



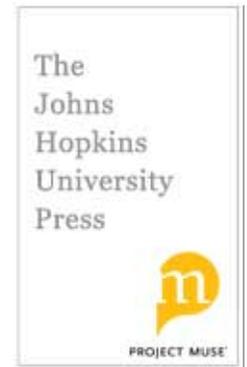
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Secularization without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee by
Vincent P. Pecora (review)

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Vincent P. Pecora, ***Secularization without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee.***

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 214. \$30.00. ISBN 978-0-268-03899-1.

Vincent Pecora's *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* (Chicago, 2006) both established his reputation as a major scholar of secularization in the world of literary and cultural studies and suggested a contrarian approach that was willing to take humanities and social science scholars to task for reducing religion to the status of ideology. Both of these characteristics are back on display in his new book *Secularization without End*, but this time Pecora's focus is turned in a more decidedly literary direction, and his target is the history of the novel. Though the provenance of this book as a lecture series is still discernable in its occasional approach to the subject—there are chapters on Samuel Beckett and Thomas Mann and a double-length chapter devoted to J. M. Coetzee—Pecora presses his readings of these novelists into more ambitious territory with an introduction and a conclusion that seek to make a major intervention in the conversation about how the novel figures into accounts of secularization. Pecora ends up arguing that the novel is a much more religious genre than we thought, and that the novel represents one of the best efforts to wrestle with the traumas of modernity in a way that articulates repeatedly the impossibility of wringing redemption out of the epic violence perpetrated by advanced civilizations across the 20th century.

In his introduction, Pecora seeks to create more distance in the relationship between the novel and secularization, a connection which Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* (1957) argues is very close indeed. What allows Watt to write the history of the novel as the history of a preeminently secularizing form is his identification of religion with belief in miracles. Since the novel's realist strategy cannot tolerate the miraculous, religion persists in the novel, according to Watt, only in the guise of Weber's religion-as-ideology. Pecora's critique of this narrow (but very influential) account of the secularization thesis in the history of the novel opens space for seeing more religion in the novel. He distinguishes a French Catholic trajectory of religious fiction from a Protestant English novel where religion is "underwritten," or "invisible." But eventually these national differences are resolved into the idea that the 19th-century novel marks an "aberration" within the history of the genre. The return to religion of some 20th- and 21st-century novels relies on a unique understanding of what religion is. Pecora argues that Walter Benjamin, in a brief unpublished essay, identified religion with the mimetic faculty, which Benjamin defines as the human ability to recognize and produce "nonsensuous similarity"—the earliest example is dance, which Benjamin understands as an archaic attempt to reproduce the movement of the stars. As time passes, humans begin to rely on the semantic effects of language and largely lose the ability to experience this nonsensuous similarity. Instead of the full mimetic power of archaic religion, then, we are left with "a lightning flash of similarity within the arbitrary conventions of reading and writing." This is what Pecora calls the "secular magic" of modern writing, and he says that readers are "always subject" to its power.

Insofar as Pecora's Benjaminian account of religion and writing is brief, speculative, and generalizing, it is contestable in all sorts of ways. One of the more significant (and more problematic) suggestions here is that modern religion becomes synonymous with the sovereignty of language. Later Pecora will make clear that language in modernity takes up a divine position: "it is language that all along has been speaking the truth about itself, which is that it has been speaking through [people], quite apart from their awareness of one another's ideas, instead of being spoken by them." Here Pecora is very close to Giorgio Agamben's claim in *The Sacrament of Language* (Stanford, 2011) that "Christianity is, in the proper sense of the term, a religion and a divinization of the *Logos*" (66). For this reason, Agamben says that philosophy, which he identifies closely with his own project of deconstructive philology, "must necessarily put itself forward as *vera religio*" (66). Pecora relies on Agamben from time to time in his book, and while he makes no such messianic claims of his own for deconstructive criticism, his account of modern religion as the worship of language could be seen to presuppose and underwrite such a move. The major problem with such a project is that it places a burden on critical work that no scholarship (Christian, deconstructive, or otherwise) can bear.

While the religious feature of the modern novel is rooted in Pecora's idea of the vestige of the sacred in the function of language as such, he demonstrates his argument thematically through "the lively reemergence within the novel of certain, supposedly forgotten, religious discourses that become legible by means of—indeed, I will claim because of—the secular trajectory of the prose that is its vehicle." Pecora picks Beckett, Mann, and Coetzee because they have sought to create fictional worlds dominated by a "Godless Calvinism," to which they were drawn by a sense that puritanism itself was already "god forsaken" in its articulation of doctrines like double-election and in its deep skepticism on the possibility of human free will. Pecora explores the well-known reliance of Beckett on 17th-century Flemish Calvinist Arnold Geulinx, and he finds proto-Calvinist Augustinian themes in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, but he devotes the most time and energy to Coetzee, whom his chapter title calls an "Ambivalent Puritan." Coetzee is puritan, in an admittedly loose sense, for Pecora because his project of rewriting the postcolonial novel as "a deeply religious genre without (or without much) religion" is focused on articulating the endless shame without redemption that belongs to the "scion of the guilty colonizer." Again, there is room to argue with Pecora's account of Calvinism, which seems to bracket entirely the central question of grace, but he makes clear throughout that he is purposefully pressing the ideas to their most extreme consequences—he is taking Coetzee as the unavoidable outworking of Calvin's doctrines.

