

THE SENSE OF PLACE: PETER DE VRIES,
J. F. POWERS, AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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THESIS



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ABSTRACT

THE SENSE OF PLACE: PETER DE VRIES,
J. F. POWERS, AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

By

Arnold R. Hoffman

The thesis of this essay is that the fiction of Peter De Vries, J. F. Powers, and Flannery O'Connor is informed by both Christian theology and a comic vision. Importantly, these two informants, often thought to be inimical to each other, are in the works of these three modern American writers inextricably associated. Furthermore, the specifically theological orientation of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor marks them as being at variance with a dominant strain in American fiction: humanistic absurdist literature.

To facilitate the analysis, Chapter I defines the basic premises of Christian theology, both Protestant and Catholic, following primarily the tenets established by Randall Stewart in his American Literature and Christian Doctrine. The chapter also presents a definition of the comic vision, differentiating between superficial, overt laughter and inner joy. The comic vision sees man as an existential being, defined in time and space through his

finitude, but ultimately capable of ironically transcending the concrete by an acceptance of it. The major conformity of Christian theology and the comic vision lies in the fact that each climaxes in the high joy of a vision of home, or spiritual well-being, which Flannery O'Connor calls "the true country" when speaking of the Christian's final sanctuary. The vision comes in a moment of epiphanic knowledge for the reader which is not always shared by the fictional character.

Chapter II analyzes eleven of Peter De Vries' thirteen novels, and proposes that De Vries has worked progressively toward an affirmation of the crucial nature of compassion and the necessity of hope, both within an acceptance of man's concrete limitations, reaching his clearest statement of this dual thesis in The Blood of the Lamb. De Vries' ostensible comedy, his surface funniness, should not be an obstacle to perceiving his ultimate--and, hence, in Tillich's terms, religious--concern.

Chapter III examines the much briefer canon of J. F. Powers, finding the concept of a literal and figurative home as the goal of a spiritual but seldom geographical quest thematic in both the short fiction and his one novel, Morte D'Urban. The spiritual home is glimpsed by the character when he looks beyond solipsistic concern to perceive the imminence of grace.

Chapter IV discusses the fiction of the late Flannery O'Connor, with emphasis upon her ubiquitous theme of man's displacement from his "true country" because of his rejection of grace. The grotesqueness of her characters generally reflects the spiritual deformity of that rejection, and the violence of incidents is paradigmatic of the Good Friday-Easter sequence which brings the individual to an awareness of his fallen state and the fact that he has been redeemed.

Not in any sense religious propagandists, all three writers dramatize the turmoil of existence when man displaces himself by an obtuseness to the manifestations of grace present in the concrete world. The failure in perception is particularly important because all three are Incarnationalists, emphasizing that the individual's redemption to infinite spiritual joy must be worked out within the confines of the limited world.

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By

Arnold R. Hoffman

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DEDICATION

For Sonja

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
I. CHRISTIANITY AND THE COMIC	21
II. PETER DE VRIES: WANDERING CALVINIST	34
III. J. F. POWERS: CLOISTERED CATHOLIC	88
IV. FLANNERY O'CONNOR: "TRUE COUNTRY" CHRISTIAN	144
V. CHRIST AND OTHER DISPLACED PERSONS	217
BIBLIOGRAPHY	234

INTRODUCTION

To every thing there is a season, and a time
to every purpose under the heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that
which is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh . . .

--Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 (KJV)

INTRODUCTION

One of the narrator-protagonists in a recent Peter De Vries novel tells us that the source of laughter is the most intriguing of all the human mysteries. We need not accept his assertion in any dogmatic sense to nevertheless acknowledge that an interest in the roots of the comic is by no means either unusual or trivial. Yet to exercise an analytical curiosity about those roots as they function fundamentally for a portion of contemporary American fiction is to venture onto a path seldom and lightly trod. It seems particularly unfortunate that so little criticism has dealt with recent comic fiction, for I think that several modern authors write from a vision that sees comedy as serious business, even crucially important. In The Mackerel Plaza, De Vries' protagonist quotes anonymously an apothegm of Richard Whately, a nineteenth century Archbishop of Dublin: "Happiness is no laughing matter." To say that comedy is serious business is not to mock the good bishop. Rather, it is to perceive the irony of his statement. And the fiction of these novelists dramatizes the premise that "happiness" is bound up at once with both the highest comedy and a conception of salvation. These writers argue that, ultimately, happiness--or perhaps better, joy, as that

term was given new dignity and intensity of meaning several years ago in C. S. Lewis' autobiography¹--is a matter of laughing in a profound way, betokening a human spirit that has placed itself.

Unfortunately, the location of self, i.e., the understanding of where one really stands in time and space, is rare in both life and literature, primarily because such a knowledge is akin to seeing oneself sub specie aeternitatis. And lacking that god-like perspective generally, man in his restricted vision finds very little in modern life that excites more than a hesitant smile or an ambiguous response from the throat. Indeed, the occasions for rejoicing are with an uncomfortable frequency overshadowed or even completely eclipsed by a fear of one variety or another.

In the last two decades Western man has come to fear, and live daily in the suppressed horror of, several very real perils, perhaps foremost among them a population explosion, racial war, and nuclear proliferation--including the unique holocaust promised by the latter. In William Faulkner's phrase, modern man asks only one question: "When will I be blown up?"² And man's fears are the greater because as an individual he generally feels an utter helplessness, even occasionally despairs, in the face of such unreason. Acknowledging the reality of these tremors, there is no element of surprise in noting that in this era many literary critics have attempted to illuminate what they see

as absurdist and nihilist themes in the contemporary writing which, partly through these themes, bears a clearly demonstrable and vital relationship to this period. This criticism purports to show many of the major--and minor--authors of our time portraying man as displaced, alienated from his total environment, standing in an isolation where traditional metaphysical systems of order are ignored, questioned, or--more often--denied. In more specific terms, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. observes that

Even the most cautious commentators in contemporary criticism are increasingly recognizing that the truly significant particularities that characterize modern literature all speak in various ways of tragic losses, and of losses ultimately rooted in the loss of God.³

In this literature, the protagonist, often a persona of the author, implicitly or explicitly discerns a radical discrepancy between his need and ambition for order and meaning on the one hand, and the experienced chaos of cosmos, society, family, and even self, on the other. For Richard Kostelanetz, the contemporary artist with such a Weltanschauung beholds a "disjunction between values and behavior, intention and effect, belief and reality, so broad and irrefutable that the world is meaningless."⁴ Many other recent critics have articulated their conceptions of this "disjunction," but behind their work, when it does not reach back to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, lies Albert Camus' succinct dictum in The Myth of Sisyphus, written in 1940: that the act of the absurd man is absurd "solely by

virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction . . .

between his true strength and the aim he has in view."⁵

Whatever the precise working, meaning for these students of contemporary man is, in short, harder to come by than it has ever been before. The contend that beneath the glibness of a "now generation" or in spite of being "where it's at," man finds it exceptionally difficult and sometimes impossible to understand himself in time and space. However, in The Absurd Hero in American Fiction, working specifically from the typology of The Myth of Sisyphus, David D. Galloway traces the apprehension of Camus' "disproportion" and the existential response to it through the fiction of Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger, and concludes that the protagonists in these works derive a personal and individual value system from their experiences.⁶

Unsatisfied by conventional metaphysics, particularly the Judaeo-Christian tradition, these intellectuals see man as left to his own resources, and reason that his essence must be defined by his subjective choices during this, his only imaginable existence. This definition of self by purely temporal will and action without allegiance to any superimposed, not to say supernatural, value system, is, of course, humanistic existentialism--or, as Sartre would have it clearly noted, atheistic existentialism. For Sartre, existentialist philosophy can provide alleviation for any

sense of loss such as Scott cites and can reason its own justification: it is "a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity."⁷

Later in the essay containing this essentially credal statement, Sartre elaborates on the existentialist's sense of loss:

The existentialist . . . thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an a priori God, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. . . . Man is condemned to be free. Condemned . . . because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.⁸

If the condition of God's non-existence may be termed a loss, Sartre's acknowledgment of a lack in the existentialist's world clearly relates to Scott's statement on the "particularities" of modern literature. But in the relationship, Scott's use of "tragic" adjectivally with "losses" demands that certain distinctions be made. In Sartre's theorizing there is no sense of tragedy, but rather only an admission of regret because the absence of God merely makes the task of living more difficult. In partial similarity, Scott's "tragic" also appears to be an expression of regret, but for him the regret is occasioned by man's loss in failing to recognize God's Being as a bulwark against despair. These two commentators, as

clearly as any, represent the crucial polar positions on the issue of belief and its corollary, man's place in the cosmos.

However, theological argumentation proper is not the form of the literature of "disjunction," and the question eventually imposes itself as to how the artist conveys his vision of this felt discrepancy. Yet it is perhaps by having a real sense of the effective "death of God" that the formalistic problem in contemporary writing may be approached. Both Sartre, implicitly, and Scott, with a paradoxical vague explicitness, provoke one question or another about the use of tragedy as a mode for dealing with the reality of the times. But the uncertainty and infinite variety of the to-be-defined human essence which the existentialists meet with a subjective affirmation of the individual are not the circumstances for traditional tragedy. Classical and Renaissance tragedy depict the assumed stature of man in relation to something outside or beyond him which is both ultimately recognizable as there and animated in its opposition to certain of man's actions. Tragedy does not pit man against what William Van O'Connor identifies as that against which many contemporary writers have man struggling: "cosmic pointlessness . . . a thick wall . . . emptiness and meaninglessness."⁹ The sublimity of man, to use D. D. Raphael's term,¹⁰ does not emerge from the act of a man beating his head against a wall or even

the case of one adamantly refusing to be so masochistic. As Galloway himself points out, the classic Sisyphus "was forced back to Hades and his hands placed against the rock by his gods." But "no absolute or higher power commands the labors of the modern Sisyphus." Camus revises the myth to emphasize Sisyphus' perpetual labor as "a defiance and negation of gods."¹¹

Nor, for many, is comedy in anything like its traditional form an acceptable means of dealing with reality. Peter De Vries himself has said that "You can't talk about the serious and the comic separately and still be talking about life."¹² O'Connor, taking his lead from Thomas Mann, argues that neither tragedy nor comedy is relevant or operative as a form in contemporary fiction. As his title-- "The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction"--intimates, O'Connor believes the grotesque to be the viable mode. Leslie Fiedler, although quite another kind of critic, substantially corroborates O'Connor's viewpoint on the traditional distinctions:

The vision of man shared by our greatest writers involves an appreciation of his absurdity, and the protagonists of our greatest books are finally neither comic nor tragic but absurd. To the modern writer, the distinction between comedy and tragedy seems as forced and irrelevant as that between hallucination and reality; his world partakes of both, and he would be hard put to it to say where one ends and the other begins. The conventional definitions of the comic and the tragic strike him as simplifications, falsifications of human life, appropriate to a less complex time. To insist that we regard man, even for the space of three acts or five, as either horrible or funny;

to require us, through four or five hundred pages, either to laugh or to cry we find offensive in an age when we can scarcely conceive of wanting to do one without the other.¹³

This blurring of distinctive lines defining the traditional genres is evident in what the writers attempt, what they succeed in, and even in how they label their own works. Some writers try for tragedy, but succeed only in evoking pathos. Such, I think, is the result in James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room. Both the narrator, David, and his lover, Giovanni, "become the passive victims of fate,"¹⁴ realizing too late and never realizing, respectively, the true nature of their relationship. Some writers, sensitive to the confusions of their milieu, try for tragicomedy, a genre perhaps more perplexing than those whose elements it borrows. In Albert Lebowitz' The Man Who Wouldn't Say No, the protagonist almost destroys his life when he rejects all his old values and, further, questions the rightness of having any new ones. But he salvages everything by adopting illusions, quitting his job, and marrying a rich woman.¹⁵ But the perplexity plagues both writers and critics. On Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, Percy G. Adams says, "It is tragi-comedy, but it is more tragedy than comedy."¹⁶ Yet from Adams' essay, one cannot be quite sure what he means by tragedy. Comedy he pretty well limits to incongruity and irony.

Certainly there are many others who have at one time or another indicated an inability to distinguish the genres

or who have called the attempt at such definition an exercise in futility and irrelevance. One thinks of the dogmatic forcefulness of Richard Kostelanetz as he distinguishes two types of contemporary fiction which he calls the only original and important recent writing: (1) that which in a sequence of absurdities ("nonsensical, ridiculous" incidents) demonstrates "the ultimate absurdity (i.e., meaninglessness) of history and existence" and (2) that which creates "realized internal portraits" of madness.¹⁷ But whether, in fact, nihilist and absurdist themes do constitute the artists' visions in the greater part of our major literature is not an easily resolvable question nor the principal interest of this essay. Rather, in spite of this demonstrated pessimism of outlook and the consequent confusion of genres, I want to submit that a blatantly heterogeneous body of contemporary fiction nevertheless coalesces to constitute an antithetical optimistic literature. The terms of this dialectic are a bit uneven, for the non-absurdist literature is not ponderous in quantity and often exhibits formal deficiencies. But it is significant, for it gives us at once a hopeful view of man's potentialities in this life--particularly the possibility of placing himself--and a vision of something beyond man's subjective nature which denies that he is alone and helpless in this existence.

It is a body of contemporary American fiction at once deeply informed by Christian theology and manifesting a comic vision. In the course of establishing the significance of this literature and its coherence as a body of work, it will be necessary to consider what constitutes a "deep" informing, and to define or limit Christian theology for the discussion. The most difficult and tenuous aspect of the argument is the defining of "comic vision." Hopefully in the process, the aspects of Christianity which are indigenous to comedy and vice versa will emerge. Again, the conclusion already suggested declares that the literature of comic vision constitutes a meaningful commentary on the mass of humanistic existentialist or absurdist literature acknowledged above.

There are at least three writers manifesting this vision: Peter De Vries, J. F. Powers, and Flannery O'Connor. Others--such as Graham Greene, John Updike, or J. D. Salinger--might appear to demand inclusion, but there are substantial reasons for excluding them. Green is an Englishman, not an American, and this study intends to examine American writers in part because of their theological heritage to be explained later. More importantly, though, Greene's fiction is not premised on the joy of high comedy under examination here. The whiskey priest of The Power and the Glory and Scobie of The Heart of the Matter are drawn in the lineaments of tragic figures who, even

without insight at the end, absorb all our attention. Working narrowly from Roman Catholic problems, Greene produces a humanistic literature. John Updike's fiction is also humanism, no matter how much he teasingly flaunts a knowledge of theology's questions and its rhetoric. Grace is not imminent in Updike's fictional world; all the help a character has is what he gives himself. Even characters like Hook in The Poorhouse Fair who have a distinguishable religious tradition neither have for themselves nor produce for others (including the reader) epiphanic manifestations of grace. Nor do the moments of humor in Updike's novels merit him a place in the discussion here. However transitorily funny such minor characters as Gregg in The Poorhouse Fair, Kruppenbach in Rabbit, Run, or Freddy Thorne in Couples may be, they never rise above the laughter of a moment. Gregg is merely helpless and ineffectual, and Thorne is vicious. Salinger's fiction comes the closest to warranting his inclusion here, for as James T. Livingston observes, such characters as Franny and Zooey are sensitive to grace in the world and because of it are moved to "gratitude, joy and love." Sensitive and thus moved, they are faced with "the problem of living out what they already know,"¹⁸ a far different prospect than that of characters in the fiction of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor who must fumble through a long period of unknowing. The difference lies in apprehending grace through an encounter

with the world or through contemplation of the world. There are surely more writers who should be specifically excluded, and perhaps others who should be included, but aside from peripheral comments, this essay confines itself to a consideration of Peter De Vries, J. F. Powers, and Flannery O'Connor.

There has been almost no critical work on De Vries, although his fiction consistently receives good reviews. Aside from very brief mention in the eclectic A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels¹⁹ and the erratic A Voice from the Attic,²⁰ the only critical commentary is Roderick Jellema's monograph in the Eerdman's Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective series.²¹ Although indeed much more, still relatively little has been done on J. F. Powers. His three published books received a number of misguided reviews. There have been a few critical essays, a representation of them collected by Fallon Evans for the Herder Christian Critic series,²² and one book, J. V. Hagopian's 1968 study for the Twayne series.²³ Although anthologized frequently in literature texts, Powers has received very little attention in critical and historical surveys of American fiction. Chester E. Eisinger does treat Powers briefly although insightfully in his Fiction of the Forties,²⁴ but William Peden's superficial commentary in his The American Short Story is an example of the much more usual approach.²⁵ For Flannery O'Connor there is a rapidly

accumulating body of critical work. Most notable and impressive as tributes beyond their scholarly qualities are the Fall, 1958 issue of Critique and Friedman's and Lawson's The Added Dimension,²⁶ a symposium of essays unfortunately gathered before the posthumous publication of Everything That Rises Must Converge, but for that all the more indicative of Miss O'Connor's great talent. In addition, there is Robert Reiter's Flannery O'Connor in the Herder series, a companion piece to Evans' collection,²⁷ and Stanley Edgar Hyman's monograph for the University of Minnesota pamphlet series.²⁸ Finally, there is Carter W. Martin's The True Country, an extended study of the "themes in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor."²⁹

But in this hastily reviewed commentary which does acknowledge the three as, in varying degrees, comic writers, there has been little manifest concern for the how and ultimate why of the comic vision. In general, comedy has long lacked a broadly appreciative audience, either among critics or laity. Such a comment as Robert Penn Warren's on William Faulkner is at one with the thinking applied to De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor: "Faulkner's humor is but one perspective on the material and it is never a final perspective."³⁰ Warren's point even as it applies to Faulkner is arguable, but the important idea is that critics seem disinclined to grant comedy status as an ultimate viewpoint for the structuring of art. Yet as

this essay hopes to point out, any artist who believes that man can "endure and prevail" holds an essentially comic view of life.

By and large, commentators on the fiction of the three writers considered here, abandon their discussion of comedy after noting the ridiculousness of suburban man's predicaments in De Vries' works, the biting (or harmless) satire of Powers' lay and clerical portraits, or the grotesques of O'Connor because they feel that comedy simply does not have any substance in itself, cannot be an ultimate concern for the writer, and, hence, is not worth the critical effort in deeply examining it. But this disdain simply belies the fact that most contemporary critics and some artists are far away--in time and thinking--from the theology that informed Dante's Comedy; that is the crux of the matter. In a New Critical preoccupation with the autonomy of the text and its coherence of structure and texture, or from a craving to be in the fore of the cultural perspective, where inevitably the literature becomes merely a tool and the literary man merely a sociologist, or out of an allegiance to Susan Sontag's school of "no content for the sake of art," critics have largely neglected some basic patterns of thinking that were illuminated for us centuries ago and that are still utilized by some imaginative writers. Generally, those critics who do suspect the operation of an ancient theology

feel ill at ease in discussing it. One of the latter group is J. V. Hagopian: at the very end of his book on Powers, he turns ostensibly to "Satire and Divine Comedy," but does not substantially clarify what he intends to refer to by "divine comedy." Instead he hopes for his reader's intuitive ability to relate quotations from the fiction, Power's commentary, and Marie Swabey on comic paradoxes.

Therefore, before turning to the discussion of specific writers, it seems advisable to attempt clarification of the broad lines within which the following analyses will take place.

NOTES

- ¹Surprised By Joy (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
- ²"Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," The Portable Faulkner, ed. Malcolm Cowley. Rev. ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 723.
- ³"The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 78.
- ⁴"The American Short Story Today," Introduction to 12 from the Sixties (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 17. For an interesting commentary specifically on the novel, see Kostelanetz' essay "The New American Fiction" in The New American Arts, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Collier Books, 1967).
- ⁵The Myth of Sisyphus, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 22.
- ⁶(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966).
- ⁷Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," tr. Bernard Frechtman in A Casebook on Existentialism, ed. William V. Spanos (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), p. 276.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 282.
- ⁹"The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction," College English, XX (April, 1959), 344.
- ¹⁰The Paradox of Tragedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 27 ff.
- ¹¹Galloway, p. 14.
- ¹²Quoted in Roderick Jellema, Peter De Vries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 9.

¹³"Introduction," No! in Thunder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), pp. 16-17. I have quoted Fiedler at length, not only for his clarity and the representative quality of his statement's terms, but also to illustrate a distinctive vitality, a kind of joie de vivre in a man of letters, that clearly does not reflect an acceptance of the "commonplace"-ness of the soul that several years ago Joseph Wood Krutch blamed for the demise of powerful tragic literature.

¹⁴Howard M. Harper, Jr., Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 149.

¹⁵In a further specification of the crossing of lines, but in drama, Ionesco announces Les Chaises as a "tragic farce." Again in drama, there has been what by analogy to simplistic criteria for tragicomedy may be called "comi-tragedy." Such a piece is En Attendant Godot, despite Beckett's subtitle in his English translation: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts.

¹⁶"Humor as Structure and Theme in Faulkner's Trilogy," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, V (Autumn, 1964), 207.

¹⁷The New American Arts, pp. 202, 203.

¹⁸James T. Livingston, "J. D. Salinger: The Artist's Struggle to Stand on Holy Ground" in Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 128.

¹⁹Horton Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 164-72.

²⁰Robertson Davies (New York: Knopf, 1960), pp. 241-42.

²¹Peter De Vries, cited above.

²²J. F. Powers (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1968).

²³J. F. Powers (New York: Twayne, 1968).

²⁴(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 172-77.

²⁵(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), pp. 79-80. It seems interesting that in the Penney Chapin Hills and L. Rust Hills six pound anthology How We Live: Contemporary Life in Contemporary Fiction (New York: Macmillan, 1968), J. F. Powers is omitted from a list of "some three hundred" contemporary writers, although De Vries and Flannery O'Connor are included.

²⁶Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson, eds., The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966).

²⁷(St. Louis: B. Herder, 1968).

²⁸Flannery O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966).

²⁹(Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969).

³⁰"William Faulkner," New Republic, CXV (August 12, 1946), rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 118.

CHAPTER I

CHRISTIANITY AND THE COMIC

Because the man of comedy is essentially human, he is aware that only the serious man can really laugh; the rest only mock or giggle.

--Nelvin Vos

Dante called his great poem a comedy, though it is entirely serious--visionary, religious, and sometimes terrible.

--Suzanne K. Langer

I

In the rapidly accumulating bulk of literary criticism from one theological perspective or another, far too often the critics have neglected to establish clearly the premises from which they are operating. However, considering the diversity in Christendom, it seems particularly necessary that any discussion of theological implications in a body of literature lay down its ground rules. An excellent example of a critic taking such care is Randall Stewart, and I shall take his caution as my guide. In the first chapter of his American Literature and Christian Doctrine, Stewart enumerates certain "basic assumptions" which he maintains serve as tenets for all Christian perspectives. In common, Stewart says, Christians acknowledge (1) "the sovereignty of God"--that He is Love, infinitely wise, omnipotent, and just; (2) "the divinity of Christ"--that He is "the only begotten Son of God"; (3) "Original Sin"--that "natural man is imperfect, fallible, prone to evil"; (4) Christ's Atonement--that man is saved through faith in it; and (5) the inspired Scriptures, The Revealed Word.¹

Obviously, the bases taken by Stewart are not to be confused with other, more famous "Five Point" statements of creed. One of these is, of course, John Calvin's set of tenets. But rather than pointing merely to "original sin,"

Calvin emphasized man's "total depravity," contending not that he is fallible but that he is utterly corrupt. As for atonement, Calvin thought in limited terms, believing that Christ died only for the elect. Calvin's other three points dogmatized on unconditional election, irresistible grace, and the "perseverance of the saints."

