

Dearest Sister Wendy... A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship, Sister Wendy Beckett and Robert Ellsberg (Orbis)
A Friendship in Twilight. Lockdown Conversations on Death and Life, Jack Miles & Mark C. Taylor (Columbia University Press)

In the 1990s Sister Wendy Beckett, a contemplative nun, became the unlikely presenter of a series of BBC television programmes on the visual arts and author of a number of art books. She was often the subject of – sometimes warm-hearted, sometimes not – parody and ridicule, especially after one particular TV moment which saw her fondling the testicles of a life-size statue of a bull. These parodies and homages included the anarchic Sister Windy Bucket, the cross-dressing Sister Beatrice, and *Postcards from God*, a musical.

Her Sunday School demeanour and somewhat simplistic religious take on art did not endear her to everyone, but in person she was very different. At 1990's *The Journey* art exhibition and conference in Lincoln, she was a charismatic speaker and a sociable and engaged delegate who charmed everyone present. In a couple of brief notes she sent to me soon afterwards, she enthused about everything from the food (which was mediocre at best!) to the other speakers and ensuing talks and discussions, as well as the exhibited work itself.

The Journey was organised by artist Garry Fabian Miller, and a couple of years later Stride published *Honesty*, a book of his photographic plant images accompanied by five Sister Wendy texts. The book was launched in a London gallery and Sister Wendy turned out for the event and set to signing limited edition copies. She sat with my mother behind the sales table, joking and chatting with her and our book buyers, whilst consuming a surprising amount of white wine. That was the last time I met her in person, but once again I received a few short letters afterwards, enthusiastic and uplifting, one accompanied by a short pamphlet she had previously written about prayer.

Robert Ellsberg got to know Sister Wendy much later on. They wrote to each other from 2016 until her death in 2018, and *Dearest Sister Wendy...* is a book extracted from a much larger correspondence. Ellsberg does, or did, his best to coax Sister Wendy into an in-depth conversation, opening up himself to her before she takes the bait and enters into true dialogue.

I say true dialogue, but actually much of what both sides write is religious platitudes: breathless thank you for each others' letters, 'being touched' by, 'rejoicing in', supporting each others' sufferings, and the sharing of dreams (always a bad sign in my opinion). There is little depth or actual questioning or debate going on here; Sister Wendy appears almost zen-like in her self-abnegation, and everything that happens is simply God's will and that is pretty much the end of it, her response is not needed. The most interesting part of the book for me is the slow change of Sister Wendy's attitude to the rebellious writer and monk Thomas Merton, whom she initially criticises for not following his monastic order's rules, but gradually warms to, mostly as the result of Ellsberg's gently persuasive arguments and observations.

Maybe it's just me, but Sister Wendy's acceptance and inability to discuss things except in terms of her untroubled Christian belief, makes for alien and uncomfortable reading. I long

for some doubt, some questioning, some discussion of art in terms of colour, form, weight, pattern, creativity, not as an enabler of some simplistic mini-sermon related to a picture's 'content'. Ellsberg is the editor-in-chief of Orbis books, and in some ways this publication feels like an indulgence, a view supported by his constant mentions of books he has published or will be publishing soon, and the autobiographical stories he weaves in to his published letters. I prefer to remember Sister Wendy's crooked smile, wine glass in hand, as she chatted amiably to the people around her in Lincoln and London; Ellsberg's depiction of a saintly, retiring and somewhat pious and dull correspondent does her a disservice.

Mark C. Taylor is in many ways the opposite of Sister Wendy. He is, according to *Wikipedia*, 'a postmodern religious and cultural critic. He has published more than twenty books on theology, metaphysics, art and architecture, media, technology, economics, and postmodernity.' That means he comes at these things mostly as a philosopher, his theology informed by and dependent upon language and thought and art, more Wittgenstein than study of religious texts. That *Wiki* description doesn't really do him justice: his books include studies of tattooing and piercing, specific conceptual and avant-garde artists, landscape design, the notion of silence, human perception of time, network cultures, pedagogy and the nature of universities, and *Imagologies* was one of the first books of media philosophy, written collaboratively about the then-developing internet and digital technologies. This man clearly thinks and thinks clearly about everything.

Since 2004's *Grave Matters* there have been a number of publications dealing with death, including *Field Notes from Elsewhere: Reflections on Dying and Living* (2009), *Last Works: Lessons in Leaving* (2018) and *Abiding Grace: Time, Modernity and Death* (also 2018). Like much of his work these are difficult books which deconstruct and process ideas, often using the theories of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Hegel and Derrida (who Taylor knew). *A Friendship in Twilight* is perhaps part of this series of books, but it is also something different.

The back cover blurb suggests the book is Miles and Taylor's 'plague journal', a series of 'raw and searching letters', which reflect on (American) politics, the pandemic, catastrophe, literature, art, life and death. I'm not sure I'd call the writing raw, but it is intelligent and questioning, and the dialogue is intriguing, with Miles, a professor of religious studies and a former Jesuit, in many ways a more traditional believer than Taylor's philosophical stance allows.

Neither, however, offer platitude or emotion as a way to talk to each other. If anything, the book suffers from the opposite, to the extent I longed for a bit of everyday joshing along with the high-flying references, allusions and debate. In a discussion about the construction of memory and recall of same, Miles tells Taylor that '[y]our intriguing connection of algorithm and olfaction reminds me, too, that in the human brain, the amygdala, controlling olfaction, is close to the memory centre, which is why scent is so powerfully able to evoke memory. Or so it has been argued.' Well, yes, smell is a strong trigger for memories, along with music.

Elsewhere there is serious debate about Trump [remember him?], the spread of covid, and death. 'Eternity and nothingness – two sides of the same coin' says Taylor, before moving his

discussion across the topics of black holes, cosmic webs, finite minds and infinity, ending his letter with a brief description of his garden and 'the harsh winter that lies ahead'. Miles offers a robust reply, noting that Taylor's 'intellectual bias is always away from individual agency and toward large processes, either imponderable in principle or else perceptible by a visionary few.' This, continues Miles, means that 'rather than seeing fascism as the work of fascists, you [Taylor] elaborated a vision of technological determinism yielding political outcomes.' Miles 'own bias' is 'toward personal rather than impersonal agency'.

It's heady stuff, and if at times it is rather elevated and academic, this correspondence clearly offered a lifeline of thoughtful dialogue rooted in long-term friendship which helped offset both the difficulties of life in lockdown, and the awareness that 'It's always a question of time. The clock is ticking-ticking for you, for me, for people lying in hospital beds, and ticking for the planet.' Taylor has been seriously ill in the last few years and it has clearly affected him, along with much that was happening politically, socially and naturally. But Taylor is not simply raging against the dying of the light, he and his friend Jack Miles are still both thinking hard and offering us their opinions, processes, ideas and conclusions to the perplexing questions they feel enabled and challenged to answer.

Rupert Loydell

[1340 words]