

# Book Reviews

## **Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition,**

Jeffery M. Shaw,  
Lutterworth press,  
Cambridge, 2014.

ISBN 9780718893620 (pbk) 193 pages  
£20.00

A hamster roaming the kitchen in his plastic ball, a consumer eyeing the shelves in his local food market and a tablet-user browsing her social media newsfeed - each encounter their respective environments with different degrees of freedom, and perceptions of that freedom. Is the hamster's freedom paradigmatic of the illusion afflicting the human condition in technologized societies? We are unable to perceive that our very thinking is technologized thus our means of escape are limited, if available at all.

Shaw offers a comparative study of how the Catholic hermit Thomas Merton and Protestant sociologist Jacques Ellul analyse the bind in which 20<sup>th</sup> century westerners found themselves. The reader is first offered an account of the life experiences that appear to have influenced these two authors. Ellul's *la technique*, as a rationality of absolute efficiency, is well-known as a significant contribution to the criticism of not merely technologies but the mind-set within which they are designed, distributed and consumed. It is against such a paradigm that both men attempt to articulate their view of freedom and, crucially, how it is constrained or even subsumed.

Shaw continues by exploring the theological influences upon Merton

and Ellul, giving particular attention to Karl Barth. Ecclesiological considerations also come into play, especially as regards the Church's embrace of *la technique* and efficiency. As self-transcendence, indeed transcendence of a false self, features prominently in their writings, Shaw considers their work from a sociological perspective, identifying their views on propaganda, the 'mass man', and the city. Here a common link through Aldous Huxley is articulated. Discussing Merton's and Ellul's political thinking requires Shaw to unpack their respective responses to Karl Marx. Both are set in the context of the Catholic Worker movement of their time. At this point in the book Shaw begins to open out and compare Merton's and Ellul's answers to the dilemma in which they believe humans find themselves. Between two forces, communism and capitalism, - both saturated with *la technique* - both men propose a way of integrity. This becomes clearer as Shaw discusses Ellul on the revealed Word of God and Merton on the written word (here through his literary criticism) by way of a comparison of their poetry. Shaw finds Ellul to finally offer more of an autopsy than a remedy for the human condition - in keeping, believes Shaw, with Ellul's Reformed Protestant tradition. Almost, but not quite, in contrast, Merton's Catholic framework leaves scope for human action to hold the potential to transcend, although not break, the bonds of *la technique*. It is, claims Shaw, their common view however that it is God who imparts such a gift of freedom.

Shaw is clear on his first page that he is not setting out to evaluate the contributions of Merton and Ellul with respect to technology and the human condition, but rather to offer a comparative study. This restriction makes for a manageable project but others might well share this reader's frustration, especially at the absence of a developed evaluation of the two men's analyses. Mention is made of their shared context, albeit on different fronts, of the Cold War - Ellul in France and Merton in the USA. Much more could have been made of this backdrop, of which the Vietnam War was but one facet. Deeper analysis of how this terrifying horizon not only shaped but *interrogated* their respective writings would have been welcome.

The text is not easy to read because the division into theological, sociological, political and literary perspectives - as sensible an option as it is - results in a narrative that does not unfold chronologically. Repeatedly turning back on itself makes it very difficult to get a sense of the development of Merton's and Ellul's views in the round. The reader will be rewarded, but the effort required to keep track of the story is considerable.

This is a book that will prove valuable to those seeking to develop a theological ethics of technology. It presents two significant voices who

wrestled with what they could see in their time. To what extent did they succeed in transcending the (false) self as people themselves shaped by *la technique* and its pervasive rationality mediated in, and reinforced, by the rapid and extensive technologies of the Cold War era? If they did succeed to a sufficient degree, to see what was happening, then perhaps the 'illusion of freedom' is rather more of an illusion itself. Such a conclusion would give us cause for a cautious hope that, with great effort, we in our digital age might do likewise.

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### **Merton & Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man & *The Seven Storey Mountain***

Edited by Mary Frances Coady

Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 2015.

ISBN 978-1-61261-628-5 (hbk) 155 pages

\$22

This is a delightful little book, beautifully produced, containing such letters as survive from the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Evelyn Waugh between the years 1948 and 1952. There are thirteen letters from Merton and seven from Waugh, although unfortunately the Waugh Estate has only permitted two-thirds of the letters from Waugh to be printed. The editor, Mary Frances Coady, provides a very readable, lively running commentary, as well as an amusing account of Waugh's American lecture tour of 1949. She also offers some annotation, though she is not always as helpful as she might be: she calls Ronald Knox's book *Enthusiasm* 'a history of Christian religious movements', but fails to make clear the specific nature of these movements; again, a note is surely needed to explain the significance of Merton's remark that 'the Jesuits will not be too angry with anything I say about contemplation if I drub the quietists for a few pages in every book.'

In 1948 Waugh was sent the proofs of the autobiography by an unknown American Trappist monk by the New York publishing company Harcourt Brace, with a request for a 'puff' for the book. The publisher more than doubled the print run on receiving Waugh's enthusiastic praise of *The Seven Storey Mountain* – 'This book may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience.' Although the original manuscript had already been cut by almost half, including the