Likewise, Stewart's premises should be explicitly contrasted to the Five Points of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, "the Father of Deism." Even though Lord Herbert's "theology" was not Christian, his principles found their way into Unitarian doctrine, and a large number of Unitarians categorize themselves as Christians. Lord Herbert believed:

1. That there is a Supreme Power (. . . a benevolent God).
2. That this Sovereign Power must be worshipped.
3. That the good ordering or disposition of the faculties of man constitutes the principal or best part of divine worship.
4. That all vices and crimes should be expiated and effaced by repentance.
5. That there are rewards and punishments after this life.²

The contrasts with both Calvin and Stewart are obvious, but it should be emphasized that the deist's statement omits specific mention of Jesus. The nature of Jesus is, even today, as it has always been, a theological problem rivaled in its complexity by, perhaps, only the doctrines of the Trinity and transubstantiation. Particular Christologies have united great masses of people, but they have also produced dissension often culminating in "heresy" and schism. In the eighteenth century Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine

called Jesus a wise moralist and equated his teachings with Socrates'. For that, many denounced them as atheists. The "Christian Atheism" of certain theologians in this decade is merely the contemporary manifestation of the complex issue, Man-Christ. Therefore, not to avoid a charge of Docetism, but to make the terms of this discussion as clear as possible, one point should be made. In addition to Stewart's second tenet--the divinity of Christ--Christianity at large also affirms the humanity of Christ, and certain points in the following discussion require explicit acknowledgment of this dogma.

The ease with which the "six points" here established could be accepted by millions of "Christians" indicates the existence of a strikingly broad common ground in spite of the manifest divisiveness in Christendom. The truth of this assertion is perhaps more shockingly--for some--reinforced by a statement of Fr. Gustave Weigel, S.J.:

Even though the fundamentalist is traditionally opposed to the Scarlet Woman of Rome and her ways, yet he clings to certain positions which are as fundamental for him as for Catholics. He believes in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, the Virgin Birth, the objectively atoning death of Jesus and His physical resurrection. The liberals vacillate ambiguously in their adherence to these dogmas. In consequence, the Catholic feels sympathy for the fundamentalist in spite of the latent antipathy felt by that group toward Catholicism. The liberals are far more friendly and cordial but the Catholic is appalled by their radical reconstructions of Christianity.³

By way of amendment, as it were, Fr. Weigel adds the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, but his

observation of the similarity between what are generally thought of as polar theological positions merely implies further that a critical discussion about literature informed by Calvinism and Catholicism is neither impossible nor unimportant.

In brief, then, this present essay assumes as the standards of Christian orthodoxy the tenets outlined by Stewart and dramatically particularized by Fr. Weigel. To attempt any comprehensive inclusion of the idiosyncracies of the myriad Christian liberals or conservative eccentrics would be at once impossible and fruitless for this discussion. However theologically complex any institution may be, the writers considered in this essay deal with part or all of the above premises as the essentials of Christian belief, whether in fact they dramatize that belief as accepted or denied. Man is not saved by candles or glossolalia. Examples are myriad of writers hammering on such non-essentials and then falling into oblivion.

Finally, it is perhaps a truism that the "infinite variety" in Christendom is to be accounted for by the construction and interpretation of corollaries to the basics, but nevertheless it is necessary to recognize that certain amplifications do attach themselves to the crucial affirmations roughly outlined by Stewart. For example, acceptance of Christ's divinity and the efficacy of his atonement demands acceptance of his teachings: that we love

our enemies, turn the other cheek, pick up our own cross, etc. Or again, recognition of God's sovereignty presupposes the effort of subordinating one's own immediate gratifications and aggrandizements to what is believed to be God's ultimate plan for man. Very importantly for what follows in this essay, this latter example points up the fact that Christians must ground themselves in eschatology and think on the Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. But of equal importance is the fact that the very preparation for the Last Things will be the coming to an understanding of man's position in the here and now.

II

Far more difficult than arriving at a basis for "standard" Christianity, that is, an agreed upon orthodoxy, is the establishing of comedy's essence, or in a more broad and useful phrase, the aspects of the comic vision. In matters of Christian theology there are a considerable number of authorities to whom one may appeal, and however apparently or really schismatic, one from the other, they do agree upon a large number of essentials. But the case of the comic is somewhat different. As Nelvin Vos says, "Both the history of literary theory and the nature of comedy itself . . . discourage formal definition."⁴ To confirm Vos' statement, one need only scan bibliographies of the generations' criticism or glance at the spatial

proportions of commentaries on tragedy and comedy in any library. Quite simply, critics through the centuries have expended far more labor on tragedy and other "serious" types of literature than on comedy in any and all of its generic forms. To affirm from this that mankind has always found life's experience more often sobering and provocative of tears than offering occasions for rejoicing is sharply qualified by the sheer mass of imaginative literature that would generally be classified as comedy. However, there are two rather significant reasons for the relative scarcity of inquiry into the comic mode.

First, comedy is elusive because of its mysterious and individual nature. If one asks of another why he is crying, and if the mourner is willing and able to verbalize, he can literally or figuratively point to the death of a mother, the loss of a wallet with a hundred dollars in it, or the shame for a misdeed. However, if one queries of another why he is laughing, the explanation--if attempted--frequently goes without understanding. Of course, jokes are repeated endlessly, evoking some degree of mirth at every telling, but laughter over a found quarter, a squirrel's antics, a father's exasperation with a stubborn two-year-old is almost impossible to communicate. Too, this "laughter" may not reach the audible state; it may remain at the level of a smile, a twinkling eye, or a jaunty pace. The point is, we "get a warm feeling" or smile or

chuckle or shout exultantly most often on a purely subjective basis, whereas the aspects of sorrow or tragedy share a public quality. Despite the cliché injunction to "laugh and the world will laugh with you" or the Norman Vincent Peale-ish spothegm "laughter is infectuous," most sympathetic laughers would be hard-pressed to account for their mirth. On the other hand, conjoiners in sorrow share a recognizable, common object.

Secondly, as Vos notes, critical tradition is quite simply against theorizing about comedy or attempting to apply some theory in an exercise of practical criticism. Perhaps a major key to the manifest difficulty (and sometimes the simple lack of interest) lies in Aristotle's categories, or, more exactly, in the fact that we have his discussion of tragedy but only some vague fragments of his supposedly finished but lost dissertation on comedy. The following generations of critics have clearly taken some comfort in refuting Aristotle's poetics of tragedy or in constructing arguments modifying it, but at least in some way working with it. For example, in his much-quoted "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith,"⁵ Nathan A. Scott first at length reconstructs in hypothesis what Aristotle might have presented as a succinct definition of comedy, but he goes on to fabricate his own theory of comedy's crux, a theory which refutes Aristotle. In short, contemporary man may be post-Darwinian, post-Marxist,

post-Freudian, etc., but literary critics have always been overwhelmingly self-conscious of being post-Aristotelian, even if Petrus Ramus did claim to have discredited the Stagirite. Partly in consequence of this tradition, although in every decade and generation artists produce what they or the world calls comedy, men of theory have been too often evasive or circumlocutious about the heart of the matter of comedy, either in "pure theory" or in practical criticism. And this is all the more strange considering the enormous expansion of critical practice in this century.

Of particular significance to this latter observation is the fact that, however sparse proportionately to discussions of non-comic modes, more is being written about comedy now than at any previous time; yet that commentary escapes wide recognition. When text editors compile statements on comedy either as a collection of theories or to accompany imaginative literature, even if they incorporate some modern commentary (the contemporary is most often strictly eschewed), they lean heavily toward older writers: Fielding, Lamb, Meredith, etc. An explicit and striking instance of this critical temper occurs in a recently published anthology of critical theories: W. K. Wimsatt's The Idea of Comedy.⁶ The book carries the subtitle Essays in Prose and Verse, but beneath that occurs a sub-subtitle, Ben Jonson to George Meredith. Admittedly, to argue with an editor's choice of scope, especially when he loudly

advertises his selection, is senseless. But one ought to note that Wimsatt proceeds in his "Postscript" editorial comment--some twelve pages out of three hundred three--to very seriously and systematically attempt an inclusive and authoritative commentary--really shorter than it appears, because of the lengthy quotations--on twentieth century criticism.

Another point amply evident in Wimsatt's book and a number of others is that in the history of comic theory, each critic relies very little upon his predecessors or his contemporaries. While one might say this manifest independence holds for all good, original, important criticism, it seems especially true for comic theory. A fine example of the reluctance to work in another's mold offers itself in Scott's essay, already referred to, "The Bias of Comedy."

Scott proceeds after the statement on the particularities of modern literature quoted at the outset of this essay to point out that in an effort to come to some kind of coherent understanding of his cosmos in the face of his loss, in an effort to "redeem the time," man in modern fiction often attempts to obliterate time or propose "some strategem of rebellion."⁷ "But," Scott goes on, "a despairing rejection of time is hardly calculated to yield any fruitful advance in human affairs." Instead, we might well turn to the "radicalism of comedy."⁸ At this point in

his development, Scott hypothetically reconstructs Aristotle's theory (or definition) of comedy, but only to finally disagree with Aristotle's premise that comedy depicts "men as worse . . . than in actual life." Rather, for Scott, the comic protagonist is the one "who is engagé, who is intensely committed to the present movement and the present task."⁹ He is, in other words, firmly grounded in time.

To probe the comic sense in the terms which Scott suggests is to discern man in his limitations, to disclose him as a bounded, confined, finite creature. Naturalism and the absurd also speak of the smallness of man, but where naturalism at its starkest sees man as a mere pawn of larger forces and the absurd focuses upon the meaninglessness of man's existence relative to anything beyond himself, the comic vision intimates both the efficacy of man's will and his position within a surrounding framework. Tragedy, too, speaks on the issue of man's will and his stature in the cosmos, and, as Fr. William Lynch demonstrates,¹⁰ in its grandest achievements, tragedy is grounded in the finite. Fr. Lynch further suggests that in great literature the finite is ultimately transcended. However, the significant difference between comedy and tragedy is that when in the latter transcendence is achieved, it is for the glorification of man. Whether the tragedy be from Sophocles, Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, Melville, or William Styron, the tragic

protagonist alone has the glory. If he achieves "transfiguration," his alone is the causal hand.

Transfiguration is not the destiny of the comic protagonist. He lives and moves and has his being under all the conditions of a "vulgar and limited finite."¹¹ In fact, comedy's "image of the finite is the most concrete, the most dense, of all the images created by the act of man."¹² The comic protagonist is singular because he recognizes his condition, accepts it, and joys in it. That at least would be the movement of the prototypical comic figure. More often he may merely suspect his condition, or merely be developing toward acceptance of it, but more importantly, for the differentiation of comedy and tragedy, his joy--which finds an easy synonym in "salvation"--must be dramatized.

If these limitations of finitude, the concept of an ultimately necessary acceptance of them, and the idea that a profound joy is their corollary are all granted, then tragedy's traditionally revered sublimity of man is suggested to be nothing more than illusion, or worse, delusion. And this conclusion suggests a third, admittedly highly speculative reason for criticism's shyness about comedy. Critics are men, and as such generally prefer to exalt man and to see him exalted. But the fictional world of finitude, mirroring the real finite world, offers man as he is and must be. For many critics the acknowledgment of mere

humanity is plain disappointment. From there, attention to the work affirming that mereness wavers, falters, and finally falls off. But in the phrase of Ken Kesey's Chief Bromden, they "forget sometimes what laughter can do."¹³ To deny man the adequacy of a substantial place is to destroy him. Kesey's other protagonist, the ostensible one, in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest sums up the problems of humankind when he tells his fellow asylum inmates, "man, when you lose your laugh you lose your footing."¹⁴ And the reverse is also true: when one fails to have a sense of place, one loses the ability to laugh.

The following discussion, then, is of three writers who are concerned with place, with the recognition of a need for "footing," with what Flannery O'Connor meant in part when she talked of a man's "true country," and not at all curiously, these three are writers of comedy.

NOTES

¹(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), p. 14.

²Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, Backgrounds of American Literary Thought. Second Edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 56.

³Faith and Understanding in America (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 69.

⁴The Drama of Comedy: Victim and Victor (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 11.

⁵In The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁶(Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

⁷"The Bias of Comedy," p. 81.

⁸Ibid., p. 83.

⁹Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁰Christ and Apollo (1960; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1963).

¹¹Ibid., p. 105.

¹²Ibid., p. 104.

¹³Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962; rpt. New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 92.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 68.

CHAPTER II

PETER DE VRIES: WANDERING CALVINIST

You must not think me necessarily foolish because I am facetious, nor will I consider you necessarily wise because you are grave.

--Sydney Smith (One of the epigraphs in The Tents of Wickedness)

However, a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more's the pity. . . . And the man that has anything bountifully laughable about him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for.

--Ishmael, Moby Dick

Of the three writers examined in this essay, Peter De Vries is clearly the most prolific. At the time of this writing there are thirteen novels, a book of short "stories," and many uncollected poems and prose pieces in his canon. The short pieces are in two broad respects representative of De Vries' novels: they are heavily autobiographical (in the same manner as John Updike's sketches) and their quality, often within the same piece, ranges from the bluntly and simply humorous to the provocative and even profound. But because they are for the most part anecdotal and do not reflect the major themes of De Vries' novels, they may be ignored here except for occasional references when the germ of a characterization, incident, or idea seems worthwhile noting in its early form. A synthetical analysis of the novels alone offers sufficient problems, both minor and major, for the scope of this essay.

One difficulty, perhaps minor in complexity but certainly major in importance, is De Vries' narrative point of view. Several of the novels, including the most recent, have been criticized for being loose or even disjointed in form. This deprecation bases itself on the fact that De Vries has at times used more than one narrator-protagonist--as in The Vale of Laughter, narrated in respective halves by Joe Sandwich and Wally Hines--or some other variety of multiple point of view--as in Reuben, Reuben, in which

through three successive sections Spofford narrates his own story and McGland and Mopworth are portrayed by a third person voice. Trying to account for what seems to them an undeniable fragmentation, some critics have strained to deliver a compliment by calling the books grouped novellas. One might conjecture from this that De Vries is really a short story writer mangué who has persistently neglected his true field. However, as I have noted, De Vries' major themes are simply not present or developed in the shorter pieces. Both the outright dismissals and the rhetorical compromises overlook the in fact manifest interrelatedness of structure and theme in each book with a multiple viewpoint. Instead of fragmentation, this flexible perspective technique achieves a breadth of enlightening vision that the subjective narrowness of first person narrative or limited omniscience can never realize.¹ To be sure, the result is far short of a vision sub species aeternitatis, but the aggregate examination of motivation and reaction distinctly transcends ordinary human attitudinizing, without recourse to narrative pronunciamento.

As in the trio of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor, Peter De Vries experiments furtherest with point of view, he is also at the extreme in sheer funniness. Where the low-keyed humor of Powers or the black comedy of O'Connor may pass without an audible response from the reader, De Vries' hilarity on innumerable pages produces the gamut

of overt laughter from chuckle to guffaw. In fact, his frequent mere funniness undoubtedly disturbs those critics who are hyper-sensitive to their own sophistication.² If this supposition of critical aloofness is valid, it surely in part accounts for major criticism's obliviousness to De Vries. Through compulsively comic characters "possessed" by a divine Comic Spirit, perhaps that holy ghost lyrically defined by Meredith,³ De Vries hurls at the reader a barrage of burlesque, farce, slapstick, caricature, and social satire (the latter never until lately even approaching a caustic quality), all long before the essential comedy of the novel is evident. On a very superficial reading, it might seem that De Vries' forte is the two-liner, reviving the old black-face routine: "' . . . when I sat down to play . . . I got a twinge down my whole back.' 'Possibly you struck a spinal chord.'"; "'Augie . . . has a lot more depth.' 'Only on the surface. Deep down, he's shallow.'"; "'What do you do when a child won't eat its food?' 'Send him to bed without any supper. . . .'" But every time, these jokes for the sake of a laugh are embedded in situation comedy, structured for larger effects: an old woman absurdly reselling to gullible travelers the curio-junk she herself bought years ago at tourist traps; two middle-aged men attempting to prove each other's lack of virility by racing bicycles on a street "track" known to be hazardous for even agile youths; a suburban social-climber plotting

to revenge herself on a matronly enemy by tricking the latter into revealing her age on a charity questionnaire. And, as if De Vries were taking his principles of fictional structure from Chinese puzzle boxes, these minor scenes contribute to conclusions at once overtly funny and illuminative of the human situation.

Indeed, throughout the sequence of De Vries' novels his characterizations and scenes are never finally wasted on witty interchanges or merely ludicrous situations. Although they may blunder through the apparently chaotic rising action like Tom Sawyers playing at life, De Vries' characters ultimately live, or are at the verge of living, as Huck Finns--but sometimes articulating their awareness as Huck cannot--in a world where life is crushingly real and earnest, offering terms that must be met by men who are not world-beaters. If these comments seem insistent on the point that these characters have an obscured depth, it is as Roderick Jellema suggests, that the crux of the problem with De Vries "is not that he is too serious, but that he is too funny."⁴ For most readers, the surface comedy obscures the comic depth of a word, an act, or an entire situation.

This comic depth, this importance in De Vries' novels is tentatively suggested by Jellema in his monograph. Jellema speaks of the novels in sequence being unified by "significant concerns," at the heart of which is a

"religious concern," surely not an unusual attitude for an artist with a Dutch Calvinist background. But, he adds, "It is more than 'concern,' finally; it builds to a delicately balanced, ludicrous, beautiful, terrible ambivalence toward the Christian faith and its bearing on the world in which we live."⁵ Much of the following discussion will constitute a substantiation of that ambivalence, yet in spite of Jellema's important and seemingly conclusive qualification, the unity and significance of De Vries' work are quite simply matters of "religious concern." If one can arrive at even the suspicion that De Vries is a serious comic writer, Paul Tillich's definition of religion seems particularly relevant: "Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit. . . . Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern"⁶ (my italics). To alter Jellema's statement slightly, then, De Vries' ultimate concern generally can be, and at times must be, seen in specifically Christian terms.

In looking for this concern in both the artistry of character and setting and the development of themes in the sequence of the novels, De Vries' three early novels may, with one exception, be ignored.⁷ While lacking the structural and thematic tightness and sustained comedy of the later novels, The Handsome Heart (1943) significantly presages the concerns which De Vries manifests later.

At the aesthetic level, one can understand the general desire to dismiss The Handsome Heart as unimportant. Much of its plot is easily predictable, very neat and satisfying in the mode of war-time fiction: when a man hitches a ride with a family leaving an insane asylum, beyond suspicion we know he is an escapee; when the protagonist's reckless and ruthless brother wheels and deals through business ventures, we know he will fall, at least to bankruptcy; when the protagonist vacillates between two women, one an unmarried innocent and the other his brother's adulterous wife, we are sure that the former will be his final choice.

Because The Handsome Heart is both unfamiliar and difficult to obtain, it may not be amiss to summarize it here. The novel's protagonist, Brian Carston, is an outsider, an isolate in many of the respects De Vries uses for later characterizations. He is discovered to us initially as a mental institution inmate making a very smooth and unspectacular getaway with the unsuspecting family of another asylum resident. In the family group is Edith Braken, young, unmarried, and prone to skepticism about the intentions of people and the worth of institutions. Brian stays overnight at the Bracken home, and a tentative romance begins. When it becomes clear that Brian is an escapee, he flees in the night with Edith's blessing. Stumbling across the countryside, Brian collapses at the shack of Morgan, a crewman on a cemetery excavation preparing for a new highway.

Through Morgan, Brian gets a job, only to become embroiled in some ghoulish looting, more than faintly reminiscent of the greedy revelry in the exemplum of Chaucer's Pardoner. Brian accidentally kills the greediest plotter and runs again. Arriving in the city where we later learn his brother Charles lives, Brian deludes a hotel clerk into thinking him an incognito celebrity, registers as "Brian Charles," and establishes himself in place to carry on an operation we do not fully understand until much later. At Brian's invitation, his old friend Woodie quickly, as if it were a matter of free choice, leaves the asylum and joins him. Very soon, too, Brian calls Irene, his old flame and now Charles Carston's wife, and they renew their affair. In the meantime, Brian and Woodie set up a slightly illegal but increasingly profitable candy-machine business (a detail out of De Vries' own history and the occupation of the protagonist in "Every Leave That Falls"). Edith comes to see Brian, that ember flares, and Brian takes Edith's virginity. Seriously trying to get her man all for herself, Edith confronts Irene, and they fight. In the interim, Charles Carston loses his fortune and commits suicide. At Charles' death, Brian decides to go back to Edith, the murder charge, and the institution. They get Dr. Grimberg to say Brian is sane, and go from there to Morgan's where the police arrest Brian. In a predictable peripeteia, Dr. Grimberg must testify that Brian is insane to get him acquitted. With

his release imminent, Brian and Edith promise each other (and the reader) that they will begin a new life.

In summary, The Handsome Heart seems very much a not always facile variation on "boy finds girl, boy must leave girl, boy returns to girl." However, there are important qualifications to this ostensibly formulaic writing. One is the characterization of Edith. When first introduced in the Bracken car on the way to the asylum (and, it might be observed now, mental institutions are to be visited by De Vries several times in the following novels), she does not arouse much sympathy. Her spinsterhood in spite of the fact that she is attractive, may be explained by the war-time shortage of men, but falls short of adequately explaining her pronounced cynicism toward the regular visits to Uncle Edgar. Yet, in the asylum as she sits listening to the inmates' chatter, idiosyncratic ramblings that Ken Kesey might well have read before writing One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, she is noticeably affected. Although only a temporary observer, existing with hardly any substantiality in the midst of men who have lost themselves among the majority who set the norms for sanity-insanity, Edith becomes sincere in her attention and questions, becomes a person whom we would welcome as the heroine. Unfortunately, after this point she becomes largely the trusting, dutiful, faithful lover. Yet, in those bright moments of her human concern, she prefigures Hester of The Mackerel Plaza, the

Naughty of the second half of The Vale of Laughter, and the Tillie Seltzer who visits Hank Tattersall in The Cat's Pajamas.

Another qualification asserts itself in the form of De Vries' explicit interest in psychological motivation and specifically the psychopathology of schizophrenia. With substantial skill but without the burden of psychology's ponderous terminology, De Vries portrays Brian Carston as a sufferer from acute paranoid schizophrenia. In a number of short, revealing flashbacks we perceive that throughout childhood and adolescence Brian was forced into his brother Charles' shadow. Finally in adulthood when Charles tries to subvert Brian's thoughts and feelings and financial independence to the aegis of his own business, Brian balks and becomes aberrant, imagining persecution by Charles which may or may not be beyond the reality of the matter. De Vries fails to clarify the matter. If the persecution is aggressively active, Brian is, of course, not really paranoid and the case loses its stereotype character. However, the development of the novel leaves the matter ambiguous. It is clear that in denying his real identity to Edith, Morgan, the hotel clerk, and others, Brian exhibits a break with reality. The use of Charles' first name as his last, indicates Brian's confused identity with his brother. In Brian's temporary loss of self we have the

first of the schizophrenics who appear in almost every De Vries novel.

Just as The Handsome Heart introduces familiar De Vries characters and situations in the schizophrenic, the De Vriesian isolato, the mental institution, the adultery-ridden marriage, and the harassments of the modern business world, it also offers De Vries' early theorizing on comedy. In novel after novel a De Vries character expounds briefly or at length, amateurishly or with a professional sagacity on both the theory and practice of comedy. In this early novel--before De Vries has the confidence and grasp of comedy's range that he later develops--the theorizing narrowly focuses on the laughter evoked by the observation of differentness, oddness, even insanity, the relativity of the latter speculated about much in the manner of Pirandello or Giraudoux. This theory of comedy is of course, that in which laughter is seen as the product of either incongruity or superiority feelings. In the novels that follow, De Vries evidences a broadened perspective which sees a great variety of sources for laughter.

