

specified the legal ramifications of breaking their contract. As Samway puts it in his introduction, “Had Merton received Giroux’s important letter of March 28, 1962, which for some unexplained reason never arrived in his mailbox, [Merton] would never have continued his relationship with Macmillan” (17). The letters suggest that this episode put a deepening strain on their professional relationship.

Beyond the correspondence on publication contracts, deadlines and page proofs, the letters often reveal their thoughts about their contemporary situation, and the men and women – writers, artists, politicians – that they both admired. One comes across some wonderful exchanges when Merton is alive to what is going on around him outside his monastery. Merton tells Giroux about his epistolary interchange with the Russian writer Boris Pasternak (222), and the monk’s personal sadness at his death (247, 249). We read later about the Second Vatican Council as he and Giroux discuss their fascination with the pseudonymous writer, Xavier Rynne, and his “Letter from Vatican City,” the ongoing insider’s commentary serially published in *The New Yorker* magazine about the debates happening at the Council (291). And most of all, at least for this reviewer, we learn of Merton’s admiration for his fellow Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor (332, 341, 360), who was, of course, also published by Giroux. Merton claimed that “Judgment Day,” her greatest – and final – story before her death was “the best thing she ever wrote and one of the best stories anybody ever wrote” (342). The volume, as a whole, is an important contribution to Merton studies, and sheds light on the significance that publishers such as Giroux had on nurturing some of the great lights of twentieth-century Catholic intellectual life in America. Fr. Samway is to be commended for making this history available to us.

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GRAYSTON, Donald, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence*, Foreword by Douglas E. Christie (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), pp. xxi + 297. ISBN: 978-1498209373 (paper) \$37.00.

To say that Thomas Merton corresponded with a lot of people is to understate the fact. The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY, the largest and most important repository of Merton’s work, holds in its collection more than fifteen thousand pieces of his correspondence to over two thousand people. A fair amount of the best-known letters, at least from Merton’s side of the discussion, was published under the editorial direction of William Shannon, Robert Daggy, Patrick Hart

and Christine Bochen in the 1980s – a project that resulted in five large volumes of essential primary-source material. And yet, as the staggering count of extent letters in the Thomas Merton Center alone attests, there exist more unpublished letters than those currently accessible to the general public. With this in mind, Donald Grayston’s book offers a notable contribution from the outset: at least a few more of the many thousands of unpublished letters have now been made available to a wider audience.

However, that Grayston has contributed to the accessibility of Merton’s correspondence is not the only accomplishment of *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*. In his Foreword to this volume, Douglas Christie offers a sometimes hyperbolic description of the events conveyed in this correspondence as so intriguing that they might merit descriptors like “potboiler” or “caper” (xi). While even Christie admits that this may be an overstatement, what he is nevertheless gesturing toward is the truth that this period of Merton’s life (the mid-1950s) is one that often does not receive the attention it deserves and that it is far more interesting than most people realize. Although these letters fall short of the spy thriller bound for a Hollywood screenplay, they convey insight into an under-examined time of Merton’s life between the initial fervor and zealotry of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the “turn to the world” expressed in his later works on social justice, violence, civil rights and interreligious dialogue. And they merit a wide readership.

In a nutshell, Merton – like St. Augustine, to whom he is not infrequently compared – struggled at points in his life with a restless heart and uncertainty about which direction it was leading him. Merton came to some early awareness that he longed to be closer to God, in whom his heart might finally rest, but still wrestled with which way of life or vocation might best accomplish that goal. In the late 1930s it was with the Franciscan order; in the early 1940s it was between Catherine de Hueck’s Friendship House or the Trappist Order; in the mid-1950s it was from among several cenobitic and eremitical options; and for a very short period of time in the mid-1960s, it was even between the married life and consecrated religious life. Grayston’s book focuses on Merton’s exploration of and discernment about which religious community God was calling him to in the 1950s.

