

Merton works discovered

Editor donates proofs, drafts to Bellarmine center

By Peter Smith

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Robert Giroux has collected vast numbers of documents during a career editing many of the 20th century's greatest writers, including 15 winners of Nobel or Pulitzer prizes.

But when a friend was helping him sort them last year in his New Jersey retirement apartment, Giroux had no idea what discovery awaited him - more than 3,000 pages of documents by the late Kentucky author-monk Thomas Merton.

The friend, the Rev. Patrick Samway, opened a cabinet and saw several book-length manuscripts by Merton.

"I said, 'Bob, take a look! I can't even lift this stuff!' " said Samway, who teaches literature at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Giroux donated the documents, appraised at nearly \$1 million, to the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. The center houses the monk's archives.

"I just knew that's Merton's stuff and forgot what it was," said Giroux, a college friend of Merton who later edited many of the monk's books, including his breakthrough work, "The Seven Storey Mountain."

Merton lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Nelson County from 1941 until his death in 1968 at age 53. His dozens of books -- many still in print -- cover such topics as prayer, social justice and interfaith relations.

The donated documents include drafts or proofs of five Merton books. It also includes an unpublished book manuscript, various essays, letters between Merton and Giroux and a 1940 rejection slip for an early novel.

The donation is the largest addition to the Thomas Merton Center since the monk's death. The collection has 50,000 documents by and about Merton, most of them transferred from Gethsemani in the 1960s.

Paul Pearson, director of the center, predicted scholars would "have a field day" with the new documents.

For example, the new documents include four heavily edited drafts for "The Ascent to Truth," a book on the philosophy of Christian mysticism.

"Here's a doctoral dissertation for somebody," Pearson said. "A researcher could see how that book developed."

In a phone interview, Giroux said Merton struggled with that book because he was trying to write too abstractly. From then on, Merton wrote on spirituality from a more personal perspective, strengthening his later books.

"He was very savvy about picking up (advice) and following it," Giroux said, "and a pleasure to work with because he knew everything."

Giroux also donated early versions of the books "Disputed Questions," an essay collection; "The Waters of Siloe," a history of Merton's Trappist order; and "The Sign of Jonas" and "Thoughts in Solitude," reflections on the spiritual life. There is also an unpublished manuscript from the 1960s on art and worship -- Merton's revival of a book that was rejected for publication in the 1950s. Until now, Pearson said, scholars didn't know how hard Merton tried to rehabilitate that book.

"Having parents as artists, being a good artist himself, there was something there he wouldn't let go of," Pearson said.

One of the earliest documents is a 1940 note from someone in Giroux's first publishing company, Harcourt, Brace.

It rejected a young Merton's novel about a Englishman who, like Merton, wandered from Cambridge and Columbia universities.



Robert Giroux

The note says the book has "a stupid millionaire, his wife, a show girl, ... a left-wing intellectual, a Hindu mystic, etc." -- but "no particular plot."

The note concluded: "I think Mr. Merton's got something, but not quite enough to do anything about."

Much of this material eventually went into Merton's now-classic autobiography, "The Seven Storey Mountain." Giroux played a crucial role in editing the autobiography. He persuaded Merton to cut a philosophical introduction.

"I said, 'Tom, you're writing an autobiography,'" Giroux recalled. "'...Just say where you were born, who you are. Make a personal contact with the reader.'"

So Merton opened with a poignant narration of his birth and boyhood in wartime France. It drew legions of readers into his account of a restless young man's journey from Europe to America and from atheism to a remote Catholic monastery in Kentucky.

The book, a surprise best-seller in 1948, appealed to a spiritually hungry post-war generation.

"It never once occurred to me it would be a best-seller," Giroux said. But Merton "was such a lively writer, (he appealed to) a lot of people you wouldn't ever expect to read such a book."

Giroux's donation, appraised at \$911,225, is actually his second major gift to the center. He thought he had provided all his Merton papers in 2001 with a donation appraised at around \$210,000.

Samway called Giroux "the best editor America's ever had."

Giroux's authors included poets T.S. Eliot and Pablo Neruda and fiction writers Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jack Kerouac.

Giroux attributes this track record to "just luck."

"The more talented they are, the less you edit them," he said.

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