Interestingly, in the later novels De Vries gives the theory to his major characters, but in The Handsome Heart the comments are offered by the secondary or minor figures. For example, in considering the responses usually invoked in a person observing the mentally ill, Edith affirms the fascination of madness. But once fascinated, she suggests,

one laughs to protect oneself; otherwise the spectre is too horrible. What Edith grapples with here is the problem of black humor, to which we cannot respond either with disgust or by turning away; rather our choice lies between laughing or despairing. But Edith proposes that the response is a taking of pleasure in our own safety; we are entertained by a spectacle that gives us a sense of security. But as the atmosphere in the car intimates, it is, as often as not, a false sense of security, and thus not a satisfactory response at all.

The crucial point of the story, however, lies in the ironic reversal taken by Brian. The key phrase for this action is submerged in a long paragraph, and that probably because De Vries himself was unaware of the encapsulating nature of his sentence, for his special kind of obvious self-consciousness comes only in the later novels. Charles' death while not witnessed by Brian is nevertheless a climactic and directive moment of violence like those to be seen in one form or another particularly in Flannery O'Connor's work and to some extent in Powers'. The death is a shock, and, in the narrative center of consciousness, Brian "knows" that "Shock not only unsettles, it also releases clogged and damned emotions, and releasing resolves."⁸ The imagery here recalls the birth trauma, and, indeed, Brian is re-born to a new life. Sensing what his new freedom can mean, Brian decides to return to Edith and

to "the danger of commitment again."⁹ That commitment in literal terms is to the asylum, but much more is implied. Brian has been ironically free, free to condemn himself, and he had been doing just that. Eclipsed by his brother and pliable to his demands, Brian allows himself to be put away. Then just as easily and as much at random he walks out of the asylum. Without intention he joins a work crew and falls heir to catastrophe there. Not trusting himself and having had no reason to trust justice, he moves on. Willy-nilly he begins again with Irene, and then takes Edith's virginity without any sense of giving himself. Finally, with Charles' death, the childhood cause for self-effacement, even self-obliteration, is gone, and Brian can be himself, but of course only by deliberate decisions. He can and must make commitments. So, he returns only incidentally to the probability of re-commitment to Edith and to a life not as Charles, but as himself.

I have devoted a large amount of commentary to an admittedly faulted novel because it lays down in rather simple lines several of the thematic concerns which De Vries goes on to develop and embellish and complicate in the later, more aesthetically gratifying work. Ironically, the very beginning of the much longer "new series" is perhaps De Vries' best known novel: The Tunnel of Love (1954).

Tunnel is De Vries' first effort at telling at least two stories within one set of covers, although he does not utilize his later device of the multiple point of view. At one level the narrative is Dick's recitation of his disaster-haunted attempt at renovating, upholding, and redeeming (in secular moral terms) another man. But at the same time it is also Dick's own story, a fact missed completely by the majority of reviewers, and it is his own more so than Nick Carraway's recollection of Gatsby is the tale of his own initiation.

A magazine editor assigned to cartoon materials, Dick falls, via a cocktail party, into an at first unwelcome relationship with Augie Poole, a good gag writer but mediocre cartoonist, whose material Dick has been rejecting for several years. Because he deems himself made of the stuff of solid citizenry, Dick is further aggravated to learn that Augie is a married libertine. In consequence, Dick sets out to cure Augie's sexual meandering, but that is only the ostensible story line. All the while his self-righteousness is machinating, Dick, too, exhibits a curious profligacy. Prey to the pressing fear that he is after all an insignificant figure even in his own small world, Dick tries to escape what he sporadically fears is his own humdrum life. So, although he convinces himself and Augie that the deed is for Augie's safety, it is really Dick's own search for exciting adventure that prompts him to

impersonate Augie to the family of a girl Augie has gotten in trouble.¹⁰

However, the best and most obvious images of Dick's escapism emerge in his reveries transporting him to his never-never land, Moot Point, a pine forest cottage-castle in the sky to which he regularly retires when the press of business and domesticity becomes too great. The major dramatization of Dick's vulnerability to the social and moral confusion in which he becomes embroiled lies in the psychosomatic illness he succumbs to when he seems to have irrevocably fouled up both his life and Augie's. If plot is one of the clues to meaning, we must see this daydreaming, this psychic self-transportation, as futile. It solves no problems and gives way in the end to a radically different perspective. It is the nature of the replacement that most directly concerns the thesis of this essay.

In The Handsome Heart, Brian Carston, schizophrenic, begins in an institution, there by submission to exterior forces. At the end he has opted for an independence that, while somewhat ambiguous in its details, seems to promise an individuality, a personal freedom. Going into society, it is ironically by way of transcending society's structures. In Tunnel, Dick, too, becomes ill, ill with a psychosomatic immobilization much like that in more recent fiction--such as John Barth's The End of the Road--where the "disjunctures" of experience halt any active response by

the individual and are much more blatantly but no less surely than in De Vries novels at the center of the work. But unlike Brian, Dick recovers into society. At the end, Dick is mentally rehearsing his plans already in progress for buying a quiet retreat that is real. It would have a rather cliché name like "Pines and Needles." The point, and certainly not a moot one, is that Dick has found his place, after tribulation, in the concrete terms of the world--and he is happy.¹¹ The languid ease into which Dick settles at the end is not a soul's torpor. Rather, it is ironically an antithesis to the immobilization with which Dick is stricken when his troubles, and Augie's, seem at their high point.

Comfort Me With Apples, De Vries' novel of 1956, introduces Chick Swallow who will also narrate The Tents of Wickedness of 1959. The romantic other world, the ideal place, the Moot Point of Tunnel, becomes in this novel Wise Acres, a rather more complicated Shangri-la because Wise Acres is before its abstract quality the title of a play Chick began writing in high school with Nickie Sherman, who in the course of the novel becomes Chick's brother-in-law. Unlike Moot Point, Wise Acres has an objective reality and must be shared in its conceptions with another man.

In The Tunnel of Love, Dick feels compelled, out of a far higher compassion than he understands, to hide Augie Poole's profligacy as if it were his own, while he works to

reform the "sinner." In the process, his own deep wish for adventure lures him into what can only be called an innocent affair. (One of De Vries' most frequently used actions is the physically sexless rendezvous, the unconsummated liaison.) The result of the tension between Dick's desire to help and his own helplessness is a schizophrenic retreat into immobility. In Comfort, Chick, too, leads a double life. On the one hand he is a cracker-barrel philosopher writing "Pepigrams" for the local paper--a position he "inherited" from his father-in-law--and the epitome of tied-down-ness. On the other, he rebels at what he thinks is his wife's inferior intelligence and becomes a constantly imaginative libertine, indulging in sexual fantasies that clearly bespeak a seeking to be out of the time and space that he thinks are stifling him. The conflict between the two identities becomes dramatically marked early in the novel: Chick is so overjoyed when he learns that his girl Crystal is not pregnant and that he won't have to listen to his own wedding bells, that he asks her to marry him. That the conflict is a requisite existential force leading ultimately to a self-recognition or a defining of essence seems to be the point of the marked change in Chick's thinking and behavior at the end of the novel. Apparently, all Chick needed was to sow his wild oats, for in the final pages, reflecting on how Crystal is mellowing out of her former intellectual deficiencies, he suspects he, too, is mellowing,

and he finds himself "a much less severely divided man." All along he plays for verve, chasing "the romantic ideal, the idea that life can have style."¹² But in the final scene, he can get up and leave the presence of a provocative woman who has just sat down beside him. That kind of fantasizing is no longer for him. This ironic change may be only sadly funny until we realize that De Vries is not pessimistically denying that life can have "style." Rather, his denial is that style can be predicated on acts that upset or even destroy the home and genuine love and alienate a man from his friends. Leaving the woman, Dick moves from a moral--and, consequently, social--chaos that he mistook for freedom to the paradox of freedom and joy in a recognition and acceptance of time and place.

The Mackerel Plaza (1958), while not De Vries' most uproariously funny novel, is certainly his most ostensibly satiric, if satire should be thought of as a mode of criticizing relatively well-defined subjects among the intellectual errancies. As its target the novel takes an especially recognizable figure of the 1950's: the ultra-liberal "Christian." In fact, Andrew Mackerel is so outrageously liberal, that it would be erroneous to narrow him down as a Unitarian. People's Liberal is his church, modeled by his thinking. To indicate the direction of Mackerel's shepherding there is perhaps nothing better than the frequently quoted description of the church's interior:

Our church is, I believe, the first split-level church in America. It has five rooms and two baths downstairs--dining area, kitchen and three parlors for committee and group meetings--with a crawl space behind the furnace ending in the hillside into which the structure is built. Upstairs is one huge all-purpose interior, divisible into different-sized components by means of sliding walls and convertible into an auditorium for putting on plays, a gymnasium for athletics, and a ballroom for dances. There is a small worship area at one end. This has a platform cantilevered on both sides, with a free-form pulpit designed by Noguchi. It consists of a slab of marble set on four legs of four delicately differing fruit-woods, to symbolize the four Gospels, and their failure to harmonize. Behind it dangles a large multicolored mobile, its interdenominational parts swaying, as one might fancy, in perpetual reminder of Pauline stricture against those "blown by every wind of doctrine." Its proximity to the pulpit inspires a steady flow of more familiar congregational whim, at which we shall not long demur, going on with our tour to say that in back of this building is a newly erected clinic, with medical and neuropsychiatric wings, both indefinitely expandable.¹³

Like other De Vries characters, Andrew Mackeral labors along with a split personality. First of all, his religious life is divided, split between an honestly intended effort for his parishoners' well-being and a concurrent denial that help for his task exists in a traditionally recognized source, at least in any orthodox conception. For Mackeral, "It is the final proof of God's omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us" (MP, p. 10). In the second place, he fancies himself a ladies man with thoughts his parish could not condone had they omniscience, but quite clearly he is drawn toward accepting a family relationship with Hester, his housekeeper and the sister of the six-months deceased wife. Perhaps again, as with The Handsome Heart,

the outcome of the romance is a bit too predictable, for between the Molly Calico of many affairs and the Hester Pedlock of home there is never much doubt about who will have Mackerel's handsome heart in the dénouement.

Like other De Vries characters, Andrew Mackerel is a daydreamer, pining to escape reality. He thinks of himself in many other roles, all more "glamorous" than the life he leads--in this he is very much a type of Powers' Fr. Urban. In fact, both clergymen tend to drift in their daydreams from irony to fantasy. But in the end, the daydreams are resolved into hard, ironic realities. Certainly not one of the novels' greatest moments, but nonetheless one of the incidents that work in concatenation to tell Andrew Mackerel who he is, is the time when he has finally swept Molly away for an illicit weekend. The whole preparation of flight to another town and fictitious hotel registration has been fraught with the perils of a needed secrecy, but

Finally the door was closed. I squatted to peer through the keyhole, but there seemed no eye on the reverse side looking in. I locked the door softly and turned back into the room, and this was the moment round which all my ravenous daydreams had wound: the moment when Molly would cry "Alone at last" and fling herself into my arms. Instead she flung herself into the only chair in the room and burst into tears (my italics). (MP, p. 80)

The incident remains to be finished but not consummated with Molly accidentally locking Mackerel out of the hotel room and then falling into unconsciousness from a combination of sedatives and whiskey. This episode insinuates the

realities of Mackerel's romantic life, but the cataclysmic event which suggests the instability of Mackerel's spiritual state to himself is the rainstorm manifestation which, however ambiguously intended by De Vries, is taken by Mackerel as the act of an imminent, providential God. In the midst of a drought, Mackerel in typical fashion eschews a prayer-meeting congregated to invoke divine relief. When the rain does come, Mackerel is crushed but indignant.

"It's not that I resent finding there is a God after all who answers prayers," I said, speaking up to the ceiling. "That kind of personal God whose nonexistence was the mast to which I nailed my flag, and said Let's get on from there. It's not just having to face up to that possibility (as an alternative to pure fluke), it's that my position is no longer tenable. If this is his answer, I'm just not his sort. Because who were at those prayer meetings? All the bores, dullards and bigots in town--not a person of civilized sensibility was there. If that's the lot he gives aid and comfort to, so be it. But I cannot worship him. I can believe in him. But I cannot worship him."

.
 "When I was young, a student I mean, we used to debate whether Christ was the son of God. Now the question is whether God is the father of Christ. Is there a family resemblance, if this is the way he proceeds? We would argue long into the dormitory nights about the divinity of Christ. Now the question is the humanity of God. No, I have lost my faith." (MP, p. 188)

Sympathetic Hester replies that, "They'll say it was a weak thing, that not even a miracle could save it." Mackerel's response must, of course, be a capper: "It's just the other way around. It was so strong it took a miracle to crush it." However, Hester will have the last word and the most fundamental insight:

"Of course. This all-or-nothing idea. Whole hog. It's got to be one thing or another, splitting hairs right down to the finish. All right, not hairs--essentials. This intolerance with other points of view, Dutch Calvinist stubbornness with people who don't agree with you. Even your anti-Calvinism is the most Calvinistic thing I've ever seen. . . ." (MP, p. 188)

Happily for some, De Vries turns away from all this play with an obvious irony to a final scene where Mackeral and Hester are promising each other happy wedlock, tinged if not tainted by a premature consummation. This quirky finale parallels the "miraculous sickness" Tom Waltz suffers at Lourdes in Let Me Count the Ways, but in his traumas Mackeral has learned something: that his fantasies--sexual, intellectual, and materialistic--were just that: illusions. Hester, a bit belatedly a fount of wisdom, sets things back down in the concrete world.

"You go around Robin Hood's barn with your intellectual arguments, generation after generation, you men," she said, pouring us coffee, "and there isn't a religion anywhere in the world that can't be summed up in a phrase my mother was always fond of."

"Let's have it," I said, bracing myself as ever. "What did your mother used to say?"

"'To be as humane as is humanly possible.' That was the way she often put it. How we should try to be with one another."

Was that it? Was all the back-breaking, skull-cracking thought of the ages to be summed up in that absurd piece of unconscious irony? Was that the fruit of human wisdom? Maybe so, I thought rather sadly.

"And you can't say that there isn't design," she went on, gesturing with both hands. "You can't say you don't see that everywhere you look, everywhere in the universe. You can't say there isn't such a thing as a designing intelligence."

"Well," I said, looking across the table at this woman, "I'd be a damn fool if I denied that." (MP, pp. 189-190)

One might read Mackerel's final sentence as an ambiguous one, albeit far less so than the final couplet of Robert Frost's "Design." However, granting De Vries his ironic play with the male-female struggle, his at least theologically sound admission largely coincides with his "creed" stated early in the book: "I believe that a faith is a set of demands, not a string of benefits, that a man is under some obligation to better himself, not sit around as he is and wait for Jesus to save him" (MP, p. 26). Which is to say, Calvinist faith alone is not enough. Good works in the finite world of man are more than efficacious; they are necessary.

Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works.

. . .
But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? (James 2:18, 20).

The Tents of Wickedness (1959) "brings off," according to the first edition's dust jacket, "a refreshing experiment in form." The "refreshing" is merely publishers hyperbole, but the novel is formally experimental for De Vries. Its narrator-hero is Chick Swallow again, but matured, one might say, from newsprint wit to amateur psychologist, and from sidewalk sophisticate to parlor and bedroom confidante and littérateur. The experimentation materializes as through a series of counseling blunders Chick variously characterizes himself, sometimes in the third person, as figures out of

Marquand, Fitzgerald, Proust, Greene, Dreiser, Thurber, and Hemingway.

Nickie Sherman, Chick's brother-in-law, appears again, but in this novel Nickie is ostensibly the schizoid one. His yen for suavity and surprise and his predilection for amateur deduction are psychologized by Chick until Nickie's personality and actions split between crook and cop, between "a raffles-type jewel thief and a Holmes-type detective."²¹ The psychic rift merely widens as Chick continues to "probe the unconscious" of his victim. Concurrently, Chick has renewed an acquaintance with an old flame, Beth "Sweetie" Appleyard, an erratic poetess who comes first to the Swallow home as a babysitter. Chick tackles her aberrant behavior and consequently propels her into real Bohemianism, illegitimate pregnancy, and a final reversion to tree-house childishness and poetizing. One is surprised De Vries does not sum up her adventures as a descent from "bed to verse."

However, beneath it all, Chick reveals himself as also seriously displaced. Unsatisfied with the lack of glamor and importance in his job as a "Dear Abbey" for the Decency newspaper, he inflates himself to proportions of the great Answer Man. With a self-styled competence for solving everyone's problems, he manages to confuse Nickie's and Sweetie's lives along with his own. But finally coming to see himself after it has all gone wrong, he can reflect, "I wanted to kick myself. I couldn't stand me. . . . I'm

just not my sort."¹⁵ At the end, having found himself and understood others through fear and trembling, he can muse upon a poem sent by Sweetie in her "exile" from his world. "Still I was glad to see that rhymed salute from a free spirit to those of us who pitch our tents, as most of us, in the end, must, on more or less conventional terrain" (TW, p. 267). Does this mean that Chick accepts with resignation or defeat? No--his acceptance is a positive one. His last words, as he recalls having just resisted a provocative woman, one of those resurgent temptations, are: "'Thanks just the same,' I told her, 'but I don't want any pleasures interfering with my happiness'" (TW, p. 268).

As if deciding to go the idea of one character masquerading as many a step better, in Through the Fields of Clover (1961), Peter De Vries employs more secondary figures than in any other novel. Perhaps in part because of that, John Wain calls it a Restoration comedy.¹⁶ The raucous scenes in bedroom, parlor, and garden do revive the style of Congreve and Wycherley, but the idiosyncratic characters also make it a comedy of humors in the Jonson tradition. In these aspects, it truly becomes, as Jellema suggests, too much a "mass of material" too much given to stereotypes.¹⁷ Surely De Vries' most relentlessly funny novel, its action revolves upon too many sub-plots--lines following the humors characters, really--and far too little of a main plot, which if discernible at all, turns upon the

idea that Ben and Alma Marvel, after forty years of marriage, find themselves living in a world they did not make. They can only marvel at the panorama of domestic chaos that passes before them as they review their spiritually and morally adrift children, gathered for the emerald anniversary. "Home" does not and seemingly cannot exist in the terms the elder Marvels would desire. Daughter Clara, twice married, considers sexual intercourse an unnatural act; son Cotton, divorced, has drifted into nihilism; son Bushrod, married, is an activist who will come back for the celebration only on the promise that the old home town now has anti-Semitism he can fight and who convinces his wife she is prejudiced when she catches him kissing a Negro maid; daughter Evelyn, happily married and a bit of semi-serious relief, fulfills her obligations to this chain of disillusionments by having an over-sexed husband. Ben and Alma are not made responsible for their children's disorientation, but the homelessness of everyone is nonetheless terrifying for all that.

After all the novels in which the virtues of the real, the immediate and concrete are grasped, and the finite as man's "true country" is ultimately recognized, and before all those in which the dénouement is to be a coming home, it might seem as if in Through the Fields of Clover, De Vries wanted to say that "t'ain't necessarily so." Yet--and I think it a matter of considerable importance--one cannot

assume in a Freudian view that De Vries' true skepticism emerges here. The novel is weak for several reasons. I have noted that the plotting becomes loose and hectic. Too, it is contrived, and the characters are too grossly flat--they haven't any convincing quality. It would be fine to suppose De Vries did not want them to have any humanness, for they are apparently to impress us as lacking humanity. Yet they should carry the burden of his theme with some verisimilitude, and they do not. Only Ben Marvel seems to have any recognizably human response to situations, and perhaps that is a bit belated, arising first in the sixteenth of the book's seventeen chapters as he and Alma have a serious battle over the children, evaluating the rightness of their upbringing. What carries Ben through that scene is his compassion, the kind affirmed by Hester Pedlock, not a defeatist's acquiescence but an acceptance of human failures--his, his wife's, and his children's--as just that, the flawed operation of human lives. His postlapsarian grounding in time and place finishes the novel:

She heaved a sigh, thinking of all they'd been through, of all of the Twentieth Century that had been brought to their old door. What was happening in and to the world, including supposedly rock-ribbed New England Massachusetts?

"What are we coming to?" she wondered aloud.

"Connecticut," said Ben Marvel, who had been watching the signs.¹⁸

If Through the Fields of Clover seems a slackening in De Vries' sustained and repeated attempts at ironic depiction of man's self-estimation and seems even superficial in the spread of human foibles it marks, The Blood of the Lamb is, as De Vries might say, quite another story. Surely it comes as a shock to a general public of De Vries, satisfied with mere funniness and unused to the sight of that fine line that demarcates comedy and tragedy, as many critics have observed it exists. The Blood of the Lamb blatantly offers depth in what cannot be unperceived as a sincere search and possibly profound insight into the complexity of faith and unbelief, into how it appears absurd to believe and impossible not to. Jellema suggests that the protagonist-narrator's name, Don Wanderhope, comes from "Byron's self-pitying and comic Don Juan" and "the Dutch word wanhoop, meaning despair."¹⁹ That explication presents itself as irrefutable and complete until one considers both the novel's thematic structure and De Vries' facility with English as well as Dutch. De Vries' past demonstrated sensitivity to English should indicate to us that he knew we would think in terms of "wandering-with-hope." Don Wanderhope does not ultimately despair and remain in the "slough of despond," but endures in a mood that, while ambivalent toward the demonstrations of God, nevertheless does not deny His existence and omniscience.

What the novel is about, though, is all the provocation to such a response to life: Wanderhope's father, a virile Dutchman strongly seeking but inclined to vacillation in religious matters, spends his last years degenerating in a mental hospital; Wanderhope himself contracts tuberculosis; the cancer-tormented young woman Wanderhope comes to love, almost selflessly, at the tuberculosis sanatorium dies just when an outlook that enfolds the two seems brightest; Greta, the troubled girl Wanderhope marries, flees out of her own Dutch Calvinist background through a mental institution, a period of fanatical fundamentalism, an alcoholism incited by convictions of guilt, finally to suicide. The proverbial straw, however, is the one set of related sequences that most of the book is given to as Wanderhope's daughter Carol succumbs to the ravages of leukemia.

Two circumstances regarding Carol's suffering should be seen as related to the themes De Vries develops in earlier novels. One is Wanderhope's relationship with Stein, another waiting father at the leukemia hospital. When he is with Stein, Wanderhope is optimistic, almost as if he is forced to be so. He would be lost if he were to despair, and so would Carol. Stein is his alter ego, one "who gave, and asked, no quarter."²⁰ In Carol's illness he is Wanderhope's doppelgänger, a cynical, spiritually darkened side of the self, differing in only physical presence from the mocking accompanier of Hank Tattersall

in The Cat's Pajamas. Wanderhope, like all of De Vries' schizoid characters, is conscious of the split in his own reactions that Stein merely objectifies; he can see Stein as "the Devil's advocate off whom to bounce his speculations, the rock against which to hurl his yearnings and his thoughts, to test and prove them truly, an office that mealy-mouthed piety could not have performed" (BL, p. 150).

