

Exploring Merton's Mountain

Review of

Thomas Merton – The Secret of The Seven Storey Mountain: The Author and Prophet

By Vera Obbágy

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Reviewed by **Robert Peach**

A published version of her thesis from studies in English at Finland's University of Helsinki, Vera Obbágy's exploration of Merton's seminal autobiography does well to synthesize previously explored territory regarding the literary and spiritual import of *The Seven Storey Mountain* for the contemporary reader. She does so, however, without really breaking any new ground in Merton scholarship, treating the topic in broad summary detail.

Structured in three main segments between introductory and concluding remarks, the essay offers an overview of the life and literary activity of the Trappist monk, undertakes a literary analysis of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and provides a basic summary of the essay itself. While Obbágy's investigation proffers an intriguing glimpse into the genres by which *Seven Storey Mountain* has been classified – particularly the problematic category of “autobiographical novel” – as well as the cultural context in which it was written, its literary influences, its critical reception and its place not only within Merton's corpus itself but in the Western literary canon as a whole, she leaves herself little room to expound upon some compelling questions raised within the brief confines of two pages at the end of her thesis.

The first of these questions revolves around Merton's decision to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani as recounted in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What appears to many readers as a sincere desire for serving God in monastic contemplation, Obbágy sees as a kind of pious cloak veiling Merton's “rebellion against everything, which he defines as the demonic elements of modern culture” (46). Obbágy writes that his motivation for joining the Trappists as told in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is not convincing enough. Why? Unfortunately, that question is left unanswered. What could have been a provocative framework for investigation into the psychic world of Merton as monk and writer – which would better suit the title of her book – is passed over all too quickly, segueing into an equally underdeveloped critique of Merton's seemingly negligent treatment of the horrors and dangers of communism in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Upset that Merton did not “refuse the ideology of communism expressly” (46), Obbágy goes no further to develop her critique of what she sees as shortsightedness on Merton's part regarding the “danger of Marxism and communism, which threatened the whole world” (47). The reader is left without any developed consideration as to what

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those dangers were and how Merton actually treated the subject of communism in his autobiography. Such would have been a topic better suited for an altogether different project. Furthermore, Obbágy considers all too briefly the implications of Merton's monastic mysticism, as revealed throughout *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for social action in what Merton would call the post-Christian era.

Thus while Obbágy offers an interesting look into what shaped a modern spiritual classic that ultimately defies strict classification, she falls short of captivating her audience with anything that hasn't already been discovered in scholarship surrounding Merton's autobiography. It would have been far more interesting either to treat in detail the critical questions she asks towards the end of her thesis or to delve further into what still has yet to be uncovered in research surrounding the original manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Obbágy paints an analysis of Merton's text in broad sweeps that, though accurate, brush over the finer nuances of the autobiography and what it means for us today in an age of technological warfare, economic exploitation, and religious disillusionment not unlike that of Merton's post-World-War-II world.