



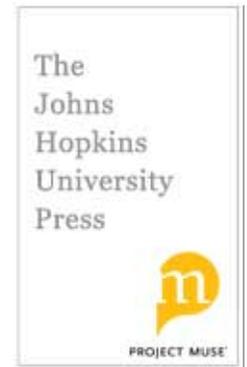
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Merton and Waugh: A Monk, a Crusty Old Man and The Seven Storey Mountain. Brewster by Mary Frances Coady (review)

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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."

Wilson Brissett

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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

in April 1966 and shortly before his own unexpected death in Thailand in December 1968.

In her seven chapters Coady details the successive phases of the relationship between the two men, interspersing at the appropriate points in the chronological narrative the surviving correspondence, 13 letters from Merton and (in somewhat abridged form) seven from Waugh, comprising about a third of the total text. Thus the book takes its place both with the growing number of volumes providing both sides of correspondence between Merton and a variety of religious and literary figures (Edward Deming Andrews, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Jonathan Greene, Victor and Carolyn Hammer, James Laughlin, Robert Lax, Jean Leclercq, Czeslaw Milosz, Boris Pasternak, Rosemary Radford Ruether, D. T. Suzuki), and with a narrative like the late Robert Nugent's *Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship* (2012), another account of a primarily epistolary relationship that began around the same time as Merton's initial contact with Waugh but lasted much longer, until Merton's death. Lentfoehr, a nun and poet who became Merton's unofficial secretary and archivist, also met Waugh, on his third American journey in 1949, and is credited by Coady with preserving Waugh's letters to Merton (9)—though in fact it appears that Merton only gave them to her in 1966 for an exhibition of his work at Marquette University (see Merton, *The Road to Joy*, 255).

In her introduction, largely focused on the process leading to the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the author points out the remarkable parallels between the early lives of her two subjects that made Waugh particularly receptive to Merton's story: "early precociousness, desire to become a visual artist, a dissolute youth spent at one of England's great universities, serious emotional setbacks in early adult relationships, a drift toward a literary career, and finally, conversion to Catholicism" (15). She quotes the passage excerpted from Waugh's letter to Giroux that appeared on the book's cover: "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" (14). But she goes on to note Waugh's criticism of the younger author's "verbose and diffuse" style (16) that also appeared in the letter (which has apparently been lost), leading both to Merton's writing Waugh with a request for literary advice, and to Waugh's being commissioned by Merton's British publisher to edit the English edition of the autobiography, from which he excised about 20% of the text and to which he gave a new title, *Elected Silence*, drawn from a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, to replace Merton's own allusive reference to Dante's *Purgatorio*.

The first three chapters of *Merton and Waugh* detail the busy six months of initial contacts between the two writers, from July 1948 through the end of the year. After providing some brief background on Waugh's own embrace of Catholicism in 1930 and his literary success before and after this key turning point in his life and career, Coady concludes chapter 1 with Merton's August 12, 1948 letter to Waugh, initiating the correspondence. The second chapter is largely taken up with the exchange of letters, mainly on stylistic matters, over the next month—two from Merton, one

from Waugh, with another one, apparently looking for some spiritual direction, missing. Chapter 3 is devoted to Waugh's visit to Merton's Abbey of Gethsemani on November 27–28, 1948, when the two men seemed to have surprised one another by their respective appearance—Merton younger and more casual than expected, but “humble and unspoiled by his newfound worldly success,” Waugh shorter and less “dashing” (56). But the two seemed to have hit it off well in their hour-long visit, appreciating “each other's inherent iconoclasm and sense of irony” and finding an “easy rapport” (58).

Chapter 4 focuses on Waugh's editorial work on *Elected Silence*, providing examples of his excision of what Waugh considered stylistic infelicities, of passages of “excessive self-castigation” (66) and “swathes of unnecessary piety” (68) as well as of details he judged irrelevant for a British audience (the only motive explicitly given in his editorial note). Coady makes no mention of the occasional references in the autobiography to Waugh himself as a favorite author of the young Merton, most notably in his appreciative comment on “my greatest Jesuit hero: the glorious Father Rothschild of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, who plotted with all the diplomats, and rode away into the night on a motorcycle when everybody else was exhausted” (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 212). (Much later, after being erroneously referred to as “Thomas Merton, SJ” in a 1962 festschrift for the Argentinean woman of letters Victoria Ocampo, who had published work by both Waugh and Merton in her literary magazine *Sur*, Merton would remark in his journal, “Ever closer to the Rothschild ideal!” [*Turning toward the World*, 271]). It would be interesting to learn if his own appearances in the book survived Waugh's ruthless editorial pencil.

