Fred Zinnemann’s *The Nun’s Story* and the Pilgrim Soul of Women

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How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face….
(from W. B. Yeats, “When You Are Old”)

Fred Zinnemann’s Hollywood film *The Nun’s Story* premiered in 1959, three years before the Second Vatican Council changed the face of the Catholic Church and American sisters heard a religious call to liberation. Had it been conceived after Vatican II, the success of such a film project would have been seriously in doubt, as would an audience’s capacity to sympathize with the intense spiritual misgivings of the nun herself.¹ The private and muted subject Zinnemann chose—the hidden crisis of faith of an inconsequential Belgian cloistered nun in the 1920s and 30s—seemed remote from the momentous geopolitical events leading up in the post-War period to Vatican II. Yet at the heart of this nun’s tormented story, and the film’s visual love affair with Catholic ritual, lies the presentiment that would ultimately prompt John XXIII to summon the Vatican Council and initiate reform of institutional religion.² This is that the Church preserved a venerable and beautiful way of life, but one increasingly anachronistic and hard for modern women to accept; and the enclosed convent must adapt and “bend,” if it was not, like Sister Luke, to “break.” However, as I intend to show in this psychoanalytic study, *The Nun’s Story* does not derive its credibility solely from the fact that it has proved to be an uncannily prophetic social text about the changing spirit of Western women religious in their encounter with the modern secular world. What continues to make this film so compelling to watch is the convincing way it gets under the skin of the nun and reveals the stifled individual chafing against the habit. Zinnemann’s camera moves from the exterior mystery of Catholic iconography deeper into a psychological drama where the emotional origins of Sister Luke’s religious vocation and the exhausting inner struggle ending in her renunciation of vows are acutely and sensitively observed.³

Outwardly the face that American women religious presented to the
world in 1959 was the face the film’s main character, the Belgian nun Sister Luke, struggles to maintain—one of composure, serenity, resignation, and submission. However, in the privacy of their convents, these women religious were beginning to experience the psychomachia which is vividly portrayed in *The Nun’s Story*. Their soul-searching coincided with increased access to further education in the 1950s. The gathering momentum of the American women’s movement throughout the 1960s would further give rise to nuns’ feminist consciousness of their religious vocation, critique of their subordinate status as women in a hierarchical Church, and reinterpretation of their vows to ordained male authority. Before Vatican II began in 1962, American nuns were generally perceived as Catholic paragons of what Betty Friedan famously called “the feminine mystique” in their conformity to lives of service and self-sacrifice. After the Council ended in 1965, they “became the most rebellious group in the U.S. Church” (Burns 130-35, esp. 131).

The events of *The Nun’s Story* unfold in the Tridentine and Eurocentric Church of the first half of the twentieth century where women did not question their place in institutional Catholicism. Yet the film rightly foresees that a central religio-political issue for nuns in the later twentieth century would involve their right to interpret the vow of obedience—that “obedience without question, without inner murmuring” which comes close to breaking the health and spirit of the film’s conscience-torn heroine, Sister Luke. The debatable nature of this vow would lead nuns to dissent, and even to break, with the Church. In effect, they were experiencing an alternative call to conversion with its shattering breakthrough of a new and uncertain faith into lives that had become regimented by religious habit and rules.

In 1959, however, the nun was still veiled in mystique; and this emanated from the popular perception that she dwelt, like the Virgin Mary, in a state of heightened grace aloof from the doubt and confusion of ordinary mortals. Yet *The Nun’s Story* is the melancholy account of a woman religious in persistent turmoil. Sister Luke, as played by the luminous Audrey Hepburn, dedicates seventeen years of her prime to religious life only to realize in the end that she does not “belong in the convent,” indeed that the harder she tried to keep the vows of “obedience, chastity, and poverty until death” the more she has “failed” to become a perfect nun. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, renunciation of final vows was a grave and unusual undertaking. The nun who abandons the convent was a transgressive subject to project on screen in the then conservative moral climate of America, especially when her film story contained an erotic subtext. With