The other thematic element is Wanderhope's coming to a recognizance of being bound into time. When he has lost Greta and all the others, when Carol alone is left to him, he works hard at living for her only, at fleeing out of the time that has dealt him miseries in sequence. And when Carol is stricken, his first impulses are to make her days unlike anything she has ever known. But ironically it takes time to bring Wanderhope to understanding. First, the doctor warns Wanderhope away from the extraordinary, advises him to plan only one thing: Carol's return to school, to the ordinary. Those plans are not enough, of course, and Carol grows worse. Then Wanderhope himself prays in a long and beautiful lyric prayer that if God spares Carol, even for a year, he will see that they miss nothing, but rather note every speck of nature's realm. Carol is not spared and Wanderhope is crushed, yet it is only after a cataclysmic event that he can see he has not seen or accepted his role. He must be receiver, not giver, not god-surrogate. Thankfully, the ending of the novel

does not recapitulate or even explicitly recall those glorious days of youth with his father, or the happiness with Rena, or the results of union with Greta, but all that is implicit when the compassionate who have had their own suffering recall him to his senses about Carol. One says, "You had a dozen years of perfection. That's a dozen more than most people get" (BL, p. 175). Another tells him what he of the poetic nature should have realized long ago, "Some poems are long, some are short. She was a short one" (BL, p. 176). Wanderhope comes to see himself in the condition of man, a sometimes perilousness, always threatening condition. But he has company:

There may be griefs beyond the reach of solace, but none worthy of the name that does not set free the springs of sympathy. Blessed are they that comfort, for they too have mourned, may be more likely the human truth. . . . the throb of compassion rather than the breath of consolation; the recognition of how long, how long is the mourners bench upon which we sit, arms linked in indeluded friendship, all of us, brief links, ourselves, in the eternal pity. (BL, pp. 175-176)

The trial is long and hard; in the text, for the reader's benefit, it is mercifully short, but the narrative allows us no doubts about the interminableness of the whole thing to Wanderhope. But the days of sorrow are a valley through which he must pass. Black Friday is the necessary, the inescapable, prelude to the glory of Easter. "To reach salvation man must pass through a negation of negation." In short, "God must be hated before he can be loved, denied before he can be believed."²¹

Early in her illness, Carol explains to her father the ritual of the comedian's pie:

"have you ever noticed . . . that after the one guy throws his pie and it's the other guy's turn, the first guy doesn't resist or make any effort to defend himself? He just stands there and takes it. He even waits for it, his face sort of ready? Then when he gets it, he still waits a second before wiping it out of his eyes, doing it deliberately, kind of solemn. . . ." (BL, p. 137)

When Carol dies, Wanderhope stumbles out and away, shortly to find himself in front of a statue of Christ that he has contemplated before on breather walks during the hospital vigils. With him he has the birthday cake that Carol was to have that day. He throws it.

It was miracle enough that the pastry should reach its target at all, at that height from the sidewalk. The more so that it should land squarely, just beneath the crown of thorns. Then through scalded eyes I seemed to see the hands free themselves of the nails and move slowly toward the soiled face. Very slowly, very deliberately, with infinite patience, the icing was wiped from the eyes and flung away. I could see it fall in clumps to the porch steps. Then the cheeks were wiped down with the same sense of grave and gentle ritual, with all the kind sobriety of one whose voice could be heard saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Then the scene dissolved itself in a mist in which my legs could no longer support their weight, and I sank down to the steps. I sat on its worn stones, to rest a moment before going on. Thus Wanderhope was found at that place which for the diabolist of his literary youth, and for those with more modest spiritual histories too, was said to be the only alternative to the muzzle of a pistol: the foot of the Cross. (BL, p. 170)

Having tried to escape out of time, Don Wanderhope at last finds himself an unmistakably finite creature. It

would be too much, a distortion, to say that Wanderhope's cup fills with laughter, but his joy is in knowing the human situation. He can perceive "we are indeed saved by grace in the end--but to give, not take" (BL, p. 174).

De Vries' next novel--Reuben, Reuben (1964)--returns to a less explicitly religious framework, but if the novel has any serious concerns, and the indications are manifold that it does, those concerns are for matters of ultimate importance, and, hence, in Tillich's terms, they are about religious questions. The protagonist-narrator of the first and better part of the book seems especially vulnerable to being seen in the terms suggested by Penney Chapin and L. Rust Hills: "fiction having to do with religion in our time is more likely to be concerned with a crisis of identity than with a crisis of faith."²²

Frank Spofford is overtly, explicitly caught in the impossibility of trying to live two lives, that of the homespun character and the cosmopolite, or rather nouveau intellectual. An off-the-beaten-track chicken farmer and small-time producer-retailer, Spofford finds that of necessity he must deal with the Connecticut suburbanites who have invaded his area and his thinking. While in the process of establishing what kind of man he must be in the new circumstances, Spofford spoofs both his tradition-bound family and the community of ultra-modern commuters. But while having great fun hopping facilely, as he thinks, from

one role to the other, exposing smallness and meanness on both places, too, he also unwittingly misappraises himself and proceeds dangerously close to a real schizoid break. Fortunately for him, his compassion for both elements overwhelms the mockery he was conducting and he gives up both the Janus-masquerade and writing a book about it all. The beautiful and important irony is that while seemingly irrevocably displaced, Spofford has in the end become truly acclimated. He sees what he can do and must do, accepts his position, and knows himself.

McGland, the subject of Part II of Reuben, Reuben, is a parody of Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan rolled into one. McGland, too, is a displaced person, self-alienated not from two equally attractive worlds but from one large one he believes to be absurd. While De Vries parodies solipsistic existentialism, McGland looks only into himself, never placing himself among others as Spofford manages to do, and does despair. Yet he does not live in Tillich's "courage of despair."²³ Although he feels himself to be living a high seriousness--interpreting, for example, his teeth extractions as progressive emasculation--he does not know himself and first attempts suicide in an absurd, hilarious, ironic episode, and then succeeds in an equally humorous, although grim, scene. In McGland's "cop-out" and our interpretation of it lies a major distinction for comedy in this essay. The tribulations of McGland have

excited our empathy, but our laughter at his hanging himself in a rupture truss is the laughter that staves off one's own suicide. This is no exultation in an ultimate high joy, but rather a dramatic and negative scene that implies joyous affirmation as its obverse.

In Part III, the final "Mopworth" section, Jellema says we are "in more traditional De Vries country."²⁴ This is certainly no compliment to De Vries, for the section is anticlimactic both in narrative depth and thematic power. A domestic comedy, "Mopworth" is predicated on the title character's courting of Geneva Spofford as a means of denying his suspected homosexuality. After gathering his strength in the trial of courtship and the labors of matrimony, Mopworth must be subjected to an ultimate incongruity, a typical De Vriesian irony: Geneva insists on a divorce so that she can open a school for children from broken families.

In its total compass Reuben, Reuben offers three conclusions to experience. One can win, as Spofford does; one can lose, as McGland does; and one can stand at the center of life's ambiguity--Mopworth knows himself but loses that which was gained through the trial of achieving self-harmony. Importantly, the results are not interchangeable. Everything depends upon what one opts for in the myriad choices. We might think that Spofford has chosen wrongly if we grant his last words as the ultimate insight.

. . . I remain alone and to one side in--where? No place. For now I am displaced indeed, belonging neither to that world I stole briefly out of to explore another, nor in that other I slipped out to explore. A foot in each.²⁵

Yet we can understand what Spofford does not see, that his final wisdom in stopping the masquerade is a position of synthesis, born out of the chaotic dialectic of his schizophrenic split between two worlds. His is a new place born of experience in the acquisition of wisdom and joy.

De Vries' 1965 Let Me Count the Ways is, as Rod Jellema suggests in his review of the book, a harmonizing of the two lines in De Vries that have been exploited here: "agony" and "zaniness."²⁶ However, the two are far more deftly interwoven than they are in Reuben, Reuben, especially as the latter tends to fragment into mere comedy of manners in Mopworth's story. Part of the unity achieved stems from the fact that the two narrators are Stan and Tom Waltz, father and slightly more literate son, respectively, and from the interweaving of their two lives in the novel's last part.

The first and last narrator--whose words still amount to only roughly half the book--is Stan Waltz, a piano mover with aspirations toward intellectual atheism. The antagonist of his yearnings appears in his own home. His wife is a non-intellectual fundamentalist who has been "plain, lowdown,

cornball, meat-and-potatoes Jesus Saves saved" and thereby, in Stan's estimation, placed "beyond redemption."²⁷ But however adamantly he defends the free thinking found in his Little Blue Book library, he is vulnerable. When the skies light up to the accompaniment of an unearthly din, Stan repents, "accepts the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal savior, now and forevermore," baptizes himself in the kitchen sink, and leads the family in "Nearer, My God, to Thee" (Let, p. 60). After his initial chagrin, Stan takes no small satisfaction in the fact that the "apocalypse" was only the local fireworks factory on fire. Part of Stan's claimed freedom is, as one expects in De Vries, the desire for a mistress, intellectually on a par with his own self-determined superiority. Yet the principal outcome of his fling is a physical blow which adumbrates the moral effect of his sought libertinism. Stan receives a Bible Belt--a trousers belt with scripture passages embossed on it--from his wife, but he gets a hernia from his piano-sized mistress Lena when he tries to gallantly carry her to bed. But Stan also pretends to a sophisticated mind and he chose Lena because she would be on an intellectual par with him. To prove himself he wins a sonnet contest--with a verbatim plagiarism from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The embarrassment of the inevitable discovery incites him to a five day drunk that becomes his period of repentance for everything--a twelve-year chronic hangover. Speaking

from the perspective of a humbled head, Stan ends the first section with a belated insight:

The point is that I have at last learned what it is all about. It can be put in a word, the sum total of human truth and wisdom. Love. That is everything. We have simply got to learn to put up with this mortal stuff, to make do with one another. Only love enables us to go on. Simple human love that asks no quarter, seeks not itself, is not puffed up. Loyal and abiding love, love that never stints, never begrudges. Love that helps us bear with one another and that makes us do for one another--make sacrifices, even, when the time comes or the occasion calls. (Let, p. 114)

Part Two is narrated by Tom Waltz, Stan's son. Tom's bifocal heritage of fundamentalism and atheism has left its mark on him: a predictable schizophrenia. Alternately pentecostal and blasphemous, Tom has difficulties with his wife Marion and with his English professorship at Polycarp College in Slow Rapids, Indiana. Ironically, every seeming blunder only propels him into the welcome arms of his dean. Marion is not so foolishly satisfied, and she and Tom grow into wider and wider differences. The psychological burden of trying to live two attitudes and life styles is too much and Tom decides to take a semester off and go without Marion to Lourdes, hoping that a miracle will be wrought on the psychological roots of his malady. He plans to take his father and the hangover along for a similar miracle. In that tentatively optimistic tableau Tom's section of the novel closes.

As Stan resumes the narration, the trip to Lourdes has been made, but it is a pilgrimage full of predictable

De Vries irony. At Lourdes Tom becomes seriously physically ill, and a rather frenetic period follows in which the case cannot be diagnosed. Finally a priest asks why Marion is not with Tom. She is sent for forthwith and arrives demanding to know everything that Tom has touched, smelled, eaten or whatever. Stan finally stumbles upon the fact that Tom had replaced a broken filling with airplane glue. But by the time the tooth has been properly repaired, Tom says he was already feeling better before seeing the dentist. Stan is skeptical, and out of relief, is, except for the confidence to the reader, quite happy with leaving the matter at Tom seeing himself as singled out by God for a special providence to set him straight about his life. Tom is re-placed, and Stan, as noted earlier, understands that he cannot dictate other consciousness. Stan accepts, however cautiously:

If you want my final opinion on the mystery of life and all that, I can give it to you in a nutshell. The universe is like a safe to which there is a combination. But the combination is locked up in the safe. (Let, pp. 306-307)

The Vale of Laughter (1967), if read in sequence with the rest of De Vries' work, impresses one as almost surely De Vries' response to those who have been attracted and repelled by his comedy'. I have indicated that in several of the earlier novels there is explicit, although brief, theorizing about comedy. Intriguing De Vries, it also occupies his characters, at least for a time. Tom Waltz'

professorial research-in-progres is on "The Clowns in Shakespeare." But in Vale the idea of comedy is taken up as subject matter in greater length than ever before.

The narrator of the novel's first half is Joe Sandwich, a compulsive comic terribly unconvinced of his own worth, and driven in retaliation to practical jokes--until he marries. Then, he manifests profligacy abroad and aberrancy at home. His advances to his usually less than passionate wife, ironically named Naughty, run to such devices as running through the house nude, bearing a sign above his masculinity, hung with a bell, asking that it be rung for service. Joe Sandwich's principal gag, though, is naming his son Hamilton because of the inevitable nickname. Out of his insecurity, Joe desires a monument. Ironically, nothing could be more appropriate than another mortal, a walking gag, a Ham Sandwich.

Wally Hines, a psychology teacher, narrates the second half of The Vale of Laughter. His fascination with humor accounts for his involvement with Sandwich, although their relationship seems to have little other basis. Wally's wife becomes Joe's mistress, one of several he has had, and the rivalry and tension in that situation sets the stage for the Great Bicycle Race which proves to be Joe's wildest stunt of all--the incident of his death is the blackest humor of his life. Individually seeking a good oneupmanship move in the battle for Gloria, Joe's aptly named wife,

both Wally and Joe drift into secretly preparing for a challenge bicycle race on a street course that includes a breath-taking downhill stretch just before a sharp curve. Joe borrows Wally's bike; Wally forgets to explain its caliper brakes--and Joe's last living moments are spent flying into space while madly backpedaling. In the aftermath, Gloria divorces Wally, he marries Naughty, and inherits Ham along with her. Having sought the Comic Spirit so long, he placidly settles down to having him in his own house every day.

Peter De Vries' most recent work at the time of this writing is The Cat's Pajamas & Witch's Milk (1968). This novel--or perhaps more accurately, pair of novellas--reintroduces the difficult De Vries of The Blood of the Lamb. While not at all so explicit in its grappling with rather basic and standard theological problems as the chronicle of Don Wanderhope's tribulations, Pajamas & Milk nonetheless does raise issues in the terms with which much contemporary theology is concerned: the individual's identity, and his responsibility to others, and the possibility of communion with them.

With typically De Vriesian irony, The Cat's Pajamas is the story of Hank Tattersall's descent to knowledge. Pouring oil on his own path, he slides from the professorial ranks of academia to the social rankness of a paradoxically genteel hippiedom. Along the way he writes absurd

commercials for an advertising firm, stars in the role of an Italian street-singer on a schmaltzy television show, peddles twice-bought vegetables from a street cart, hires himself out in the guise of an immigrant gardener and proceeds to nurture weeds and uproot flowers, and finally hawks canned fresh air from door to door. Richard B. Sale calls this plunge to social oblivion an "identity-seeking debauchery (through role playing rather than alcohol)." ²⁸

Yet beyond this what we ought not to overlook--although we might, in all the comedy that Hank produces in his decline--is that this man's identity crisis springs not from a single moment or even a particular incident, but rather in chronic fashion recurs again and again, until he has irretrievably alienated himself. Too successful--though not in monetary terms--he must prove, it seems, that he is less than whatever he appears to be. Toward the end, long after their marriage has collapsed, Hank's wife finds him living with a less than bourgeois widow and her idiot son. In a deliberate lie Hank tells his wife that he has Mrs. Yutch pregnant and couldn't leave her if he wanted to. Earlier, one of the women for whom he is gardening inadvertently sums up Hank's whole existence: "Oh my God . . . Talk about a will to fail." ²⁹

The radical schism in Hank's identity or self concept is amply evident in the interior exchanges between Hank and his doppelgänger. "Tattersall had taken to writing himself

abusive and even threatening letters." This "other self . . . this familiar" (P&M, p. 6) intervenes regularly to harass Tattersall on his objectivity, or tact, or decency when Hank is doing well, and on his ego-centricity, unfaithfulness, and plain stupidity when he begins his descent. If we read the doppelgänger as Tattersall writes him, there can be no doubt that the latter is perfectly aware through every choice he makes.

But further--and this point has been neglected in all the reviews of the work--Hank's identity problem is also manifest in his relationships with women. Married when the story begins, Hank Tattersall, in boringly repetitive De Vries-character fashion, chases other women. Suddenly coming upon an old flame, he pursues her, but--with a twist, as we might expect--through her niece, Mayo, one of his students. Yet as Hank launches his floundering pursuit, it seems that he makes Mayo herself his quarry. He daydreams, envisioning himself a suave college-type--more student than professor--who could sweep Mayo off her feet and away to the nearest dimly lit bar for a drink. All of this, of course, has its basis in his insecure marriage. Sherry seems a fine wife, stable, and if a bit too domesticated, at least sincere and loving toward her husband. But being another type, Hank has periodically throughout their marriage--"three or four times in their six years together"--insisted that they get remarried, always of

course by a romantic elopement. "He called it 'renewing the dream'" (P&M, p. 68). But the last time he proposes before leaving teaching (and this must be seen as an inciting incident), Sherry balks.

That was the thing that worried Sherry--the suspicion that he was spoiling for a new identity, not just a change in the old one, or a temporary variation of it. (P&M, p. 77)

It hardly seems an accident that Hank Tattersall is thirty-three years old when he begins his descent, or that it is on page thirty-three when we read: "He often saw himself as Christ beating the be-Jesus out of everybody in sight." Something like O'Connor's Haze Motes; preacher-prophet for the Church without Christ, Tattersall will affirm negation. He tries to, and comes to an end which Sale calls as "absurd as any in modern fiction."³⁰ With his head caught in a doggy door and the rest of him exposed in a snowstorm, he freezes to death. But not before his doppelgänger can quip "'Well, your end is in sight, Tattersall. . . . I think we can safely say that'" (P&M, p. 185). But Hank has one last and only regret: that Lucy Stiles had never really meant anything at all to him. In the regret we perceive that Lucy's ignorance of Hank's innocently misdirected attention had precipitated the whole fall. Putting his plans on something without substance, Hank becomes the comic-victim, not the comic-victor like his ironic archetype, Christ.

Beside The Cat's Pajamas, Witch's Milk is distinctly anticlimactic in two respects. The Cat's Pajamas is unrelentingly funny, from the broad farce of Hank's attaché case full of plumber's tools spilled on the floor during a chamber music recital to the grotesque chronicle of a man who insists on kicking himself while he's down. By comparison Pete Seltzer's doubletalk in Witch's Milk is a dull comedown. In dramatization, the second novella is also a sad finale. Hank Tattersall, however much a fool, excites our empathy. Torn by the very real contradictions of life, he is truly their victim, and never deliberately hurts another person. That his wife is his victim is a quibbling point, for she never really suffers in losing him. Tillie Seltzer, on the other hand, evokes very little sympathy in spite of being far more overtly a victim.

Tillie Seltzer is the major figure of Witch's Milk and the "Mrs. Seltzer" who appears near the end of The Cat's Pajamas, calling on Hank as a social worker concerned for the idiot child left to Hank's care after Mrs. Yutch chokes to death on a chicken bone, convulsed at one of Hank's jokes. In her own story, Tillie is, like Hank, trapped by the expectations of society. Hank secedes, but Tillie cannot or will not. Married to a most incongruous figure--a gimpy philanderer--Tillie tries to keep her place in the world. But the world in which she moves is composed principally of women and a homosexual, all of whom deserve

much more the real label which Tillie hints euphemistically at in calling herself a witch: that is, they are bitches.

Hank Tattersall is responsible himself for the course his life takes; but Tillie Seltzer, while intellectually pretentious is as much beset as she is responsible.

Saddled with a prodigal husband, she must also undergo the trauma of watching her nine year old son, Charlie, die of leukemia. Interestingly, whether because of space limitations or perhaps the fact that he had already portrayed the agony of a leukemia death, De Vries does not except in minute, isolated moments catch for Tillie the suffering which Don Wanderhope endures. Then, without the magic clue of parenthood, Tillie and Pete separate, he to an apartment and a girl in town, she to fruitless work for charities. For all her troubles, Tillie earns a rest in a sanatorium. After receiving a marriage proposal from the homosexual of her crowd, Tillie gets a call from Pete, and in a dénouement unlikely for the events that have preceded it, Tillie and Pete are apparently going to get together again. Why does Tillie take him back again? Because "He had no faults at all. He was just hopeless" (P&M, p. 299). If Tillie is a hapless creature who opts for something over nothing, her words at least are those of one who by the wisdom of experience accepts the human condition.

To explain in part how Peter De Vries' fiction means-- with a nod to John Ciardi--we might for a minute place these thirteen novels in the company of one book of short stories: Dubliners. Setting aside Joyce's definition of "epiphanies" and the critical discussion of them (especially whether they do or do not operate formally as Joyce intended in his stories), the term "epiphany" is nevertheless useful in seeing and defining an aspect of De Vries' novels with regard to the comic vision. In James Joyce, Harry Levin says that, "Though grounded in theology, it [the epiphany] has now become a matter of literary technique."³¹ I would like to return the word a little closer to a theological context.

If "ephipany" may be defined as a revelation or an achieved state of awareness, we can divide the stories in Dubliners into two types: those in which both a character and the reader understand (or, in the case of the character, at least have intimations of) the true state of the character's situation, and those in which only the reader knows. "Araby" is an example of the former: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."³² "Clay" is an instance of the latter; Maria never perceives that she is mocked in her brother's house, or that she in fact sublimates the verse of a song which speaks of a lover-knight, or that in spite of external jollity her days are a vacuous existence.

The typology of this division in Dubliners provides a key for De Vries' fiction likewise. In some of the novels the characters have an awareness of joy in the spiritual or moral position they hold at the conclusion (an awareness of course shared by the reader) and in some only the reader suspects the import of the situation. In The Handsome Heart, although a few may find the ending glib, Brian Carston acknowledges what he has passed through and joys in what he achieves. As Heart's themes are overtly secular and psychological, The Blood of the Lamb's are manifestly religious and theological. Just so, Don Wanderhope's state of mind as the latter novel concludes might seem sharply different from Brian's perception. However, his articulation of the compassion which he receives after Carol's death is only a sentence or two away from the affirmation of Stan Waltz as he closes the first section of Let Me Count the Ways, that love is "the sum total of human truth and wisdom." It might be argued that in The Cat's Pajamas & Witch's Milk the existence of such love and the consequent joy is denied, at least in Hank Tattersall's story.

However, I think too many reviewers have read The Cat's Pajamas straightforwardly as the affirmation of negation without allowing for De Vries' insistent and constant sense of irony. The final irony may well be that De Vries ultimately satirizes the absurd man. The

existentialist's life is the cumulative product of his choices. "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."³³ But always, when one choice is made, myriad others are implied. Choosing isolation, Tattersall rejects communitas, the sphere of compassion. As if to set things straight for his too-literal readers, De Vries gives us in Witch's Milk an epilogue. Tillie Seltzer puts aside rejection and self-aggrandizement at the end, takes back her husband, in part because "he had no faults at all. He was just hopeless." The burden of her son's death by leukemia has, in spite of moments of fury at the seeming injustice, taught her that "We're all on loan to one another, you know, the whole thing can be foreclosed without a moment's notice" (P&M, p. 270). Doodling in the sanatorium during her rest, she drafts a prayer. "Give us courage for our fears, the wisdom to survive our follies, and clarity to bind up the wounds we inflict on one another" (P&M, p. 291).

The Handsome Heart establishes a major theme in De Vries' fiction: the selfish rage for personal success and importance in modern life ironically induces a harried environment and sufficient tension to often culminate in an individuality-destroying schizophrenia. The only antidote is real love which has the effect of clearing the eyes so that one can really see the "true country" of his saving

moral stance and in contrast the chaos of a life lived in a world of illusions.

It would seem, then, that in the course of the years and their novels De Vries has in one way or another, in one degree of obviousness and intensity or another, countered that destructive selfishness by developing a central thematic assertion that compassion--or charity--is the cure for a world of ills or an ill world. "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. . . . Charity never faileth. . . ." ³⁴ Charity is, of course, love, modeled for Christians on the agapé of the Father. If the early novels are marked by ironic reversals, those reversals succeed the accession of compassionate understanding as the ruling motive for the protagonists. Without intending to be syllogistic, I think there exists a neat sequence of premises and conclusion in De Vries' fiction: God is Love. (Even if one presses the point that De Vries never evidences a distinctly and overtly Christian orientation, one might accept tentatively that De Vries says Love is Everything.) And God is Joy. Interpreting the parable and adding capitalization, we may say, "Enter then into the joy of thy Lord." ³⁵ Therefore, love and joy are one. The true comedy of Peter De Vries novels is not simply physical reunion or celebration--such traditional signs of the comic ending are absent in much De Vries as we have

seen--but emerges rather in the comprehension of place. The comic figure, the joyous one, is he who accepts the finitude of life, with all the foibles and failures in himself and others.