With a metaphor that reads as part armchair psychology and part spiritual direction, Grayston posits that Merton was struggling with *acedia*, a kind of spiritual listlessness, boredom, dissatisfaction, or, we might say, *restlessness*. After an insightful and contextualizing introduction in which Grayston notes how he happened upon part of this previously unpublished correspondence while visiting the Italian

community of Camaldoli in 2008, he shifts gears in chapter one to develop his operative metaphor of *acedia*, from which we get the patristic notion of the “noonday demon” that appears in the book’s title. At first, the metaphor seems inapt, not the least because of its sometimes modern usage as an analogue for what we would otherwise call clinical depression. However, in the spirit of *ressourcement*, Grayston returns to the fourth-century spiritual writer and ascetic Evagrius Ponticus to provide helpful exegesis. In light of the patristic description of *acedia* as that temptation which, over time, occasions disdain for a particular place (e.g. a monastery such as Gethsemani) or community (e.g. the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance), Grayston’s reliance on the concept to frame the correspondence more or less fits.

Unlike the perceptive introduction and first chapter, chapter two, Grayston’s attempt at offering a summary of Merton’s life and work, reads as idiosyncratic and incomplete. Granted, this reviewer acknowledges the difficulties that face any Merton scholar who embarks on condensing into a single chapter the life and times of such a complex person with such a complicated history. But the weaknesses of this biographical chapter range from what I might propose are odd emphases (e.g., spending so much time on Merton’s encounter with Gregory Zilboorg) to simple errors in fact (e.g., Grayston’s accounting of Merton’s exploration of a Franciscan vocation, which reflects longstanding misassumptions I addressed at great length in chapter three of my 2014 book *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*¹). Given the likely primary audience for this book – Merton scholars and students of contemporary monasticism – this chapter seems unnecessary. And for those who are interested in exploring the contours of Merton’s life and times there are ample resources elsewhere.

The highlight of the book is undoubtedly the “Camaldoli Correspondence” itself. Nestled between chapters two and three, and weighing in at about one hundred pages, the annotated transcription of the correspondence offers readers precisely what they have come to expect from such a project: new glimpses into Merton’s mind and heart. Grayston provides a helpful introduction to the key characters involved in the correspondence, which sets a firm foundation for the engrossing exchanges that follow. The correspondence delights the historical imagination, calling to mind the major figures – some widely known (Merton; Archbishop Montini, the future Pope Paul VI), others

1. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014) 55-77.

only giants in religious life (Abbot Fox; Dom Giabbani) – engaged in conversation about the current and future state of Merton’s religious vocation, specifically whether he should transfer from Gethsemani to the more eremitical Camaldoli.

While Merton’s letters are certainly fascinating, this reviewer was captivated especially by Abbot James Fox’s May 16, 1955 letter to Archbishop Giovanni Battista Montini of Milan (122-26). It is an enlightening read, which offers a snapshot of the multivalent lens through which Fox saw Merton: part admiration, part concern, part exasperation, and all with affection hidden beneath an outwardly experienced “tough love.” And still, one cannot help but read this letter as motivated in some significant part by the fear of “scandal” that might overcome the Abbey of Gethsemani and the American Church by Merton’s departure to Camaldoli, a concern over which Fox spills much ink. Similarly engaging is Montini’s August 20, 1955 letter to Merton (135-38). Whether arrived at independently or through the urgings of Fox, Montini’s loving, gentle and inspiring recommendation to Merton to stay put is touching and worth the price of the book itself. He concludes his letter with: “it seems to me that your place of sanctification is the one where you now are. There you can have solitude, silence, peace and fervor, and from there you can give to so many souls that which God has given to you: the interior dwelling with him” (138).

The remaining chapters contain Grayston’s close readings of the letters, reconstructions of the chronology surrounding the multilevel discussions, as well as interpretations of major themes present in the correspondence (in particular, *acedia* and “God’s will”) and how these vocational themes reappeared in later years with discernment about the possibility of a Trappist foundation in Latin America. Grayston’s close reading of the letters is insightful and well researched, offering context when evidence allows and considered conjecture when speculation is more appropriate. This volume is required reading for the Merton scholar or committed admirer who wishes to delve deeper into this period of struggle and discernment, and a necessary addition for anyone seeking to fill their Merton library with key resources. But this book is also valuable for those interested in twentieth-century eremitical religious life more generally and the 1958 foundation of the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California more specifically, for the seeds of that religious community are seen being nourished in this same correspondence.

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