Pecora's suggestive reading of Coetzee's corpus is worth the price of the book even for those who may balk at some of his more speculative claims about the novel and religion. That religion is absolutely central to Coetzee's novels, and that the religious engagement of his fiction is fruitfully ambiguous, has been clear to his readers from the beginning. Pecora may have set the critical terrain on this question

for years to come by arguing that we should focus our understanding of the religious language in Coetzee's novels primarily on the role of shame. For Coetzee's characters, the secular condition is defined by an overpowering, inherited sense of shame (analogous to original sin) from which there is no hope of redemption. Pecora explains this in two ways—first, it is sourced in the Dutch Calvinist heritage toward which, as the child of progressive Afrikaner parents, Coetzee developed an ambiguous relationship; second, it represents Coetzee's attempt to come to grips with his identity as a member of the oppressive ruling class that oversaw one of the 20th century's great atrocities, apartheid. This Calvinist, critical whiteness, and the shame it entails, explains why Coetzee's novels offer, over and over again, parables of atrocity that explore a variety of subject positions within stories that seem familiar but just outside of historicity. Coetzee most often fictionalizes the position of the oppressor, from the Vietnam-era psychological operations specialist of his first novel *Dusklands* (1974) to the white South African sexual predator of his most famous novel *Disgrace* (1999). And while the position of the oppressed is not neglected, the representation of the voice of the victim is deeply problematized, and sometimes made impossible, throughout his work—the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982), Michael K. in *Life and Times* (1983), Friday in *Foe* (1986), even the frogs in “At the Gate” from *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

Here is where Pecora's analysis of Coetzee's art connects to his larger claims about religion and the novel. The power of Coetzee's fiction lies in the “lightning flash” of insight it offers into an older religious view, a power that is equally reliant on the secularized, semantic form of novel writing and its mimetic connection to a distantly remembered religious past. Pecora claims that, in Coetzee's case, the result has been “a career of novels” that amounts to “a spiritual autobiography of the first rank” with the 2005 bicycle-accident novel *Slow Man* serving as a Pauline conversion story. Reading Coetzee's fiction within this (almost Girardian) trajectory doesn't change the fact that redemption is consistently resisted in the novels, but Pecora's suggestion helpfully clarifies Coetzee's work as a series of portraits of a certain kind of secular, or secularized, condition—one that never entirely abandons religious language in exploring its dark contours. Pecora calls them “allegories of our predicament,” a predicament (caught between religion and the secular) that, according to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007), marks the experience of the religious and the secular alike in our modern social imaginary.

In his conclusion, Pecora offers several arguments about the ethical potential of what he calls the “afterlife” of the novel preeminently on display in Coetzee's fiction. Following Adorno, he entertains the idea that the novel intends to offer a redemptive alternative to the bad social totality of modernity, with its state-sponsored holocausts and genocides and legal regimes of racism and biopolitics. A strictly secular realism cannot respond to these traumas, Pecora argues. By offering other imaginative possibilities, the novel potentially engages with past religious visions as well, a movement Pecora connects with the ubiquity of the

allegorical in Coetzee's work. The widespread discomfort among Coetzee's critics with his allegorical, and suggestively spiritual, style signals for Pecora their embrace of the position of the bourgeois individual. In light of this, Pecora argues for the surprising political ability of allegory to enact a "conflict of authorities" and produce a "defamiliarization of everyday life." In this way, the novel's position—with one foot in religion and one in the secular—preserves the possibility of levelling a powerful critique of the worst aspects of the secular modern state. But the novel also bears unique potential to guide faith away from errant, accommodationist versions of itself. In other words, the perverse resistance toward redemption is necessary in an age in which "belief has become nothing less than the 'hardened certainty' that destroys belief most certainly."

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Mary Frances Coady, ***Merton and Waugh: A Monk, a Crusty Old Man and The Seven Storey Mountain***. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-61261-628-5. Pp. 155. \$22.00 (hbk).

For close to four years at the midpoint of the 20th century, the lives of two of the most significant English-speaking Roman Catholic converts and literary figures of that century converged through letters, editorial labors, and a brief personal meeting. In *Merton and Waugh: A Monk, a Crusty Old Man and The Seven Storey Mountain*, Mary Frances Coady provides an engaging account, incorporating the 20 pieces of extant correspondence, of the friendship between the Cistercian monk (1915–1968) whose 1948 autobiography, with a crucial assist from Waugh, became an unexpected best seller, and the British novelist (1903–1966), at the height of his own fame after publishing his postwar best seller *Brideshead Revisited* three years earlier.

The relationship is set in the context of Waugh's ambivalent attitude, at once fascinated and appalled, toward America, sparked by an initial visit to the USA in early 1947 to negotiate a movie deal for *Brideshead*, the only result of which was a mordant article on American funeral practices for *Life* magazine that would subsequently metamorphose into the short satirical novel *The Loved One* (1948). But when he received a manuscript in mid-1948 from editor Robert Giroux of the autobiography of a young cosmopolitan whose religious conversion led him into a Trappist monastery, he not only provided an enthusiastic endorsement that was printed on the front cover of the book's dust jacket but also was prompted to propose to *Life*'s editor Henry Luce an article on American Catholicism that brought him back to America for a "research" trip in late 1948. This tour of Catholic sites included a visit to Merton's Kentucky monastery for a brief meeting that remained vividly memorable to Merton two decades later, after Waugh's death