NOTES

¹In his critical study J. F. Powers (New York: Twayne, 1968), John V. Hagopian proposes to see the fiction of Powers from a rather traditional perspective that might seem to contradict my assertion on point of view in De Vries' work:

Any story told from a limited, subjective point of view is automatically two stories--the implicit one of characters and events as they "really" are, and the explicit one of characters and events as they are distortedly seen by the central intelligence (p. 125).

However, De Vries, surely quite aware of the simple irony on which dramatic monologues depend, attempts to work formally with a technique that gives the lie to the idea that things are as simple as "seems" and "are" relative to one person. In its greatest complexity, De Vries' fiction proposes that although a thing seems x to one character, it may be y to another, and z to yet a third. All the while the narrative point of view may be saying the thing is really A--perhaps. One might compare, in another genre, Rashomon. Within De Vries' own work, Let Me Count the Ways illustrates the point. Stan Waltz tells his story (and throughout De Vries' irony is superabundant). Then his son Tom tells his story, all the while commenting on his father's ideas (and again authorial irony is clear). Finally, Stan resumes his narrative, explaining his own former views, clarifying Tom's ideas, and offering an abundance of new "insights" (still overshadowed by the omnipresent irony).

²Hugh Kenner's review of The Cat's Pajamas & Witch's Milk (New York Times Book Review, November 24, 1968, p. 4) examples the hesitancy to accept comedy as the frame for anything important. In a blatant elitism, Kenner manages to summon up only "gag" and "pun" as capsule descriptions of De Vries' virile, visceral comedy. Extending himself, he does admit that De Vries "turns a neat sentence."

³George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy" in Comedy, Introduction and appendix by Wylie Sypher. Anchor Books (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 47-48.

⁴Peter De Vries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 7.

⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁶Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 7-8).

⁷Nevertheless, for some inexplicable reason, De Vries' first three novels have been totally forgotten or dismissed by both commentators and De Vries' final publishers, Little, Brown and Company. Jellema says they are all of "limited importance," but obviously I am arguing the point.

⁸The Handsome Heart (New York: Coward-McCann, 1943), p. 167.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰This family consists of three eccentric brothers: a musician who reads scores like books, a professional student, and a liberal minister. The latter is so much the twin of the late Andrew Mackerel that he even predicts exactly Mackerel's best lines, for example, ". . . let us hope . . . that a kind providence will put a speedy end to the Acts of God under which we have been laboring" (p. 118 in Tunnel; p. 24 in The Mackerel Plaza).

¹¹The name "Dick" is all that the narrator ever reveals in his first-person narrative, and that not until the penultimate chapter. Both the commonness of "Dick" and the absence of a last name point to the universality or representative quality of the figure. He is an Everyman. Further, without claiming intention on De Vries' part, I would offer that in this case "Dick" is the Christian name, and he is a pilgrim treading a wearying path toward sanctuary.

¹²Comfort Me With Apples (New York: Little, Brown, 1956), pp. 274-275.

¹³The Mackerel Plaza (1958; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1959), p. 10. Hereafter all references to this novel will appear parenthetically in the text with MP and the page number.

¹⁴Peter De Vries, p. 21.

¹⁵The Tents of Wickedness (New York: Little, Brown, 1959), p. 202. Hereafter all references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text with TW and the page number.

¹⁶"Home Truths," New Yorker, XXXVII (February 25, 1961), 130.

- ¹⁷Peter De Vries, p. 27.
- ¹⁸Through the Fields of Clover (New York: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 275.
- ¹⁹Peter De Vries, pp. 39-40.
- ²⁰The Blood of the Lamb (1961; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 154. Hereafter all references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text with BL and the page number.
- ²¹Sypher, Comedy, p. 231.
- ²²Penney Chapin Hills and L. Rust Hills, How We Live: Contemporary Life in Contemporary Fiction (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 659.
- ²³Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 140.
- ²⁴Peter De Vries, p. 30.
- ²⁵Reuben, Reuben (New York: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 180.
- ²⁶"The Back of God's Hand," Saturday Review, XLVIII (August 28, 1965), 41.
- ²⁷Let Me Count the Ways (New York: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 5. Hereafter all references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text with Let and the page number.
- ³⁰Sale, p. 448.
- ³¹Rev. ed. (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Direction, 1960), p. 31.
- ³²James Joyce, "Araby" in Dubliners. Viking Critical Library (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 35.
- ³³Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," tr. Bernard Frechtman in A Casebook on Existentialism, ed. William V. Spanos (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), p. 278.
- ³⁴I Corinthians 13:4,8.
- ³⁵Matthew 25:21.

CHAPTER III

J. F. POWERS: CLOISTERED CATHOLIC

There are no living American
Catholics who are major writers.
--Harry Sylvester (1948)

Surely we are tired of the
priest novels.
--Michael Novak (1963)

In its broadest intent, the preceding chapter argues that the fiction of Peter De Vries must be read, for its richest import, on a level beneath--or, one might say, in the terms of this essay, above--that at which it is popularly received. In particular, De Vries' readers must perceive his novels' endings as resolutions and not merely as final, because last, quips, or humorous situations. The outcomes are "comings-out"--that is, epiphanies for the reader always and for the characters usually, in which it is made evident to the perceiver that a full participation in the possibilities of the human condition arises only in the escape from solipsism as one gives and receives love.

One antagonist of the theological or any other mode of explication is Susan Sontag. If one attends the argument of her oft-quoted essay "Against Interpretation," there is little surprise in Miss Contag's final proclamation that "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."¹ Indeed, the impetus for her essay is a belief that the best art of our time, in its several media, is unencumbered by symbol systems that need minute explanations. In the final analysis--and the irony of "analysis" is deliberate--for Miss Sontag "It doesn't matter whether artists intend, or don't intend, for their works to be interpreted." Urged or not, she argues, content analysis

wrongs the artist, "violates art . . .[,] makes [it] into an article for use."² However, in the long run, her whole essay, although in name dignified and elevated by William V. Spanos to "formalistic criticism,"³ is simply a call for the paradox of an uncritical aesthetic appreciation.

Indeed, Miss Sontag would do well to give critics more credit, to admit with Albert Camus, whom she calls "the ideal husband of contemporary letters,"⁴ that "great works . . . always mean more than they are conscious of saying."⁵ Nevertheless, one feels--and again the irony is intended--the care with which Miss Sontag chooses the final terms for her emphatic accusation. And, it is to be granted, it seems that at times we have made a vice of a virtue. Ours is an age frequently burdened by a literary critical tradition that rivals--in its historical, formalist, socio-cultural, psychological and mythopoeic fragmentation--the Biblical exegesis of the Scholastics, both in its complexity and in its tendency toward a smug sophistication. In a calculated reaction to this tradition, Miss Sontag and several others wish to sponsor a simple--but, I contend, clearly naive--encounter with works of art.

Another critical bone, already picked in the introduction to this essay, offers conversely that content in art must be seriously examined for its philosophical statements. From such analysis, this criticism suggests that the important literature of our time actively and sincerely

denies any virtue in the recognition of a metaphysical superstructure as an informative element in art--or life. Thus it seems doubly ironic that one of the more simple and clear statements on what really lies at the heart of literature comes from a modern writer who had both a healthy respect for feeling and a tentative suspicion of intellect, but who, plainly antithetical to Miss Sontag and her coterie, knew quite well that her art operates with symbols, and who readily acknowledged her allegiance to Roman Catholic doctrine. The writer is, of course, the late Flannery O'Connor.

It would be worse than foolhardy to suggest anything strikingly original in the matter of Miss O'Connor's critical observations. For example, in reading through the essays of Mystery and Manners, the posthumous collection of her prose on life and art, one finds that regularly Miss O'Connor employs the eye-seeing metaphor to explain the good writer's perception and communication of the reality in which he exists.⁶ Her conception and her terminology on that point frankly recall Joseph Conrad's Preface (1897) to The Nigger of the "Narcissus." Speaking to incipient writers on their "moral position," Miss O'Connor says, "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing."⁷ Speaking to those readers who demand of the novel that it above all deliver some moral profit, Conrad

says, "My task . . . is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see."⁸ Again, Miss O'Connor's conviction that there is something in the work of art that cannot be accounted for by the mere addition of syntax, image, and symbol is not a new thing under the sun. However, the manner in which she talks about the transcendent quality of fiction is her own.

For Flannery O'Connor the means to the ultimate effect of the best fiction lie enshrouded in mystery. There is that in the fiction deserving of the name "art" which cannot be touched, not because it somehow vaguely exceeds the sum of its mechanical parts, but because that fiction is, however paradoxical it may seem, grounded in the transcendent, the realm that Miss O'Connor thinks of for the Christian writer as his "true country." It is in her observations on the fiction writer and his "home" that I find the keystone for this whole essay. Her principal affirmation of the concept of grounding, although the germinal idea appears almost motivally throughout her nonfiction statements, comes in "The Fiction Writer and His Country."⁹ There, although she does not rely upon the figure explicitly, Miss O'Connor describes the artist's "world" as if it were a set of Chinese boxes: at the center is the immediate fictional setting; around that is the writer's own native region; and, as one would expect,

encompassing that is his nation. But, while the vision of many others would either stop there or vaguely suggest an internationalism, for Flannery O'Connor there exists beyond everything else a "true country, which the writer with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute."¹⁰

However, as the quoted statement on "seeing" intimates, Flannery O'Connor believed strongly that fiction must perforce deal with more than the intangible. Indeed, "the world of the fiction writer is full of matter. . . ."¹¹

The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. . . . [F]or the sensibility infected with [Manicheanism], fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art.¹²

And because incarnation is a mystery, there are also and always certain qualifications to the response demanded of the mystery's perceiver, in this case the reader.

The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind, but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery.¹³

Man himself is a mystery,

. . . first because he is a kind of limit or horizon between two worlds. He is immersed in the flesh, but constituted by spirit; occupied with matter, but drawn toward God; growing in time, but already breathing the air of eternity. . . . On the day when, by some flash of intellectual enlightenment, or some effort at spiritual progress, we come to realize what we really are, we are seized with a kind of shiver. . . . Man then is radically a "mystery" that refuses to be "degraded into a problem."¹⁴

What we are or what we are enlightened to, has in all our fondest dreams, something to do with beauty. But we must all sit to the lesson captured succinctly in Fr.

Lynch's warning for both writer and reader:

There are no shortcuts to beauty or insight. We must go through the finite, the limited, the definite, omitting none of it lest we omit some of the potencies of being-in-the-flesh.¹⁵

Given the incarnational quality in literature, it seems no distortion to suggest that in the case of a writer with some conception--whether realized, unconscious, or even unresolved--of his own true country, his fiction will correspondingly dramatize in those characters who are candidates for the joy of spiritual sanctuary, an awareness of an ultimate ground of Being, a home, as it were. For example, the fiction of Peter De Vries is admittedly not neatly orthodox in any overt way. However, understanding that the finer literary imagination and the Christian theological imagination rise to converge in a common affirmation of the finite world, one sees that De Vries' fiction has a truly comic and Christian resolution. Home in Peter De Vries' fiction is revealed in the world, not in negation of the metaphysical, not of the world, but demonstrative of the working vision that any participation in the mysterious infinite must come through an engagement with and finally an acceptance of this finite world. That is to say, in the most untainted terms of existentialism,

De Vries is clearly an existentialist, no matter how much he satirizes the "professional" existentialists as theorists.¹⁶

Flannery O'Connor, while clearly believing in this world as revelation, is--to borrow a phrase with which Walter Hooper describes C. S. Lewis--"a thoroughgoing supernaturalist,"¹⁷ and a writer whose eye is very obviously always trained on a point beyond but through the finite. Between these two, in a position less ambiguous than De Vries but more at home in the world than O'Connor, stands J. F. Powers.

In a very real sense, Powers' vision of the human condition is easier to apprehend than either De Vries' or O'Connor's. Powers' conception is the most readily perceived primarily because his fiction almost always provides within the work adequate clues to the norm, i.e., the ideal, by which we are to evaluate the words and deeds of the characters. Hagopian summarizes the ideal thus: "However difficult it may be to define with precision, the constant standard in Powers' fiction is the true Christian spirit."¹⁸ The definition of that spirit--however imprecise it is finally adjudged to be--constitutes a major portion of the matter in this essay.

It might be argued Powers has no claim to uniqueness in his exposition of standards within the confines of the work, but it seems equally obvious that many writers are

not so helpful. In Peter De Vries' fiction, either everyone in the work has an elusive antic personality or else the one person whom we might want to recognize as operating by some kind of coherent standard remains artistically a totally uninteresting background figure. In Flannery O'Connor's work, the characters are grotesques: socially, emotionally, or intellectually--and finally, theologically--aberrant figures whose symbolic physical deformity coalesces with the interior distortions to obscure for many readers any glimpse of a normative vision. For example, in "The Displaced Person," even the old priest who benevolently brings the Guizac family to Mrs. McIntyre's farm as displaced persons is strikingly homely, more than half-deaf, totally uninterested in explaining his idiosyncratic insights ("Christ will come like that!"¹⁹), and monomaniacally committed to dogmatizing Mrs. McIntyre even after she mentally and physically collapses from her complicity in Mr. Guizac's death. Indeed, many readers of Flannery O'Connor who have been unaware of her personal confession have believed her to be viciously satirizing all religion. A real danger emerges when in reading De Vries and O'Connor, we search too frantically for the ideal and swing far in the opposite direction, foolishly fabricating new caricatures out of very insubstantial cloth. In contrast, J. F. Powers gives us quite plausible characters in a sometimes distressing verisimilitude, who

always keep us by their own shortcomings within sight of the standard.

With a perhaps tiresome insistence, this essay has proposed that there is something comic in Christianity and that something of Christianity is indigenous to comedy. Both climax in joy, and in both "home" or a state of spiritual soundness is the ideal position sought. The ideal frequently seems impossible to achieve, but it nonetheless constantly makes itself known and beckons man's efforts. In The Mackerel Plaza during one scene in the period when Andrew Mackerel attempts to make himself unappealing to Hester, oblivious to his real need and desire for her, he tells shaggy dog stories. Hester is not stupid, but fortunately for us, and apparently for no other reason than to offer Peter De Vries another opportunity for theorizing on comedy, she asks how shaggy dog stories work. Mackerel explains they operate by a "sort of calculated deflation that sets you down in the middle of nowhere, and that may be related to angst in the distance you find yourself from home."²⁰ Shaggy dog stories make us uncomfortable, leave us unsatisfied, deny us fulfillment. Real comedy, on the other hand, provides pleasure because we recognize, and are thus in one crucial sense comfortable with, the elements of the comedy. If a nervous laughter is sometimes occasioned by uneasiness in the face of the foreign--see Edith's thesis in The Handsome Heart--real

comedy becomes possible only when we recognize home, even if we have never seen it before. It is, perhaps, explainable as a species of déjà vu. The comedy of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor is real, not the stuff of a "shaggy dog," because in it one glimpses or beholds full face the norm for fulfillment. But the vision is clearest in Powers.

One must stress that in much of Powers' fiction the fulfillment, the "homecoming," is not overt, but rather is suggested through irony in an underplay or through the irony of narrative by a center of consciousness, a structural feature which John V. Hagopian takes as a major subject of his book. Even less often than in De Vries' fiction is there anything like Duke Theseus' kindly benediction (which for Northrup Frye would be the comic archetype²¹):

. . . Sweet friends, to bed. A fortnight hold
we this solemnity
In nightly revels and new jollity.
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V, i, 357-359)²²

Rather, Powers works obliquely, coming as close as at any other time to direct affirmation in the ending of "The Presence of Grace." If "coming as close" seems to be obscurantist critical rhetoric, I would borrow the words of Thomas M. Carlson:

I can think of nothing that presents greater technical difficulties than the descent of Grace in fiction. It descends in an instant which is incomprehensible to the mortal mind, yet the artist must somehow render it comprehensible to the reader.²³

In "The Presence of Grace" we witness in an understatedly traumatic afternoon away from the rectory, a young curate's trial by the devil in the world of the flesh. Father Fabre accepts a dinner invitation and thereby lends his presence--and, the subsequent accusations protest, his blessing--to a home shared by an unmarried middle-aged couple. The resolution to the turmoil that follows in the wake of Father Fabre's innocent excursion is his understanding that "the way for pastors was ever lit by flares of special grace."²⁴ But still, Powers would have us experience the epiphany on our own; the statement must be dramatized. So the story's closing paragraph is something of an allegory, as Powers plays upon pastor-shepherd-stick-crook-flock-dell-outdoors:

Father Fabre, trailing the boys out of the sacristy, gazed upon the peaceful flock, and then beyond, in a dim, dell-like recess of the nave used for baptism, he saw the shepherd carrying a stick and then he heard him opening a few windows.
(PG, 191).

The moment is, we must believe, a showing-forth for the curate. In running from his troubles he has almost decided to seclude himself as he thought his pastor did. But Father Fabre has naively seen only the old priest's exterior: his penchant for privacy and his frequent refusal to communicate in more than cryptic monosyllables. He has been, to Father Fabre's thinking, "ordinarily untalkative to the point of being occult" (PG, p. 182). Yet, in the final scene, when Father Fabre has abandoned

the ship of his personal fortunes as lost, when he believes that his pastor cannot and will not save him from the wrath of pietistic ladies convinced that their curate has sanctioned and even indulged in lusts of the flesh, he sees that ancient wisdom under pressure opens the windows of grace.

Our understanding of what Father Fabre beholds is so clear that we are sure he, too, experiences an epiphany. But frequently in Powers' work, the character's enlightenment promises to be slightly beyond the story, as a species of extra-fictional resolution to be perceived by the readers through the standard indicated in the work and applied in a final interpretation. One such story is "Blue Island" from the collection The Presence of Grace. Taken at face value, this story on secular figures might seem a minor "tragedy" of suburbia, but in truth it, too, affirms the act of opening to the outside.

The young wife Ethel is the victim of a grace-less merchandise-party organizer, a vampirish she-devil (described in damning phrases: "sharp-looking teeth," "purple claws," "starved," "her finger searching the little wound") who embarrasses the hopelessly timid Ethel in front of her new neighborhood acquaintances by foisting a "Shipshape" party on her in the guise of "a morning coffee."

The name of the suburb to which Ethel's husband Ralph has moved her is Blue Island. Very soon in the exposition

we know "Island" stands for isolation, for "my blue heaven" as hermitage. The move is clearly Ralph's attempt to separate himself and Ethel from his shady business interests in town; it is an attempt at withdrawing himself and Ethel, and is not concealed by the superficial efforts at socializing he coerces his wife into. "Blue" epitomizes the melancholy generated in Ethel as she surveys her apartness. Everything that Ralph tries to establish in Blue Island is bluntly the antithesis of a real home. Even the furnishings, down to the paintings and silverware, are misplaced in the suburb; too large or too ornate, they look toward another "home."

When Mrs. Hancock doffs her mask of sympathetic friend-maker for her true face of pot-and-pan pitchman, Ethel's guests hastily depart, leaving the now desolate bride to the final assault of her traitorous guide. In an almost catatonic state, Ethel gives Mrs. Hancock fifteen dollars for a pan and some furniture "ointment," and turns prostrate on her bed to await Ralph's return at noon. The story ends as Ethel hears him arriving and looks from the window to see him bearing a congratulatory bouquet, a "club of red roses" (PG, p. 162). The vision completes the image of a cave-man in the way Ralph has treated Ethel. But the joke is on Ralph. All along, while ostensibly the strong one--Ethel was an orphan, and Ralph married her as a waitress in one of his nightclubs--Ralph has revealed

himself as frantically insecure. Unfortunately, the island has been as much a prison for Ethel as an escape for Ralph.

This "home" has been a travesty. We sense at the conclusion and must believe that Ralph will shortly understand--for he is sensitive, wants things for Ethel, tries furtively and without success to shape himself in the mold of a suburbanite--what a real home is. Ralph fails, and Ethel must be the innocent sufferer, because there are no prescriptive ideas about a home. It must be defined in the living. And like "mother" or the idea of comedy, home is often revealed through negative examples.

"Blue Island" is, admittedly, one of Powers' minority of stories with secular characters in the feature roles. I would not say that it is a story with a secular "base" because I think such a piece as "Blue Island" demonstrates conclusively Powers' concern for the sanctity of the human spirit, an ultimately religious, i.e., theological matter. "Blue Island" is one of Powers' later stories, 1955, but the principal of an ideal home defined by its conspicuous absence is evident in earlier work such as "The Lord's Day," the first story in Prince of Darkness, although not the earliest written.

"The Lord's Day" revolves upon the quietly clamorous strife between an obtuse, selfish parish rector and the cluster of teaching nuns directly under his supervision.

The time setting for the story is the very early afternoon of a hot summer Sunday--the ballgame is on and Father takes his collar from his neck and a cold beer from the refrigerator. The hour is right for the appearance of the noontide devil, and just as he comes as Father rustles the nuns off to count the day's collection while preparing to relax himself. The very funny repartee that follows among the nuns as they count buttons, bus tokens, and change produces an image of Father as tyrant of the house, insensitive to the smallest needs of the ladies in his "family." He will not give Sister Eleanor money for a school map of the United States, and she must piece together an erratic topography from the "free road maps she got from the oil companies."²⁵ Indeed, all that Father has done with any energy is cut down the only hesitant images of beauty in the story: some mulberry trees. Father himself gave "the first lick" because he thought they attracted bees and a bee had stung him. "What if it had been a wasp? How did he know it was one of the mulberry bees? He knew. That was all" (PD, p. 11).

The story's climax emerges in the conflict between Father and the Mother Superior (who has the story's point of view) over the nunnery's stove, an ancient affair as inefficient in operation as a collage of road maps. But Father will neither fix the stove nor get the ladies a new one. His contention and last word is that the remaining

mulberry is "blocking the draft. If you want your stove to work properly, it'll have to come down. That's all I got to say." "'Thank you, Father,' she said," and in a provocatively ambiguous ending, "went quickly out of the kitchen, only wanting to get upstairs and wash the money off her hands" (PD, p. 18). Whether she feels she has betrayed the nuns by being defeated on the issue of the stove or whether she simply views the collection money as solely the property of this incredible old miser, we at any rate perceive that community is conspicuous by its absence. These brides of Christ are in thrall to a man who would bring everything down, not to deal with it, but to eliminate it. Straightening up from examining the stove, the priest "peer[s] out" (PD, p. 18) and sees nothing but something literally standing in the way of his willed remoteness.

This, of course, is the same image of an unharmonious domestic scene that Powers develops with much more openness and humor in "The Valiant Woman," published the same year. Reading this latter story, one almost forgets at times, in spite of Father Firman's intensive scrutiny of the canons, that priest and housekeeper are not man and wife.

"Eisdem licet cum illis . . . Clerics are allowed to reside only with women about whom there can be no suspicion, either because of a natural bond (as mother, sister, aunt) or of advanced age, combined in both cases with good repute." (PD, p. 126)

Mrs. Stoner "did not meet the letter of the law--but, alas, how she fulfilled the spirit!" (PD, p. 126). A thorn in the side, if not a crown of thorns for Father Firman, Mrs. Stoner is an exaggerated stereotype of the shrewish wife. To her part, Father Firman plays Casper Milquetoast with Walter Mitty-ish fantasies of rebellion. Together, beyond the sheer funniness of the situation and dialogue, the two stand as figurative expressions of the combatants in an unharmonious home. And, as we hear in the conversation of Father Firman and his birthday well-wisher, Father Nulty (the only one who can brave an evening in Mrs. Stoner's house), there are harmonious rectories, and even in allusion they establish the existence of an ideal, a "home" as it can be for priest and housekeeper.

A principal story on the theme of home, although it has previously been analyzed only as racial commentary, is "The Trouble" of 1944, the second piece in Prince of Darkness, juxtaposed as it were with "The Lord's Day," casting light on that story. The "sad" story about secular blacks is much more a theological comedy than the "funny" story about religious whites. No one of the characters in "The Lord's Day" knows more about the nature or the extent of the present disharmony at the story's conclusion than he knows at the beginning. But in "The Trouble" the young boy clearly experiences a disillusionment that exposes a means by which home can be destroyed.

