerouac, John LaFarge, SJ, Robert Lowell, Bernard Malamud, and Flannery O'Connor. Their professional relationship was indeed a productive one, as Giroux served as editor for 15 of Merton's books during the monk's life, and another 11 produced posthumously after his death.

Samway has produced an exemplary book as far as the subgenre of Merton letters goes. The collection begins in 1948 as the success of *The Seven Story Mountain* continued to impress writer and editor alike, and runs until just before Merton's death in 1968. The letters capture the overlapping personal and professional dynamics of their interaction. This includes personal updates, such as their musings on Vatican II, to Giroux's editorial feedback that shows how even a writer as masterful as Merton, particularly earlier in his public writing career, needed some coaching. As Giroux wrote in a February 13, 1951 letter on one manuscript, "At first reading, I must confess, the new book was tough going," or later, "I also found that when I reached page 168, 'The Problem of Unbelief,' it was like coming to an oasis in the desert. It's witty and pungent and fascinating. But I also realized that it doesn't belong there, and actually interrupts the development of your text as this late stage" (85). These exchanges offer a rare look at the often slow process of writing and rewriting beyond many of Merton's works.

Under the best of circumstances the publishing process is not always a smooth one, and as the letters show, this was an even more complicated affair for Merton and Giroux. They had to navigate Trappist superiors and censors for each of Merton's many books, as well as Giroux's own corporate hierarchy. The book offers a rare peak at the practical side of Merton's writings, a gauntlet of *imprimi potests*, *nihil obstats*, and *imprimatur*s, in addition to the more normal back and forth over galleys, permissions, copyrights, editing, and artwork. Throughout these logistics one gets the sense that Merton, while extraordinary in so many ways, did not have a tremendous talent for organization, at least as far as his writing was concerned, as he was often overwhelmed by the logistics of his own writing commitments and contracts. Additionally, the demands of this relationship were further exacerbated by the slower pace of the world of letters and telegraphs in which it unfolded, wherein miscommunications could take weeks, if not months, to solve. Today, when everyone has an expectation of having instantaneous results, the persistent patience of Merton and Giroux as they worked out kinks in the editorial process is indeed a contrast.

This point is best highlighted in one of the stretches of letters that began when Merton on his own initiative signed a contract with Macmillan to publish a book, not realizing he was still under contract with Farrar, Straus and Company. The

resulting attempt to unwind this act involved both firms' presidents and stopped just short of court. As the letters show, it was not until after the affair was settled that the two managed to figure out that a critical March 1962 letter from Giroux never actually reached Merton, and was most likely misplaced by a confrere of Merton's at Gethsemani. As Merton reflected on the matter in an August 22, 1963 letter that is one of the great gems of the book,

In monastic life, one is accustomed to receiving a series of mild, aimless and rather absurd kicks in the teeth, and the vow of obedience with its attendant graces does something to make the blows less important. It is sickening to me, though, to learn (as I not infrequently do) that the fallout has entered the lives of some of my friends, through no fault of theirs or mine. I am very, very sorry that you had the privilege of participating in one of my professional monastic traumas. (310)

While the relationship between Giroux and Merton is central to the book, there is in a real way a third character whose shadow is cast on most pages, Naomi Burton Stone. An English transplant to the United States who was Merton's literary agent from the very beginning of his writing career, Stone was an invaluable individual behind many if not most of Merton's projects. She helped move his many projects along during his life, and edited many of Merton's previously unpublished works after his death. Throughout Samway's volume there are several instances where it seems that she was the only one capable of tackling the publishing Gordian knots in which Merton found himself. Given the collection of correspondence between Stone and Merton housed at the Merton Center at Bellarmine University, it seems only like a matter of time before someone takes on the task of editing and publishing this collection as the next addition to the corpus of Merton studies.

Throughout these letters Samway offers just the right amount of editorial touch. He intervenes to enlighten the reader only when needed. Among the more helpful additions, Samway includes footnotes that not only explain certain references in each letter, but also excerpts from Merton to others at the time. These additions often show frustration with Giroux's publishing house, though rarely does this seem to extend personally to Giroux.

Half a century after his death, Merton's writing continues to inspire specialists and non-specialists alike. As evidence, one need look no further than Merton's central place in Pope Francis 2015 address to the US Congress. Indeed, Merton's words continue to have enduring resonance in a complex, war-torn, conflict-riven, and technologically driven world, perhaps even more so than when he first wrote them. Still, one wonders what Merton, the man of so many theological and intellectual interests, would feel about having so much ink and paper devoted solely to him. This is surely another ironic facet of Merton's legacy.

Chris Staysniak

Boston College