Chapter 5, the longest, details Waugh's six-week lecture tour of American Catholic colleges in early 1949, but is made up principally of correspondence, seven letters between May and October 1949, four from Merton and three from Waugh (again with at least one no longer extant). Merton's are largely “newsy” but include expressions of gratitude for Waugh's work on the autobiography and appreciative comments on his *Life* article on American Catholicism, including his visit to Gethsemani, that was read in the monastery refectory; Merton also sent along new books, among them *The Waters of Siloe*, a history of the Cistercian order that Merton dedicated to Waugh, and that the latter would also edit for British publication. Waugh characteristically mixes expressions of gratitude and critique in his letters detailing his response to a reading of *Seeds of Contemplation* as well as of *Siloe*.

The brief chapter 6 discusses Waugh's editorial efforts on the latter volume, which he found “rather inferior” (108) to Merton's earlier work, and which according to Coady left him “in despair over the task” of revision (111), so that eventually his “discouragement and boredom” resulted in much more sporadic editing in the latter part of the book, “nearly half the total number of pages” (113). Though Coady mentions in passing that Waugh “rearranged two chapters so that the history of the monks, from twelfth-century France to twentieth-century America, flowed chronologically” (112), in fact this revision constituted a major structural alteration, much

more radical than anything in *Elected Silence*. *The Waters of Siloe* consists of two distinct parts, a survey of the history of the Cistercian Order from its founding in 1198 through the mid-20th century, with particular focus on American monasteries, followed by a considerably shorter section examining the central characteristics of Cistercian life, especially during its golden age in the 12th century. The two parts were structurally independent but together emphasized the essentially contemplative character of Cistercian life, largely lost for much of the order's history but in Merton's optimistic view being recovered in the renewal of monastic ideals in the present era. It is the bulk of the material from this second section that Waugh relocated much earlier in the English edition (renamed *The Waters of Silence*), a new arrangement that is arguably superior in structure to the rather awkward juxtaposition of the two unequal sections of the original volume, but one that results as well in a de-emphasis of the theme of recovery of essential contemplative identity through a return to the classic sources of Cistercian spirituality, gradually displacing the emphasis on penitential practices characteristic of the 17th-century Trappist reform that had dominated the Order's life for the previous 200 years.

The last chapter takes the story from August 1950 through February 1952, relying largely on the final seven letters, three from Waugh (one a brief note card) and four from Merton, generally rather chatty, though in one he wonders if he had somehow offended Waugh in an earlier letter. (Waugh assures him he hadn't, suggesting his "general bad temper" may have "crept into" the correspondence (123), though there is nothing in the surviving letters that indicates a reason either for Merton's unease or for Waugh's proposed explanation.) Waugh continues to proffer stylistic critiques (e.g. the lack of consistent audience in Merton's 1951 *The Ascent to Truth*), but his role as mentor has clearly diminished. There is no indication in Merton's final letter of February 25, 1952, that the contact between the two men was now at an end. There was certainly no overt breaking off of the relationship. Coady suggests it was simply that Merton had become more confident about his own writing as well as busier with his new duties as master of scholastics at the abbey, responsible for the spiritual and intellectual formation of the newly professed monks.

As Coady notes in her epilogue, the two men did differ greatly in their subsequent responses to the direction taken by Roman Catholicism leading up to and issuing from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), with Waugh bemoaning what he saw as the loss of coherence and stability, and Merton emerging as one of the most challenging progressive voices for deeper involvement of the Church in the crucial issues facing the contemporary world. She quotes Merton's response in August 1964 to a letter published in the lay-edited Catholic journal *Commonweal* (to which Merton was a frequent contributor) from "a crusty old man called Evelyn Waugh," vehemently disagreeing with an article criticizing Catholic conservatism. Merton comments wryly, "he is one of the genuine conservatives: he wishes to conserve not what might be lost but what is not even threatened because it vanished long ago" (142). The book concludes by noting the circumstances of the two men's deaths—Waugh dying on Easter Sunday of 1966 after attending a

Tridentine Latin Mass, Merton at a monastic conference in Thailand, 27 years to the day after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941, while on his first extended trip away from the monastery, a pilgrimage to Asia to imbibe the wisdom of “the spiritual waters of the East” (145). Yet despite these differences, as Coady rightly notes, the lives and writings of the two men bear witness to their common “search for the absolute” (145).