The first paragraph of the story functions in at least two ways. First, it contrasts with the story's second paragraph: paragraph one is juvenile in diction and deceptively tinged with sentimental humor--the youthful narrative center of consciousness talks about "outfoxing" Gramma by slipping to the window against her orders. But the second paragraph explains what the boy and the others of "we" were watching: a rumble between whites and blacks. And in this exposition it becomes apparent that the young narrator is black. From the deceptively benign atmosphere of the first paragraph we move immediately to the fringe of stark violence--"we'd seen the whites catch up with a shot-in-the-leg colored and throw bricks and stones at his black head till it got all red and he was dead" (PD, p. 19).

However, the second function of the first paragraph is to establish a benign image that controls the whole story told in retrospect. The goodness implicit in that scene of childish play emerges as the domestic standard when the narrator's family shelters a white man during the race riot. Importantly, what begins as a passive sheltering becomes a clear instance of manifest compassion. But however ripe the scene is for sentimentalism, Powers avoids that by dramatizing the father's difficult restraint:

Daddy got up from the table mad as a bull and said to the white man, "Remember what I said, mister."
 "But why me?" the white man asked. "Just because I'm white?"

Daddy looked over at Mama on the bed and said, "Yeah, just because you're white; yeah, that's why. . . ." Old Gramma took Daddy by the arm and steered him over to the table again and he sat down.

The doctor and the white man stopped at the door. Daddy walked draggily over to them and stood in front of the white man, took a deep breath, and said in the stillest kind of whisper, "I wouldn't touch you." That was all. He moved slowly back to Mama's bed and his big shoulders were sagged down like I never saw them before. (PD, pp. 30-31)

The father's refusal to exact a vengeance upon his "guest"--unworthy as that man evidences himself to be--in the presence of his dying wife is a deed of omission that asserts nothing will be gained through further violence. We know "home" in this story directly, by an act of affirmation--however unconscious and under strain--in the midst of desolating circumstances.

Powers' other story about Blacks in Prince of Darkness is "He Don't Plant Cotton," published the year before "The Trouble." This, too, is a story about compassion and home, but only as their conspicuous absence in society at large evinces an understanding of their importance to the central characters of the work. "Cotton" is the drama of one evening in the lives of some Negro nightclub musicians who are displaced persons. They are displaced in a very obvious and literal sense in that in the course of the evening the combo is fired for not playing Stepin Fetchit to the boorishness of some drunken white Southerners.

Unfortunately, racial conflict looms large enough to obscure another sense of displacement for most readers. The Negroes are separated from their native culture which is not the South, but rather an audience that could genuinely "dig" their music, "those clouds of rhythm . . . shimmering up like heat" (PD, p. 79).

Standing out on the cold New York street, Baby, the drummer, almost despairs when he cannot even tempt a taxi to stop. Then, out of the cold, black, dirty night he salvages a note of rescue, of optimism as Libby, the piano player, laughs at his pitifulness, laughs with "that fine, young-woman laughter" so much "like her piano on 'Little Rock'" (PD, p. 37). Hagopian proposes that their "rebellion gives them a sense of joy and dignity."²⁶ It does, but not it alone. That is, mere rebellion would leave the taste of ashes in their mouths--as it is, Libby "was laughing, gradually louder, mellow octaves of it, mounting, pluming . . . " (PD, p. 87). This laughter that is "dug" by Baby could not grow merely from the refusal to call either a hate-infested Northern nightclub or a practically antebellum South their home. Rather, the clue to Baby's apprehension of Libby's laughter lies in the development of the story: a development of one after another intuitive communication between the musicians. This, then, is the laughter of joy celebrating the felt community and an awareness of having passed through the temporal notes to a transcendent harmony.

"The Old Bird, A Love Story" presents yet another parable on the issue of displacement and its antithesis, the sanctuary of home. Mr. Newman, "unemployed and elderly" (PD, p. 140), obtains a few weeks before Christmas a seasonal job in the shipping room of a department store. At first Mr. Newman is depressed at such a come-down from the office work he has always known. Ironically, however, his re-discovered skill with rope and knots fosters a rejuvenation in spirit. Nevertheless, he comes home from the first day's work a bit ashamed to tell his wife of the menial job he has taken. He assumes a mask of alternate taciturnity and gruffness that are both so much unlike his usual behavior that his wife can only laugh. When she does, he simply relinquishes his role. "It was not a hopeless situation, but only because she loved him. She did love him. Overcome by the idea, he abandoned his silence." Outside,

Snowflakes tumbled in feathery confusion past the yellow light burning in the court, wonderfully white against the night, smothering the whole dirty, roaring, guilty city in innocence and silence and beauty. (PD, p. 150)

Once again Powers is vulnerable to sentimentalism--or, more exactly, considering the age of the couple, their indigence, and the nearness of Christmas, he is vulnerable to O. Henryism. However, Powers eschews false emotion as rigorously as he avoids sensationalism.²⁷ Mr. Newman recovers his dignity as provider and explains that the job

is only temporary. He adds that the people have been "very nice," and to this his wife responds,

"Then maybe they'll keep you after Christmas, Charley!"

He looked sharply at her and could tell she was sorry she said that. . . . He opened his mouth to speak, said nothing, and then, closing his eyes to the truth, he said:

"Yes. You know, I think they will. I'm sure of it."

He coughed. That was not the way it was at all. It had happened again. He was the bad actor again. His only audience smiled and loved him. (PD, p. 151)

If this story has any coherence at all, it seems to affirm that the fault of being human is endurable if love is present to accept that fallibility. (In the same way, "He Don't Plant Cotton" affirms the endurability of displacement if just one person "digs" the displaced one.) Charley's wife accepts him, and in that is the figure of a greater Love. In the language of the story, Powers could not name the church calendar season with any good cause--these are not overtly religious people--but the reader should know that the pre-Christmas weeks constitute Advent, the season of the Church Year which prepares for the coming of that greater Love in the form of a new Man. In this light, Mr. Newman takes form as the new-man, one who can adapt, adopt, adjust, and finally--forsaking reality for the higher truth of love--accept.

It should be obvious that in drawing characters in acceptance, Powers does not intend to degrade them. As in De Vries' fiction, the act of a character's acceptance

acknowledges the possibility of grace. Such epiphanic moments accompanied by an embracing of the limited, the finite, the human, are not of the same nature as the acceptance that George Orwell attributes to Henry Miller in Tropic of Cancer:

Miller's outlook is deeply akin to that of Whitman. . . . Tropic of Cancer ends with an especially Whitmanesque passage, in which, after the lecheries, the swindles, the fights, the drinking bouts, and the imbecilities, he simply sits down and watches the Seine flowing past, in a sort of mystical acceptance of thing-as-it-is. Only, what is he accepting? In the first place, not America, but the ancient bone-heap of Europe, where every grain of soil has passed through innumerable human bodies. Secondly, not an epoch of expansion and liberty, but an epoch of fear, tyranny, and regimentation. To say "I accept" in an age like our own is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine guns, putsches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films, and political murders. Not only those things, of course, but those things among others. And on the whole this is Henry Miller's attitude.²⁸

Orwell's criticism of Miller is not applicable to Powers' fiction because in the latter any character's resolution at the end of a story is based solely on his experience within that story. That is, the extra-fictional vision I indicated earlier as sometimes necessary does not require a political view beyond the confines of the story. Nor within a story containing political lines should the perspective be warped by those lines. The narrator's father in "The Trouble" is not accepting race hatred and riots; rather, his apparently unconscious recognition of a

higher duty than vengeance rejects the political and sociological elements of his life pressing in upon him. Again and again in the fiction surveyed in this essay the comic acceptance is a recognition of the human condition, a condition which ironically--and this steals thunder from tragedy--affirms that man can look outside himself.

One story that clearly says, insofar as fiction can ever speak directly, that man must look outside himself, is "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does." This theme of looking outside, picked up from a line in the text of that story, has been thoroughly explicated by a Jesuit, Father Robert Boyle. Indeed, he finds the idea of an outer-directed vision as necessary to salvation to be the controlling theme of all Powers' best fiction.²⁹

I can readily understand why "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" is generally the critics' favorite among Powers' short stories. It has intensity and depth and furthermore a warmth that Powers never achieves elsewhere. In the tale of an aged, sickened, and spiritually desolate monk, Powers moves with a deadly seriousness; but in the end, it is a comic story--we do not laugh but we rejoice. Perhaps this story more than any other Powers piece demonstrates that essential difference between a superficial, overt, physically manifested laughter and the great joy taken in the really comic.

In its movement toward re-birth, this story parallels closely "The Old Bird, A Love Story" which was published the year after "Lions." Charley, the old bird, is nearing the end of his flight through the hall of life--to borrow a figure from the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History, which Powers may well have had in mind.³⁰ As he does, he comes to understand that happiness cannot be a goal--being "kept on" after the Christmas rush--but comes forth in the process, in the here and now. Very neatly, although without the self-conscious articulation, Charley seems to experience a crisis similar to that recounted by John Stuart Mill as marking a turning point in his life.³¹ (Moreover, all this seems to be related to Bergson's élan vital, the idea of a moving, vital spirit, which is killed once we take a section of it out to examine it. Happiness, joy is incipient in the process, in the vitality.)

Didymus, the old monk, has like Charley tried to keep his attention singularly on the future, and only recovers his perspective in his literally dying moments. Didymus has striven for the big acts of self-denial in his efforts for holiness. In the story he receives word that his brother has died, and that news launches him on reveries recalling his refusal to visit his brother while he had opportunity.

When he received the letter from Seraphim asking him to come to St. Louis, saying his years prohibited unnecessary travel and endowed his request with a certain prerogative--No, he had written back, it's simply impossible, not saying why, God help him, as a natural man, he had the desire, perhaps the inordinate desire, to see his brother again. He should not have to prove that. One of them must die soon. But as a friar, he remembered: "Unless a man be clearly delivered from the love of all creatures, he may not fully tend to his Creator." Therein, he thought, the keeping of the vows having become an easy habit for him, was his opportunity--he thought! It was plain and there was sacrifice and it would be hard. So he had not gone. (PD, p. 38)

Here and pervasively through the story, it is evident that Didymus' sin is that which he is quick to find in his genuinely humble friend, Brother Titus: "Vanitas" (PD, p. 35).

Didymus has been looking forward so intensely to sainthood, to his eternal reward (his heavenly home) for a life of self-denial, that he has missed the voice telling him that reward must be earned in a self-denial for others. He has tried to get out of the here and now, tried to get into the company of saints, while all the time he has been living in the company of saints. He has yearned to get into the arms of Jesus, meanwhile oblivious to his part in the "mystical Body of [Christ], The blessed company of all faithful people"³²--really the Household of Faith.³³

It is only in the story's final moments that Didymus comes to fully understand what is required of him: an act of compassion for another. Titus had given Didymus a

canary during his illness. Didymus' last act before collapsing beyond recovery is to free the bird from his cage. Later that night, Didymus' last words are "Open the window, Titus." When he does, the canary flies out, and Titus ineptly tries to hide the fact by fumbling at the window for a draft. His love for Didymus will not let him admit the bird has flown. But Didymus knows, and he waits with a long-trained patience for Titus to turn from the window. He himself cannot destroy Titus' intention, for he knows now that he must "look outside, to Titus. God still chose to manifest Himself most in sanctity" (PD, p. 56). Didymus never understands real sanctity until he opens the window to grace and flies out from his solipsism.

Hopefully, the preceding discussion of the majority of J. F. Powers' short fiction makes amply evident the fact that a prominent and often extremely urgent theme realized in the stories is the desirability and possibility of a home for the individual spirit. Often, as in "Blue Island," this home seems a purely temporal matter, and in other stories, such as "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," the ultimate home is obviously in a transcendent realm. Yet, reading all of the pieces together, one idea suggests itself strongly: the first kind of home is metaphorical for the second, and the second kind is attainable only by a grounding in the first.

Before turning to a consideration of Powers' one novel and its dramatization of this same theme, I want to examine another group of stories which taken singly have their merits, but together constitute rather impressive evidence that Powers writes consciously about the concept of home.

The three Father Burner stories--"Prince of Darkness" (1946), "Death of a Favorite" (1950), and "Defection of a Favorite" (1951)--form an interesting sequence not only because they rehearse a number of the thematic concerns of Powers' whole canon, but also because they manifest his achievement and his failure as an artist. The critics' favorite is "Prince of Darkness," a finely realized character study, exploited by those who contend that Powers exposes the priesthood for a sham. Through much of the story, Father Ernest Burner is subtly imagined as a Satanic figure: "eyes malignant," "lips parched to speak an unsummonable cruelty," "talking with a mouthful of smoke," "applying a cloven foot to the pedal" (PD, pp. 157, 160, 165, 178). "[W]ary of the fatherers," Father Burner thought "a red-hot believer . . . could be a devilish nuisance"; "He operated on the principle of discord at any cost. He did not know why"; "'Oh, hell!' he groaned"; "He turned off the light, saying 'Damn' to himself . . ." (PD, pp. 152, 159, 168, 185). (The latter two sentences are all the more important because Powers'

characters seldom swear, and never do so gratuitously relative to the reader's perception.³⁴⁾

We first see Father Burner beset by the urgings of an insurance salesman "to think of the future" (PD, p. 155). Indeed, Father Burner does think only of the future when he is not preoccupied with the slights he has received in the past. "He was forty-three, four times transferred, seventeen years an ordained priest, a curate yet and only. He was the only one of his class still without a parish" (PD, p. 175). More than of being a pastor, Burner day-dreams of being a "somebody" in the clerical world (much as Father Joe in Powers' more recent "Priestly Fellowship" fancies himself becoming the grand old man, a sort of guru in a Roman collar, around whom his brethren of the cloth, young and old, would cluster³⁵⁾). Yet,

Nowadays when Father Burner thought of the future it required a firm act of the imagination. . . . The future had assumed the forgotten character of a dream, so that he could not be sure that he had ever truly had one." (PD, pp. 155-156)

Shirking or completely shunning the tasks of his curacy, Burner is very much trying to get out of the space and time in which, whether he likes it or not, he is solidly set, his gluttony merely reinforcing that metaphorical fixity. Importantly, he never even understands his present responsibilities which, of course, would be his path to the intangible glory which forms no part of his vision. Probably the entire story is captured in the one incident

in which Burner sets off for a private flying session. He is rained out, without ever going up, and he thinks of the rain as stultifying. However, even without the help of traditional symbology, we see it as a saving rain. Burner here and at the conclusion is kept down, must be kept down, for if allowed to soar, he would lose all direction.

Finally Fr. Bruner is called one evening to hear confessions at the cathedral, and in his fond dreams anticipates that the Bishop will use this opportunity to confer privately with him to announce a promotion. If we must have beyond Fr. Burner's selfish reveries and the ego-centric conversations with other priests one final dramatization that he is not pastoral material, we are allowed to invade the privacy of the confessional to hear Burner speaking with his last penitent.

"Practice birth control?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"Don't you know it's a crime against nature and the Church forbids it?"

"Yes."

"Don't you know that France fell because of birth control?"

"No."

"Well, it did. Was it your husband's fault?"

"You mean--the birth control?"

"Yes."

"Not wholly."

"And you've been away from the Church ever since your marriage?"

"Yes."

"Now you see why the Church is against mixed marriages. All right, go on. What else?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Is that what you came to confess?"

"No. Yes. I'm sorry, I'm afraid that's all."

"Do you have a problem?"

"I think that's all, Father."

"Remember, it is your obligation, and not mine, to examine your conscience. The task of instructing persons with regard to these delicate matters-- I refer to the connubial relationship--is not an easy one. Nevertheless, since there is a grave obligation imposed by God, it cannot be shirked. If you have a problem--"

"I don't have a problem."

"Remember, God never commands what is impossible and so if you make use of the sacraments regularly you have every reason to be confident that you will be able to overcome this evil successfully, with His help. I hope this is all clear to you."

"All clear."

"Then if you are heartily sorry for your sins for your penance say the rosary daily for one week and remember it is the law of the Church that you attend Mass on Sundays and holy days and receive the sacraments at least once a year. It's better to receive them often. Ask your pastor about birth control if it's still not clear to you. Or read a Catholic book on the subject. And now make a good act of contrition . . ." (PD, pp. 186-187)

Toward both the questions he asks and the counsel he offers, we must feel ambivalent. With an obvious nod toward "The Valiant Woman" we must say his statements fulfill the letter of the law, but not the spirit. He gives bookish, seminary-ish answers that do not engage him in his full priestly function but only in its facade. To alter St. Paul's words, fulfilling only the letter of the law killeth, but the spirit (sadly absent in this case) giveth life.³⁶

After the confession, Fr. Burner is bid to an audience with His Excellency, who from the outset impresses us as a warm, humane man. In spite of that, Burner, not at home in his parish, is not at home here either. And everything conduces to making him uncomfortable. For example,

early in the story we see "Father Burner's sausage fingers," and in the conversation at the cathedral, Burner notices that the "Archbishop's hand [is] ringed, square, and healthy" (PD, pp. 153, 187). At the end of the interview, Burner has revealed no qualities or references to speak for him. Nevertheless, he is sure that in spite of his poor showing, he will receive an assignment. However, the Archbishop's hands prepare an ironic note that commits Burner to yet another curacy post, and that concludes, "I trust that in your new appointment you will find not peace but a sword" (PD, p. 193). To change the metaphor, Burner has not yet borne his cross.

The two other Father Burner stories are collected in The Presence of Grace. Both offer a radical shift in narrative point of view from a center of consciousness in Burner to that of the rectory cat at his latest assignment. But at that the similarity ends, although Hagopian would not quibble for the difference between them.³⁷

"Death of a Favorite" once again depicts a fat Father Burner, grace-less in his egotism. But in this story (much less a character study than "Prince of Darkness" and in all ways a less successful work) Burner is not clearly the Satanic figure he is in the first story. Indeed, as Hagopian suggests, he is "never the source of evil,"³⁸ but is led on by another priest in the only really major incident, or series of incidents, in the story, as he and

Father Philbert condition the cat, Fritz, for a Pavlovian response to the crucifix. Fritz is the "favorite" of the title, the white-collared, "celibate" friend of Father Malt, the old, near totally deaf pastor. Knowing Father Malt was formerly the exorcist of the diocese, and being inclined to a practical joke on the annoying cat, the two priests train Fritz for an adverse response to the cross, and then suddenly one evening hand the cross to Father Malt. Fritz panics, runs out, gets himself run over, is "simultaneously, reborn, redeemed from [his] previous fear" (PG, p. 45), and returns to nestle against Father Malt's leg. Philbert is horrified and Burner merely disgusted.

Safely home, Fritz muses on Father Burner:

I found myself wondering if I could possibly bring about his transfer to another parish--one where they had a devil for a pastor and several assistants, where he would be able to start at the bottom again.

But first things first . . . for now Father Malt himself was drawing my chair up to the table, restoring me to my rightful place. (PG, p. 46)

Ironical, perhaps "cute," the ending poses a serious problem. Burner seems dismissed, and Fritz is restored, but there is no justification. Fritz has done nothing to merit being restored. To suggest that he has managed to give Burner his comeuppance, or to propose irony in the point of view and say that Fritz esteems himself too highly solves nothing. The dramatization of the story--and that belongs to Powers--tells us only that Fritz is at best

naive and that Father Burner is jealous, but bumbling and ineffective. In short, though at first witty for its cat's-eye view, the story fails, lacking both theme and coherence.

"Defection of a Favorite" is another story. Also told in Fritz' words, it begins with the selfish Father Burner of the first two stories but opens very quickly into the spiritual growth, the bright day of the soul, of the priest. At the end of the story's third paragraph, Father Malt takes a fall on some ice and in consequence will be hospitalized away from his parish for more than a year. In his absence and charged with the care of the parish, Burner undergoes nothing less than a metamorphosis. He begins to tolerate Fritz and turn off lights he had previously left burning all night. He buys the cook a kitchen radio, starts reading Church Property Administration, takes up a regular routine of calls, etc., etc. As Fritz says, "It almost seemed as if he were out to distinguish himself, not in the eyes of others--something he'd always worked at--but in his own eyes" (PG, p. 114).

Early in Father Malt's absence, there are, according to Fritz, a number of tense moments between Burner and the cat, which, as they dissolve into a warm, mutual tolerance, prepare for the final scene in which Father Malt returns, appearing "softer, whiter," indeed, almost ghostlike. Pastor and curate stand facing each other

"like two popes themselves not sure which one was real." Standing between the two, Fritz decides what he must do, and moves to rub against Father Malt's leg: "With a purr, I'd restore Father Malt's old authority in the house. Of necessity--authority as well as truth being one and indivisible--I'd unmade Father Burner" (PG, pp. 127, 128).

The conclusion of the scene, and the story, comes in three paragraphs that begin with some of Powers' best writing and end with some of his most pathetic.

The irremovable pastor stood perspiring on his crutches. As long as he lived, he had to be pastor, I saw; his need was the greater. And Father Burner saw it, too. He went up to Father Malt, laid a strong, obedient hand on the old one that held tight to the right crutch, and was then the man he'd been becoming.

"Hello, boss," he said. "Glad you're back."

It was his finest hour. In the past, he had lacked the will to accept his setbacks with grace and had derived no merit from them. It was difficult to believe that he'd profited so much from my efforts in his behalf--my good company and constant example. I was happy for him. (PG, pp. 128-129)

The third paragraph is one too many. When Father Burner welcomes Father Malt, he means "Glad you're back home." The comedy is complete at that point, and Fritz' interpretation only states the obvious and offers his feelings, about which we are unconcerned. The important point is that Father Burner has found a home because he has made one and has found himself.

J. V. Hagopian says, "What is suggested . . . is that Burner all along needed not the office and the security of

being pastor but rather the confidence of knowing that he had the ability."³⁹ While this is true, I contend Hagopian is insensitive to what Powers has obviously and clearly planned as the conclusion to the Burner stories. He further suggests "the psycho-moral metamorphosis of Fr. Burner in the cat stories is not satisfactorily dramatized; it is merely asserted. . . ."⁴⁰ Here I think Hagopian is wrong; he looks at both stories at once and I do not think that can be done. Granted, there is no change at work in "Death of a Favorite," and "Defection of a Favorite" begins with Burner as the same old man. But as Father Malt goes to the hospital, Burner slowly becomes more confident and aware of his position and his responsibilities. By stages he begins to see himself as he looks outside himself.

The thematic concern of the sequence of Father Burner stories as discussed in the above paragraphs also informs Morte D'Urban. Furthermore, it does so in both the novel's development and its conclusion, a curious fact that I propose wreaks havoc with the contention of many of Morte D'Urban's reviewers who cited the episodic structure of the novel, referring to the previous publication of some of the chapters as short stories. The ensuing remarks--following the lead of Hagopian, Robert G. Twombly, Stanley Poss, and others⁴¹--intend to demonstrate anew the unity of the novel, but by way of showing the centrality of the concept of home.

Morte D'Urban is, of course, at the present moment the capstone of J. F. Powers' fiction. Winner of the 1963 National Book Award for fiction, the novel brings into prominent and clear focus all the major elements of Powers' fiction. Not the least of these is the matter of point of view. Again in this work there is a central consciousness, a limited omniscience, a narrative that while standing outside, nonetheless adapts and confines its observations to the perspective of the central character, and thus irony is enabled. Particularly in Morte D'Urban, if one does not perceive the narrative irony, he cannot understand what is going on.

The story has had many analogues suggested for it, and its protagonist, Father Urban, has been compared to King Arthur, Lancelot, and finally Christ. But I think the most important point to remember is that this story told from the perspective of one very human being is no more and no less than the story of a man. It is far too easy when working with literature that evidences a theological grounding to slip off into a comparison of the hero (or protagonist) to Christ. One striking example is T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral. By citing the premonitions of death on the part of everyone--the Woman of Canterbury, Thomas, the priests--the entry, the temptations, the ritual death at an altar, and more, one might arrive at the resolution that Eliot's play is an allegory. But

it is not. It is merely the story of one totally (and only) mortal man's struggle to make perfect his will by submitting it to God's will. While not existential in, say, Sartre's terms because Thomas gives up his will (that is what is meant by making it perfect), it is existential drama in terms of one man having to work out the discovery of his life's meaning.

If we need an explicit reminder that beneath everything Father Urban is a man, we discover at the beginning of Chapter Four that he was christened Harvey Roche, an ironic name that is submerged, but in the way an iceberg's foundation is hidden. The name "Urban" has been adequately handled by the reviewers and critics. For example, Stanley Poss says, "Urban is both urban and urbane."⁴² It suffices here merely to say that "Urban" is appropriate to the priest we encounter at the beginning of the novel and follow through the early episodes. Father Urban is a city man, urbane, sophisticated, sure of himself and what he is doing. But beneath that surface of activity and at first only incipiently meaningful is the fact that he is a rock, capable of being struck by God's grace and enduring the blast. It would have been too much for Powers to have called his protagonist "Peter," but Urban is called upon to finally be a foundation, a rock, which is solid only because of the time and process of its formation.

The process of Urban's doing is, of course, the plot of the novel. In a quickly moving first chapter and a half we see Urban--through Urban's perspective--as a go-getter. He is not really, as far as we can see and probably not at all, for such a priest would be inconsistent with Powers' other characters, a saver of souls. Rather, he prides himself on being a first-rate publicity man for his order, the Clementines, named for St. Clement of Blois. And again a name is not only humorous but also meaningful; it is not "bloys" but "blah," which in a word sums up the energy and achievement of the order. From Urban's perspective, he is the only one of the Order's preachers-for-hire who is popular and does any conceivable good. From Urban's viewpoint the other speakers, indeed, the whole lot, including the monks writing for the Clementine and other publications from the Order's colophon, the Millstone Press, are embarrassing blemishes on the body clerical. Urban is concerned because he does have some order pride, but in his salad days it seems indistinguishable from his own.

Urban falls into a friendship with BCL (Big Catholic Layman) Billy Cosgrove, and by wheedling some good firewood for Billy out of the forest of the Order's Novitiate, Urban gets in turn for the Clementines a new headquarters in Chicago at a "prestige address for any concern."⁴³ Once called into his thought, the Province headquarters remind

Father Urban of the Provincial, Father Boniface, an absolute incompetent, who in Chapter One ("The Green Banana") leaves Urban a letter assigning him to the Order's "newest white elephant" (p. 30), a ramshackle retreat house near Duesterhaus, Minnesota. A name once again: "Duesterhaus" translates as "House of Gloom." And the very thought of being shipped to the sticks at the height of his career fills Urban with despondency. Almost immediately after reading the fateful letter, Urban hears Father Jack telling him that he has been assigned to Duesterhaus. Urban hasn't the fortitude to tell Jack that he is also going, and settles the awkward moment by asking Jack to lunch at the Pump Room--it will be on Billy's tab. In Urban's imagination it will be the "last meal" for both priests.

Arrived in Duesterhaus, Urban embarks upon a comedy of the errors, in his eyes, of others. To Urban, every priest--and that is all there are: there are no retreatants--and every aspect of the retreat house is a cross to bear. Father Wilfrid, the priest in charge, has in effect taken a vow of poverty for his Order. He saves or tries to save money on everything. As a result, the retreat house needs plaster, paint, heat, furniture, a car--everything. Brother Harold is too competent, and Father Jack is of course there, a constant reminder of--as if Urban would ever forget--the good old days out of Chicago.

In the following weeks Urban's pride is worried and wearied as well as if a Divine Hand were guiding the affair. Unused to labor beyond that in golfing or fishing, Urban attempts, at Wilf's directive, a host of menial tasks: scraping plaster, sanding floors, hoeing weeds. In each case he fails because of his ineptness and rebellious spirit. "A Couple of Nights Before Christmas" (the title of Chapter Five) the three priests argue over the proper inhabitants of the manger scene during Advent. Wilf is positive of his ideas, Urban is defensive from the weeks of ignominy, but it is quiet, humble Jack who reminds them that really only the animals should be there before Christmas Eve. Wilf acquiesces and says to Urban,

"Just shows how wrong we can be sometimes."

We! As if Father Urban had been wrong about anything! He glared at Jack, and stared him down, his eyes following Jack's down to the checkerboard--where he saw a surprising opportunity. He was not forgetting Wilf, but he would deal with Jack first. With his only king, Father Urban jumped this way and that, taking a dreadful toll of Jack's black men.

"Why didn't I see that?" said Jack. Something in his tone, and, on second thought, the easiness of the conquest on the board, suggested to Father Urban that Jack had indeed seen it, had planned it, had offered himself and his black men for sacrifice. Thereupon, though he didn't like what Jack had done, the desire to deal with Wilf died in Father Urban. In a way, he was sorry.

Father Urban, and perhaps Wilf and Brother Harold, too, sensed the rare peace now reigning among them, but Jack rejoiced in it visibly. Still, a moment later, it was Jack who broke the spell. "You know, Urban, I don't feel right about those animals," he said--not, Father Urban knew, to be critical but just to be saying something. For a moment, they had all been lifted up, and this was Jack's way of letting them down lightly to earth, where they had to live. (pp. 107-108)

The critics who protest that Urban's eventual "conversion" is unprepared for, should re-examine this scene and remember that Urban is the center of consciousness.

Just as Urban almost despairs of mixing in the world again, Wilf relents and allows him to go down to St. Monica's parish to relieve the pastor, Father Phil, who is being taken on a vacation by his old friend Monsignor Renton. At St. Monica's, if nothing more than out of sheer relief, Father Urban throws himself into the work. After his first night call he can say to the curate and housekeeper, "I was happy to go out. I really was. It made me feel like a priest--for a change" (p. 148). On the one hand, we can be sure that Urban is being ironic, remembering the amateur carpentry he has escaped for a few weeks. But on the other hand, in the dramatization, "Suddenly St. Monica's was a busy, happy rectory" (p. 148).

Urban becomes virtually absorbed in St. Monica's and does a good job. Before he leaves, word comes that Father Phil has died, and the old Father Urban who has not lost all self-concern goes to see the Bishop about receiving the pastorate of St. Monica's. In the interview he almost insinuates himself instead into the cure of three Indian missions in the isolated North. The offer is an hilariously funny, ironic reward for a job well done, but indeed that kind of reward adumbrates the heroic wound and the three dramatic reversals to be suffered by Father Urban which will culminate in the recovery of his footing.

Back at the Hill, Father Urban continues pitching his cause until Wilf relents and begins sending him out more and more on preaching missions, until--in Urban's estimation--he becomes "the Hill's roving ambassador of good will" (p. 199).

Urban's next major endeavor is to get Billy Cosgrove to buy land adjoining the retreat property and finance the development of it into a golf course, as an attraction for more retreatants and a greater variety. It is, of course, the kind of venture that bears Urban's enterprising stamp. But after the project's completion when the Bishop begins to think about confiscating the entire operation for a diocesan seminary, Urban's security is threatened. The Bishop arrives to play golf and look things over, and in the process becomes the formal cause of Urban's transformation. Playing against the Bishop and looking in one direction for another ball, Urban gets hit on the head by the Bishop's ball.

Without further ado the Bishop's plans are dropped. As Urban awakens in the hospital from the concussion he has suffered, Monsignor Renton explains everything and concludes that it was "An act of God, if ever I saw one" (p. 233). Urban, not quite so given to emotional rhetoric, "regarded this statement as unsound and probably heretical in its implications, since it made short work of him as a responsible instrument of God's will in an orderly universe" (p. 233).

Not surprisingly, Urban is unaware that he has received the mark of a new life, the wound that will heal into a firmer tissue than previously existed. But before his health is regained, before he is a whole man (in the scriptural sense), he must prove himself through temptations.

Early in his convalescence, Urban experiences the first of three trials. He goes to rest at the estate of Mrs. Thwaites, whose wealth he had previously courted for his Order. But, while there he loses all chance of her favor when he presumes to judge against her in favor of her main Katie whose savings Mrs. Thwaites has robbed at dominoes.

The second trial effects the break with Billy Cosgrove. Taken resort fishing by Billy, Urban ruptures their friendship when he rescues a swimming deer Billy maliciously attempts to drown. He saves the animal by throwing Billy from the boat in an acceleration burst. The furious Billy, once again in the boat, in turn dumps Urban, literally and figuratively. While the still weakened Urban swims for shore, Billy departs without paying the resort bill, and takes the new station wagon he had given to the retreat house. The exercise of very little imagination tells one that Urban has now severed himself from the world and the devil, both of whom he has, in their disguises, eagerly sought.

The third trial is a wrestling, but only figurative, with the flesh. On his way in from the resort, Urban is picked up by Sally Thwaites Hopwood who tries to seduce him. When she strips for a naked, moonlight swim, he resists, refuses. Angered, she hits him on the head--in one of the book's most obviously symbolic acts--with one of her golden-calf shoes and leaves him stranded on the island where she took him. He makes it back to the Hill, waxes lean, submits to a Mayo checkup that reveals no psychological illness--as it could not, for his trouble has been spiritual--and then learns that he has been elected new Provincial of the Order.

In the short last chapter, Father Urban as Provincial seems everything that he would never have been before the time of the concussion. He is calm, accepting, unconcerned for the material welfare of the Order. Powers seems to have attempted a figure for the action of grace, suggesting the intervention of Providence to turn Urban around in his search for self-aggrandisement. Being hit on the head sent Urban to Mrs. Thwaites', out with Billy, and finally, through Billy, to Sally Hopwood. If it seems that according to his past behavior, Urban should have ignored Katie's problem, Billy's meanness, and Sally's lust, it can only be said that such an accusation ignores a significant number of incidents in the story which tell us that Urban is redeemable. Hagopian and others recognize beauty and meaning in Urban's

last thoughts in the novel, but no one has observed the tightness of the novel in the sense that Urban's attitude toward his final home is the plot of the novel.

On first arriving at the Hill, Urban looks about him and intuits the sense of "Duesterhaus." He remarks that the man at the local railroad station "kept calling this 'The Home'" (p. 45). Wilf goes on to explain the morbid history of the place, indicating that at one point in time "it had been purchased by the county and turned into an old-people's home, really a poorhouse. Fortunately, all that was very much in the past--all but the name 'the Home'" (p. 46). Urban first sees it as a home for old people, alcoholics, and now lunatics--or at least the dregs of the Order's incompetents. As Wilf and Urban look out on a bleak winter horizon, Wilf asks, "You cold?" and Urban replies, in a clear double entendre, "Just numb is all" (p. 47).

The next instance in the overt home motif is early in the interview Urban gets with the Bishop of St. Monica's diocese. The Bishop probes for Urban's interests, and Urban replies

"As you know, Your Excellency, we're primarily a teaching and preaching order. Me, I've always been in the preaching end--for many years traveling out of Chicago, which I guess I still think of as home."
(p. 174)

Knowing the Bishop is from Chicago, Urban tries to impress upon him that he is an Order man, but also that he is from

Chicago. He does not say "traveling out of Province headquarters."

By the chapter "Twenty-four Hours in a Strange Diocese," Urban has reconciled himself to being assigned to the Hill, but he still has the energy to make the best of his situation. He has become by this time--in his own mind--"the Hill's roving ambassador of good will. . . . Wherever he went, people always seemed glad to see him--and, of course, it was all for the Order" (p. 199). His reconciliation to making the best of what he considers a bad thing is evident in his--for us--key remark to the president of the Minnesota Central whom he is trying to flatter out of another pass:

"Not from around here, are you?"

"As much from around here as anywhere else. For many years, I traveled out of Chicago, but I consider Minnesota my home now--and consider myself fortunate." (p. 199)

If we are tempted to accuse Urban of a bald-faced lie, it would be well to remember this as one remark in the sequence being chronicled.

Further, in talking with Mr. Studley at the Zimmerman's, Urban speaks with what appears to be very little facetiousness: "'For many years I traveled out of Chicago. . . . But I'm proud to call Minnesota my home now . . .'" (p. 210). Although at the moment envying Studley, Urban would not lie to him, for that would give Studley an additional advantage. Studley already has Urban uneasy because of his studied

irreverence and his explicit lack of respect for Urban. Even Studley's dog, Frank, a sensual beast and a mirror image of Studley, curls up on Urban's momentarily discarded coat and collar. If this were the old Urban, unable to bear such slights, he would try to impress Studley with his Chicago connections.

Finally, the novel closes with a sly, wry irony of which Urban seems aware, although through much of the novel he has been not a very shrewd observer of himself (he has merely grown to be more observant). ". . . [T]he new Provincial was worried. Oddly enough, although for many years he'd traveled out of Chicago, he seemed to think of the Hill as home" (p. 309).

This is to say that Morte D'Urban has been the story of a man's homecoming. The motival has become thematic. Detractors who would say glibly that "you can't go home again" miss the point. Urban has never been home.

Strong additional support for this conclusion lies in two pieces of news that come to Urban in the story's final paragraphs. Mr. Studley pays a visit to the new Provincial in Chicago and reports that things are rather quiet back home, but his big piece of news is that his dog Frank is dead. The phrase "Frank had died" (p. 309) is repeated twice. On the naturalistic level, of course, Studley is remorseful that his pet is gone and that could account for the emphatic repetition. But on the symbolic level we must

pair the news about Frank with the note in Wilf's letter about Rex, the faithful hound Wilf acquired with the purchase of land for the golf course. According to Wilf, "Rex was fine" (p. 309). The old sensual, worldly man is dead and the new man, humbled in the country, is alive and well.

Any discussion of Morte D'Urban should not close without some consideration of the pervasive allusion to Arthurian myth. The critics who have dealt with Powers have already discussed this point with a great deal of depth and dexterity, and I would presume to add only one short further comment.

I think it is true that "the Arthurian matter is obviously embedded in the novel so realistically that it seems a natural part of an ongoing plot development," and it is equally true that "it . . . endows the action with a larger significance."⁴⁴ Perhaps the model for such a conjoining of myth and realism in modern literature is Joyce's Ulysses. Regardless, Powers' success must ultimately be judged on his novel's own merits although comparison with other works is inevitable, just as comparison with Ulysses is necessary to establish fully what Powers has accomplished in the act of union. I would offer only a comparison to another piece of contemporary fiction: John Updike's The Centaur.⁴⁵

In Updike's work the mythology is an overlay, functioning, yes, to lend importance to the struggles of Peter Caldwell and his father, but that functioning is often retarded because the mythology is merely an overlay. It intrudes upon the novel. One cannot read The Centaur without fumbling back and forth between Olinger and Olympus for the identification and relationship of characters. We could happily follow George and Peter in the straight line of their own story but Updike will not allow it. Whether he intended the whole thing as a practical joke on critics is irrelevant. The novel as it stands gives us glimpses of an absorbing, vital story and our inability to focus all our attention on that story simply frustrates us.

In Morte D'Urban we have the story of a man (as compared to Edwin O'Connor's The Edge of Sadness which is about a priest) and we can read his story, as this discussion has done, without being hampered by an ignorance of myth. If we are familiar with the Arthurian tales, we may understand that more deeply this is the old story of quest for the worthwhile, and the reward is vouchsafed only to him who is worthy. Through his three temptations, Urban proves himself worthy and receives his grail, which is not the Provincialship but a sense of grounding. Literally knocked off his feet, he now has both feet firmly planted on the Hill.

I have subtitled this chapter with an appellation for J. F. Powers: "Cloistered Catholic," a label which I trust

the development of this chapter has not suggested to mean that J. F. Powers is narrow or sectarian in viewpoint or regionalism. It should not even be taken to mean that Powers is a Catholic novelist in the bad sense of that expression. Rather, I want to epitomize in that oxymoronic phrase--paradoxical considering that "catholic" denotes the antithesis of "cloistered," universal--the essence of Powers' achievement. On the smallest possible scale he has suggested the largest possible meanings. He has stepped into the privacy of the rectory and monastery and shown, largely through the surprise, the strikingness, that any kind of catholic (or Catholic) vision must proceed from an individual awareness; a light within must be turned on before exterior illumination is possible. Again and again, Powers shows men--often in turned-around collars--who are seeking to get outside themselves before they have dealt coherently, comprehensively, wisely with the man within.

Alfred Kazin, reviewing Morte D'Urban, wrote of Powers,

There is real love in his heart, but he knows that the heart does not write short stories, and that the beauty of grace can appear only against the background of the horrid daily element, which is gravity. Gravity and grace are the only possible elements in which a true imagination can work. The one stands for "reality"; the other for ideal beauty. Most American writers don't even know that they are necessary to each other. Their world has no background, nothing by which to judge the pitifulness of our daily actions.⁴⁶

This essay has proposed that from "a true imagination" Powers has created a "reality" informed by the "ideal beauty."

NOTES

¹In Against Interpretation (1966; rpt. New York: Dell, 1966), p. 14.

²Ibid., pp. 9, 10.

³William V. Spanos, "Theological Criticism," Contemporary Literature, IX (Spring, 1968), 250.

⁴Against Interpretation, p. 53.

⁵Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 8.

⁶Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

⁷Ibid., p. 91.

⁸In The Portable Conrad, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Viking Press, 1947), p. 708.

⁹This essay was first done for The Living Novel: A Symposium, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 157-164. It is also collected in Mystery and Manners, pp. 25-35.

¹⁰Mystery and Manners, p. 27.

¹¹Ibid., p. 67.

¹²Ibid., p. 68.

¹³Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁴Jean Mouroux, quoted in "A Christian Appraisal: The Point of It" by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. in Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, ed. Harold C. Gardiner (New York: Scribner's, 1951), p. 3.

¹⁵William F. Lynch, S.J., Christ and Apollo (1960; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 23.

¹⁶At this point one might think, of course, of other fiction, e.g., John Barth's The End of the Road. After a merciless and black parody of those who monomaniacally stress the absolute seriousness and great difficulty of choice, Barth seems to be saying that, in fact, one must make choices.

¹⁷"Preface," Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis. Ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), p. vii.

¹⁸John V. Hagopian, J. F. Powers (New York: Twayne, 1968).

¹⁹Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955; rpt. in Three, New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 291.

²⁰(1958; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1959), p. 100.

²¹Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 163 ff.

²²Ed. Madeline Doran (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 112.

²³"Flannery O'Connor: The Manichean Dilemma," Sewanee Review, LXXVII (Spring, 1969), 256.

²⁴In The Presence of Grace (1956; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 190. All subsequent references to stories in this collection will be noted parenthetically in the text with PG and the page number.

²⁵In Prince of Darkness (1947; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1958), p. 15. All subsequent references to stories in this collection will be noted parenthetically in the text with PD and the page number.

²⁶J. F. Powers, p. 38.

²⁷In the latter case I think particularly of the seduction scene in Morte D'Urban which avoids even a glimmer of the lurid in the confrontation of priest and naked lady.

²⁸George Orwell, "Inside the Whale" in Collected Essays (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), pp. 125-126.

²⁹Robert Boyle, S.J., "To Look Outside: The Fiction of J. F. Powers" in The Shapeless God, ed. Harry J. Mooney, Jr. and Thomas F. Staley (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), pp. 91-115.

³⁰See A History of the English Church and People, tr. Leo Sherley-Price (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), Book Three, Chapter Thirteen, pp. 124-125.

³¹See Chapter Five of Mill's Autobiography. Dolphin Books (Garden City: Doubleday, n.d.), pp. 103 ff.

³²Changing "thy Son" to "Christ," this phrase utilizes wording in the post-communion prayer of thanksgiving in the Trial Liturgy of the American Episcopal Church.

³³This phrase, a common one, is employed by Peter De Vries in his introduction to the special Time Reading Program edition of Powers' stories: Lions, Harts, Leaping Does (New York: Time, Inc., 1963). ". . . [T]he subject of Mr. Powers' stories . . . is the Household of Faith. It is basically a Pauline notion, springing up quite naturally in St. Paul's letters to those first few believers so precariously knit in a bond that was a little more than figuratively domestic" (p. xvii).

³⁴Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's people are seldom profane with any names of the Deity, and when they are, the reader must be alert to ironic implications.

³⁵"Priestly Fellowship," New Yorker, XLV (September 27, 1969), 36-46.

³⁶II Corinthians 3:6.

³⁷J. F. Powers. See especially page 83.

³⁸Ibid., p. 85.

³⁹Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹J. F. Powers; "Hubris, Health, and Holiness: The Despair of J. F. Powers" in Seven Contemporary Authors, ed. Thomas B. Whitbread (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), pp. 143-162; "J. F. Powers: The Gin of Irony," Twentieth Century Literature, XIV (July, 1968), 65-74.

⁴²"J. F. Powers: The Gin of Irony," p. 69.

⁴³Morte D'Urban (1962; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1967), p. 17. Hereafter, all page references to the novel will cite this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁴J. F. Powers, p. 141.

⁴⁵(New York: Knopf, 1963).

⁴⁶"Gravity and Grace," New Republic, CXXXIV (April 30, 1956), 20.

CHAPTER IV

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: "TRUE COUNTRY"

CHRISTIAN

I can say that for me, at least,
it is in the long succession of
these small redemptive instants,
just as much as in the magnifi-
cence of heroes, that the
meaning and the glory of man is
revealed.

--Edwin O'Connor
The Edge of Sadness

If the foregoing analysis of two writers, with occasional glances at a third, has any incremental effect, hopefully it is to suggest that there is some validity in drawing into one essay a writer who digs at "the tangled roots of exurban living," another who vivifies "scenes of clerical life," and a third who proclaims "a holy kind of horror" among Southerners.¹ For the real subject matter of Peter De Vries, J. F. Powers, and Flannery O'Connor is man; the exurbanite, the cleric, the Southerner are all figures for Everyman. The representative stature of his characters is apparently quite real to Peter De Vries, for he says, "We human beings are all absurd variations of one another . . . and this is what comedy of all kinds puts down on paper."²

"Comedy of all kinds." Certainly in the work of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor, the spectrum of overt comedy is shown in its extensive breadth. But at the same time, we perceive the spectrum as a fan, with its hinge the high comedy of joy. As De Vries' characters drop puns, fall over each other in farce, innocently conduct burlesques of business and domestic affairs, and parody literary styles (ironically, and amusingly, bringing literature to life in literature), we grow assured that De Vries enjoys himself immensely, working very hard at flying a superficial

funny that reveals, even by its defiance, a forceful gravity. Expanding on the inseparability of the serious and the comic, De Vries proposes that for a work to be even "bearable," any outer humor must be matched by an inner seriousness.³ This present essay suggests that De Vries' "inner seriousness" is a concern for man's self-displacement as he seeks to escape the elements and exactions of his finitude.

In his assault upon man's myriad foibles and the greater sins arising from solipsism, De Vries may, of course, be called a satirist. However, for him, satire is only a means to the greater comedy. Bent on improvement or the prevention of folly in others, satire always brings itself to bear on the particular, but using satire as a vehicle--mere transportation, as it were--De Vries wanders over the whole human landscape, proving that things are not as hopeless as they seem.