Merton and Waugh is issued by Paraclete Press, an estimable small publisher, sponsored by an ecumenical monastic community, of numerous volumes on Christian spirituality and much fine religious poetry. But this book is rather oddly “packaged.” The front flap of the dust cover consists not in a description of the book but in three endorsements. The text proper begins with an “Editor’s Note,” the editor in question turning out to be Coady herself, never referred to by that title elsewhere in the book; the “Note” is indeed concerned exclusively with editorial matters regarding the correspondence, principally the fact that Merton’s letters are reprinted from *The Courage for Truth*, the fourth of the five volumes of his selected letters, and that the Waugh estate would permit no more than two-thirds of any letter of his to be included, so that the correspondence is not really complete, though the abridgements seem to have retained the essential tone and content of each of these letters. But there is no other prefatory material explaining the overall approach of the volume, so readers are left to discover the mixture of narrative and primary source materials on their own. The subtitle is also somewhat misleading, as the book covers much more than *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and Waugh was not yet Merton’s “crusty old man” during the period of their direct contact. Conversely, the photo of Merton on the back cover, merged with that of Waugh at an indeterminate age, is clearly from his later years, well over a decade after his correspondence with Waugh had ended.

The book could also have used a sharper editorial eye to catch the errata that almost inevitably find their way into a manuscript. For example, Waugh’s response to Merton’s letter of August 12, 1948, is dated August 13 (36), clearly impossible and presumably a mistake for August 23; Clare Boothe Luce consistently loses the final letter of her maiden name (14, 27, 99), while Dom Frederic Dunne, Merton’s first abbot, inconsistently gains a “k” (16 and 105, but not 148 n. 19); St. Lutgarde of Aywieres is anachronistically called a Trappistine (18) (i.e. a product of the 17th-century reform, more than 400 years after her death), while the genuine Trappistine Mother Berchmans, one of the two French nuns sent to assist in the foundation of a Cistercian women’s community in Japan, was not “the foundress” of that community (18); *Disputed Questions*, which Coady rightly cites as “beginning a new phase” in Merton’s writing life, was published in 1960, not 1953 (138); his Cuban poem is “Song for Our Lady of Cobre”—not “Our Lady of Cobra” (!) (70).

Coady does not cite Merton’s comment in *The Sign of Jonas* (126) that Waugh “thought that it would be a good idea for me simply to put books aside and write serious letters, and to make an art of it,” a suggestion more appropriate for the urbane English Benedictines Waugh was familiar with at Downside Abbey than for the much more restrictive Trappists, who at the time, as Merton notes, were

generally allowed to write only eight letters a year, at four designated times, half of which were to be to the monk's family. Nevertheless, Merton eventually became a prolific correspondent, with well over 4,000 letters to hundreds of different people, famous and obscure, of various religious beliefs or no religion at all. Though not without a few lacunae and a scattering of minor inaccuracies, *Merton and Waugh* is in the main a balanced, judicious, and insightful account and transcription of one of his earliest important epistolary friendships. It is a welcome addition to the expanding series of volumes that provide access to this significant dimension of his life and work.

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B. W. Powe. ***Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye: Apocalypse and Alchemy***. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-4426-1616-5. Pp. xii + 354. \$32.95.

In *Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye: Apocalypse and Alchemy*, readers will discover a work that feels as though it simply had to be. There is a sense of the inevitable in this study that links the extraordinary careers of its two subjects. As a student of both celebrated luminaries at the University of Toronto during the 1970s, B. W. Powe is right for the authorship of such a book. His interest in the two—initially dazzled by McLuhan, then later awed by Frye—has matured over the decades as he has become a formidable scholar of their works. Thus, Powe is an interpreter who can help readers come to terms with both the personal rivalry that marked the parallel careers of McLuhan and Frye and the revolutionary ideas that pervade their writings.

Another reason to take up Powe's work is for its secondary purpose: his elucidation of the distinct character of Canadian scholarship. McLuhan and Frye understandably take center stage in such an effort, and the general concern for a national intellectual identity becomes particularized in the careful reading of each innovator's life and thought. Hence, although Powe never identifies himself as a *Canadianist*—the term appears one time in this book—a Canadianist he is. (See, for example, his earlier works, including his 2006 book *Towards a Canada of Light*.) The scope of Powe's thesis regarding a "Canadian difference" leads to overgeneralizations at times, but these are almost always venial lapses, forgivable in light of his larger concern to advance the book's thought-provoking subtext—namely, that a nation's polity, history, and even geography could influence the scholarship emerging from its academies.

Powe sees in Canadian thought an alternative to the American variety that dominates in the western hemisphere, often effectively driving out other possibilities. Moreover, as a Commonwealth nation, Canada's intellectual contributions can also temper those strains of thought dominant across the Atlantic and around