Much less the flashing satirist, J. F. Powers looks upon the human comedy primarily in the narrower and more quiet terms of clerical life, but with no less depth than De Vries. The constriction of ostensible scope is only an irony, and although irony is a major device in De Vries' fiction, employed in both incident and outcome, it is Powers' principal instrument. With it, he extracts from life and exhibits in art minute but crucial human experiences ranging from the frankly hilarious "domestic

comedy" provided by the inversions of "The Valiant Woman" to the subtle dilemma of Father Eudex in "The Forks." We must laugh outwardly at a "party" with one guest, at a birthday celebrant who is not allowed to enjoy himself, at a woman who fulfills the spirit of the law with a vengeance while defying the letter; and we must chuckle at a young priest with activist inclinations who sends an opportunity for good works down the drain. Powers has been accused of meanly satirizing the clergy out of a layman's jealousy, but such shallow accusations show no perception of Powers' suggestion that the priest is grounded in the man beneath the cassock, and that through this representative figure we should see that men in their own ways are subject to the folly of a self-seeking that is oblivious to the presence of grace. Such critics err because Powers' mode is understatement, but to adapt a phrase from Max Eastman, Powers employs that "understatement as a weapon."⁴

Flannery O'Connor eschews understatement for its opposite, and her exaggerations turn into grotesquerie that is very near black humor in its "seeming gratuitousness," to borrow Louise Y. Gossett's phrase.⁵ But like the outrageousness of black humor, Flannery O'Connor's preposterous distortions only seem irrelevant. Admittedly, Miss O'Connor prompts those inclined to be distressed at exaggerated effects. What could be more ludicrous than a female Ph.D. in a barn loft tryst with a Bible salesman?

Or a gaunt young man in a glare-blue suit and a black hat standing on a high, rat-colored Essex yelling "I'm clean"? If we have our own sanity, we must laugh when Hazel Motes runs over the look-alike preacher and when the Misfit murders an entire family. But we laugh for two reasons: first, because the "regional idiom and custom . . . lighten the grimness," and second, because there is no indication Miss O'Connor delights in this savagery in the way that Oliver Evans suggests Paul Bowles may sometimes "indulge in horror for its own sake."⁵ Rather, gratuitous horror in Miss O'Connor's fiction is only a "seeming"; in reality, the horror is an "effect . . . to dramatize a thesis."⁶

The complex melding of horror and comedy in Miss O'Connor's work has fostered one of the most important peripheral effects of her fiction. In addition to fostering new inquiry into both Southern fiction as a regional phenomenon and fiction with demonstrable theological significance, her work has also clearly been a contributory cause for new examinations and re-definition of Southern (or American) Gothic⁸ and the grotesque in literature. At the least, the terms "Gothic" and "grotesque" are often confusing and subject to misunderstanding or misapplication, assuming some standard is known and accepted--an assumption tenuous in referring to one reader and simply foolhardy when referring to two. Speaking for many, Sumner J. Ferris feels these are "vogue words . . . so vague as to be

almost meaningless."⁹ However, the efforts at definition proceed with few apologies.

In his essay on "The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction," William Van O'Connor defines the grotesque as "the anti-poetic, the cowardly, the ignoble, the realistic, the ugly." For Mr. O'Connor, the grotesque, by clashing with "our sense of established order," accommodates, at least partially, our submerged "need for . . . a tentative, a more flexible ordering."¹⁰ If Irving Malin is correct, Gothicism, too, is an affront to an accepted and exterior order. Working extensively with Flannery O'Connor's fiction, Malin concludes that the "new American Gothic" relates to the old--that of Poe's poetry and prose--in its focus on psyche rather than society. It "image[s] the terrors of the buried life: self-love, the need to destroy community."¹¹ In attempting to specify "The Grotesque in Recent Southern Fiction," Lewis A. Lawson deems it sufficient to say that "grotesque" and "Gothic" are not synonyms. Focusing on the grotesque, he defines it as "a mode of illusion which employs both photographic realism and absurdity, which occurs most frequently in times of cultural confusion, and which possesses characteristic tropes, motifs, and content." Lawson invokes Wellek and Warren (Theory of Literature) for the phrase "a mode of illusion" meaning "a conception of reality," but explains in his own words that

All art is an illusion of someone's reality, a representation of reality that is coloured by the individual vision of the artist. The grotesque mode of illusion is one that is markedly different from the illusion upon which the majority of people have agreed. We sense the grotesque only when we compare the vision of the artist to what we think is the public vision.¹²

However, Lawson cautions that the majority of men fail in apprehension of the grotesque by supposing that there is one objective reality recognized by all except "the perverse artist."¹³

Strangely, what Lawson does not emphasize adequately is that grotesquerie in fiction may be the conscious endeavor of the writer to dramatize his awareness of both the extreme subjectivity of some men and the kind of "objective reality" he believes in. Therefore, we might turn for a clarification of the issue (at least for the writer "with Christian concerns") to the words of an artist, not a critic. And in Miss O'Connor's much-quoted statement, we note not only her admission of irony in the employment of grotesquerie, but also her special recognition of "times of cultural confusion":

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little . . . when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock--to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.¹⁴

Critics are also fond of quoting Miss O'Connor's letter of January 25, 1959 to Ihab Hassan, cited in Radical Innocence. They usually repeat her "confession" that "It never occurred to me that my novel [Wise Blood] was grotesque until I read it in the papers," but they generally omit reference to her preceding sentences:

The reason for grotesquerie in Southern fiction is that the writer's vision is literal and not naturalistic. . . . When a child draws he doesn't try to be grotesque but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. I am interested in the lines that create spiritual motion.¹⁵

One point in this comparison of passages is that Miss O'Connor's statement on "distortions" and "shock" quoted above from "The Fiction Writer and His Country" was published in 1957, two years before her epistolary acknowledgment to Hassan of "grotesquerie" in her work. To invoke a patent truism, then, writers do often have a feel for things that it remains for the critics to name.

Trying to isolate a "Gothic impulse" in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, Carter W. Martin attempts his own clarifications, asserting "the best Gothic fiction conveys themes which are congruent with the method of terror, striking a balance between manner and thematic intent." Like Lawson, he insists "grotesque" and "Gothic" are not synonymous. The former "is some deviation from an explicit or implicit norm and may reside in physical attributes, actions, or situations."¹⁶ Although Martin does not

acknowledge having seen Lawson's essay cited above, his bibliography does include Lawson's earlier examination of the grotesque in Wise Blood,¹⁷ and therefore, it is not surprising to perceive a parallel between Martin's assertion that the grotesque "may be simply verisimilitude or rhetorical overstatement" and Lawson's phrasing "photographic realism and absurdity." Acknowledging the inextricability of terms suggested here, Martin allows that "when its [grotesquerie's] intention is to promote a feeling of revulsion or terror, it is a textural necessity in Gothic fiction."¹⁸

Displaying an inexplicable but distinguishably greater sensitivity to the fashionable word "grotesque" than to its relative "Gothic," Martin overlooks Miss O'Connor's lecture-essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction."¹⁹ In her remarks here, as well as elsewhere (although then with less directness), Flannery O'Connor explains what I think is one of two major reasons for her "Gothic impulse," although--and this may account for Martin's oversight--she never uses the word "Gothic." Concluding a commonality in eighteenth century Gothic novels of the school of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and "Monk" Lewis, R. D. Spector states "They were an awakening response to a coldly rational world. They were an appeal to imagination at a time when science was producing facts and demanding logical explanations."²⁰ Closely parallel,

Flannery O'Connor's thesis is that in the face of scientific advancement since the eighteenth century, those writers working in agreement with "the popular spirit" have been increasingly inclined to attest that rationalistic, deterministic factors are the only informers of men's lives. Other writers, however, have felt that life is "essentially mysterious," and their fiction, true to that conception, has attempted to "go through the surface features into an experience of mystery itself."²¹ Miss O'Connor's thought and diction here agree entirely with Father Lynch's argument in Christ and Apollo.²² As she hastens to assure her audience, a vision of that which lies beyond the finite does not necessitate a rejection of the concrete but, paradoxically, is most firmly grounded in the belief that the world does not itself ultimately bind and confine man.

Beyond this reaction to cold rationalism, Miss O'Connor's grotesquerie generally conveys also her perception that humor enforces the aesthetic distance that allows us to see the truly blasphemous without the occluding lens of immediate repugnance. Hugging a stolen mummy to her breast, the sluttish Sabbath Lily Hawks would be a purely repellant figure, but for her words to Haze Motes, "'Call me Momma now.'"²³ When she speaks, the full ludicrousness of the situation evokes in the reader a distancing laughter that in turn reveals the horrible, unconscious parody of the Madonna by this life-denying

creature. In his chapter on "Comic and Grim Laughter," Martin recognizes this function of Miss O'Connor's humor, but he fails to associate it with motivation for the grotesque in general.

Difficult of definition in the abstract and without doubt best re-examined for each individual author, the grotesque as abnormality of body, psyche, or spirit impresses itself as crucially important in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Asked why "Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks," she responded, ". . . because we are still able to recognize one."²⁴ For Flannery O'Connor the criterion for knowing a freak is "to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological."²⁵ From this perspective, one sees her work as an amazingly swift parade of the lame and the halt. Some stumble along on artificial legs and clubfeet. Others are squint-eyed or blind with lime burns. Some are idiots. Many have fanatical obsessions with disease, pain, and mutilation. The blasphemers, agnostics, atheists, and nihilists are myriad. But always, the particular grotesqueries--and they are plural--in any one story relentlessly beckon our attention and repay our curiosity in the knowledge that we have looked into the blackness of alienation from God.

One-armed Tom T. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" protests "I'm a man . . . even if I ain't a whole one."²⁶ But we remember quickly that "whole" means redeemed as well as entire. After having married Lucynell Crater, one of God's holy idiots, to get possession of her mother's car, Shiftlet abandons his bride in The Hot Spot diner--an appropriately named place to damn his soul--heedless of the counterboy's prophetic exclamation that "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (G, p. 169). Driving away, he notices without interest several signs that warn "'Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own'" (G, p. 169). We know, although Shiftlet remains unenlightened, that he has rejected a means of grace--here, as in much of Miss O'Connor's fiction, the opportunity to extend compassion--and has displaced himself from the Kingdom of Heaven.

The story's irony- and humor-filled conclusion only reinforces the point.²⁷ Shiftlet picks up a hitchhiker and gratuitously begins to heap encomiums on the mother he deserted. When the stranger rejects Shiftlet's sentimentality, abuses his own mother, and suddenly leaps from the moving car, the stupified Shiftlet can only surmise "that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him" (G, p. 170). His reflection recalls the prophetic observation he made when first approaching Mrs. Crater's: "'Nothing is like it used to be, lady. . . . The world is

almost rotten'" (G, p. 161). Yet, still figuratively blind, he invokes the God he is rejecting: "'Oh, Lord! . . . Break forth and wash the slime from the earth!'" (G, p. 170). By way of answer, thunder and rain quickly crash on Shiftlet's car, and he races ahead to escape them, unwillingly to be "baptized" by the symbols of prevenient grace.²⁸

Writing on Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, Caroline Gordon says that "all her characters are 'displaced persons' . . . 'off center,' out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption."²⁹ Earlier in the essay, Miss Gordon suggests that the major difference between Flannery O'Connor's work and that of Capote, McCullers, or Tennessee Williams "lies in the nature and causes of their [O'Connor's characters'] freakishness."³⁰ I do not think Miss Gordon or any other critic intends to suggest that the displacement is a literal cause of the grotesqueness; not at all. Rather, the freakishness of body and action are drawn large, i.e., exaggerated, because of the displacement which Flannery O'Connor envisions. The misshapen existences of Miss O'Connor's characters reveal themselves to be, in Hugh Holman's phrase, "telling metaphors for the restless soul's disquiet when it rejects the God it seeks."³¹

Thomas T. Shiftlet drives out of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" still rejecting God. Another story from

the same collection may be used as an example of Flannery O'Connor's usual practice, that of dramatizing within the story an epiphanic understanding of past rejection. Moreover, "The Artificial Nigger" very obviously employs one of Miss O'Connor's own workings of the journey motif, in which the epiphany is fully realized at home after the often traumatic but always illuminating events of a trip abroad in the land.

Mr. Head, one of Miss O'Connor's country versions of her many know-it-all intellectuals, incongruously plays cicerone to his ten-year-old grandson, Nelson, taking the boy to Atlanta to teach him "that he was not as smart as he thought he was." The boy, for example, insists that he will recognize a Negro, although he had never seen one; the last one had been run out of his town before he was born. Too, Nelson contends that since he was born in Atlanta, this will be his second trip. All the way to the city, Mr. Head argues that it is the boy's first trip, but his own third. In short, each is narrowly sure of himself (G, p. 196).

We are prepared for the story's peripeteia by the peculiar twinship of the pair: "they looked enough alike to be brothers . . . not too far apart in age . . . Mr. Head had a youthful expression . . . while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it" (G, p. 197). As Carter W. Martin

points out, both characters emerge from "innocence into sacramental knowledge"³² of their true kinship, but it is Mr. Head who achieves the more articulated awareness.

On the train, Nelson's answers indicating that he sees Negroes only as men--fat or well-dressed or old--contrast with Mr. Head's conception of "them"; the latter sees Negroes as objects, roped in, for example, on the train's dining car. In the city Mr. Head and the boy become, through Mr. Head's now all-too-evident ignorance, hopelessly lost in the Negro section. It is a circle of the pilgrim's Inferno, and Mr. Head, assuming to guide the boy, is in need of his own Virgil. They begin to feel, although as yet unconsciously, like objects themselves--objects of derision, mockery, and scorn. Victory belongs to the Negroes Mr. Head would have taught Nelson to look down upon.

Once again in a white neighborhood, they take a nap, but Mr. Head hides himself to prove Nelson's dependence on him, a dependence that we already know exists strongly. Terrified at awakening alone, Nelson runs into a woman who immediately threatens police justice. Mr. Head, approaching timidly, denies Nelson, and the incident passes with the two, now sharply alienated, walking away widely spaced.

Now panicked, Mr. Head admits he is lost, gets directions, and calls out to Nelson, "'We're going to get

home!" (G, p. 212). The boy does not respond and suddenly Mr. Head is granted a conception of hell:

He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation. He didn't care if he never made the train and if it had not been for what suddenly caught his attention, like a cry out of the gathering dusk, he might have forgotten there was a station to go to. (G, p. 212)

For a consciousness growing into an awareness of God, hell is not, as Sartre says, other people, but is rather isolation. Stumbling in an abyss of loneliness, Mr. Head and Nelson are apocalyptically rescued by a common sight: a plaster statue of a Negro obviously intended as a hitching post. Miserable looking, the artificial Negro seems neither young nor old to Mr. Head and Nelson, but "some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (G, p. 213).

Offering dependence and seeking compassion, Nelson implores Mr. Head with his eyes

to explain once and for all the mystery of existence.

Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one."

After a second, the boy nodded with a strange shivering about his mouth, and said, "Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again." (G, p. 213)

The imagery of their disembarkment at home is purely edenic. "The treetops . . . fence the junction like the protecting walls of a garden" (G, p. 213), and the train

that was instrument in their coming to a knowledge of good and evil "disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods . . ." (G, p. 214).

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise. (G, pp. 213-214)

Conventionally, modern literature has said one cannot go home again, but it should be observed that, like Father Urban, Mr. Head and Nelson are really home for the first time. Their displacement from their true country is objectified in their contentious trip to the city. But sharing in the communion of a "common defeat," they rise in their own victory and no longer vie for ascendancy.

Another example, and perhaps more than "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" or "The Artificial Nigger" a clear one, of this spiritual unrest imaged in external strangeness presents itself in "Good Country People," a later

story in A Good Man Is Hard to Find. The main character, a thirty-two-year-old spinster, manifests a malignant ugliness of appearance and action which reveals its predication on an inner spiritual deformity, indeed, a nihilism.

Her leg had been "shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten" (G, p. 245), and "every year" since then, as her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, thinks, "she grew less like other people and more like herself--bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" (G, p. 247). Out of spite for the world, the daughter shuns every feminine quality, dressing as unattractively as she can. When she embarks for the fateful rendezvous with the Bible salesman, she puts "some Vapex on the collar . . . since she did not own any perfume" (G, p. 255).

In a deliberate effort to mark the ugliness of the world as she sees it from her intellectual position, she had changed her name when she became twenty-one. Her given name is Joy, and although we must assume she was not baptized--her mother's Bible "was in the attic somewhere" (G, p. 249)--it could meaningfully be called her Christian name: she rejects it. She changed it to Hulga, choosing that "purely on the basis of its ugly sound" (G, p. 246). Sickened at even the thought of the name, Mrs. Hopewell persists in calling "her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way" (G, p. 246).

The image of a machine, though fleeting, is not to be lost, for Hulga has severed all human relationships. She has taken a Ph.D. in philosophy and has returned home, unemployable with a symbolic weak heart, an intellectual and an atheist (a combination used as frequently by Miss O'Connor as by Peter De Vries). She cannot talk to anyone. She ignores her mother and scorns her mother's "friend," Mrs. Freeman, the ironically-named wife of Mrs. Hopewell's hired man. Machine-like, Hulga dispassionately decides to seduce the Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, who has called at the house and has duped Mrs. Hopewell into thinking him "good country people."

In the barn she thinks she is shocking him when she says, "'I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing'" (G, p. 258). Oblivious to the fact that there is not even lust in his mechanical foreplay as they tumble in the hayloft, she murmurs, "'We are all damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation'" (G, p. 258). To herself she muses that "for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence" (G, p. 259). But their true relative status begins to dawn on Hulga when Pointer convinces her to let him remove her artificial leg and then will not give it back. With Hulga defenseless, Pointer opens his sample case and from a hollow Bible takes whiskey,

pornographic cards, and contraceptives. When he lays them before her in an ironic gesture of adulation, Hulga, like Sabbath Lily Hawks, takes on the aspect of an anti-Madonna. (Earlier, she had imagined herself a goddess and the re-naming of herself her "highest creative act" G, p. 246.) Just as surely, to the Fundamentalist imagination Manley Pointer would be the anti-Christ in a pious disguise. Miss O'Connor seems to be saying that ironically it takes the latter, here in an act of quiet violence, to reveal the former's true state to herself. Aghast that he is not "just good country people" (G, p. 260) and enraged that he is "a perfect Christian," "say[ing] one thing and do[ing] another," (G, p. 261) Hulga watches Pointer pack his bag and leave the barn. Surely, his parting remark strips Hulga of the last of the illusions she thought she did not have: "' . . . you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!'" (G, p. 261). It is he who has seduced her, pointed her to the revelation that beneath her shell of haughty intellectual sophistication lies an empty naiveté.

However, the story does not close on Hulga's apocalypse. The final two paragraphs survey Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman watching Pointer as he leaves the farm, and we are reminded that Flannery O'Connor peoples each story with more than one freak. The two women muse on the Bible salesman's simplicity and Mrs. Hopewell speculates

that "'The world would be better off if we were all that simple'" (G, p. 261). However, we have known from the early scenes of the story that few could be more simple than she. With her cliché-ridden mind, she understands nothing about Hulga and thinks the nosey Mrs. Freeman's obsession with Hulga's leg and any other form of sickness or mutilation marks her as just "good country people" (G, p. 244). She cannot sense Pointer's duplicity when he starts his pitch, and to his protestations of humility, she cries, "'Why . . . good country people are the salt of the earth. Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go 'round. That's life!'" (G, p. 250).

The horror that remains in the background for us is that only Hulga has been enlightened. The vision of her mother and Mrs. Freeman is still focused downward, not implying a grasp on the concrete, but an obliviousness to the evil under their noses. The serpent imagery of the scene is beautifully subtle but effective. Mrs. Freeman watches Pointer as he "disappeared under the hill" and then devotes "her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. 'Some can't be that simple,' she said, 'I know I never could'" (G, p. 261).

An allegorical construction may be put upon all this, although the parallels are complex and not perfect but merely directional. The snake Satan, the insinuating

Manley Pointer, has left the garden that Hulga considered an inviolable sanctuary, having displaced Hulga with a rape of her innocence. She must now go forth, like Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "into the world of guilt and sorrow."³³ But the allegory has another side, relative to Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman. Like the simple, naive, pre-lapsarian dwellers in Eden (of Milton's poem), the two women remain unconscious of their liability to damnation in the blindness of pride. If the story does indeed make a convenient equation between simplicity and innocence, irony builds upon irony while these two post-lapsarian creatures act as if they are without sin while deprecating simplicity.

If the story's conclusion seems a little too patently allegorical, although with a complexity like that of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," there may be a relevant suggestion in Louis D. Rubin, Jr.'s remark as he writes of the stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge:

The consciously religious work of art . . . usually achieves its intensity because of the conflict set up within the work between the artist's moral convictions and his intense sympathy for the humans caught in the toils of sin. But when there isn't that conflict, what results is likely to be allegory, and very didactically set forth at that.³⁴

The conflict fails in this story because Miss O'Connor makes "her sinners so wretchedly obnoxious that one can't feel much compassion for their plight."³⁵

Without a doubt, Flannery O'Connor's finest story built upon the image of displacement is "The Displaced Person" (G, pp. 262-299), which perhaps tellingly follows "Good Country People" immediately in A Good Man Is Hard to Find. But although it may clarify the theme of "Good Country People," "The Displaced Person" requires its own explication and commentary toward an appreciation of its richness, for as Harry J. Mooney, Jr. perceives, it is "in many ways central to Flannery O'Connor's total achievement."³⁶

Anyone writing on "The Displaced Person" since 1964 must acknowledge the development of perspective on this story through three documents: the Time review of A Good Man, Robert Fitzgerald's retaliatory essay, and Eileen Baldeshwiler's supplementary analysis.³⁷ The first, in its flippant alliteration and plain misreading, is infamous among Miss O'Connor's appreciators.³⁸

Only in her longest story, The Displaced Person, does Ferocious Flannery weaken her wallop by groping about for a symbolic second-story meaning--in this case, something about salvation. But despite such arty fumbling, which also marred Author O'Connor's novel Wise Blood (Time, June 9, 1952), this is still a powerful and moving tale of an innocent Pole who stumbles against the South's color bar.

In the second, Fitzgerald conclusively proves that the story belongs to Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre and offers as his thesis "that estrangement from Christian plenitude is estrangement from the true country of man."³⁹

The third complements Fitzgerald's essay by a close analysis of the peacock and Mr. Guizac as analogues of Christ. Acknowledging the insightful comments of Fitzgerald and Baldeshwiler, I would yet offer the following discussion as further supplementary for a few interesting and crucial details.

Ostensibly, the story's title figure is Mr. Guizac, the Polish D.P. who is brought with his family to a small farm by a local priest. But in fact the story focuses upon two other persons: Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley, the wife of Mrs. McIntyre's dairyman. Clearly developments of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, these two women are far more complex. Struggling along on the farm after three husbands and a long succession of white trash tenants, Mrs. McIntyre finds her fortunes suddenly reversed by Mr. Guizac's energy and skill. For the first time in years, the farm makes money, and Mrs. McIntyre dreams rapturously of her material prospects, like the little woman in the Scandanavian children's tale who counted her eggs before they were laid. Reveling at the sight of Mr. Guizac working her acreage, she is moved to tell Mrs. Shortley "' . . . at last I'm saved! . . . That man is my salvation!'" (G, p. 270). The true state of her soul is already evident, for she treats Mr. Guizac, aside from his wages, as no more and no other than one of the machines he operates.

However, like a "giant wife of the countryside" (G, p. 262), Mrs. Shortley dominates the first half of the story. Prejudiced to her roots against Negroes and people from "over yonder" (G, p. 266), Mrs. Shortley is as solid in her physical features. She stands or walks on heavy legs, with arms folded, habitually gazing from "two icy blue points of light that pierced forward surveying everything" (G, p. 262). Ironically, her eyes, considered both literally and metaphorically, betray her hamartia. Again and again, she manifests a farsightedness, an inability to see things close. The defect is an objective correlative for her inability to perceive the nature of her situation, the immediate. For example, a peacock and two hens roam Mrs. McIntyre's yard, refugees, as it were, from the days when her first husband had a flock of them. Now, neglected, they are as displaced as the Guizac family. Mrs. Shortley never really sees the beautiful peacock with its arresting tail of green-gold and blue suns, who would stand "still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all." She can only mutter, "'Nothing but a peachicken'" (G, p. 266). Too, like Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. Shortley cannot see Mr. Guizac as a man. For her he is an agent of production, threatening her shiftless husband's position. Coming from "Europe where they had not advanced as in this country" (G, p. 264), Mr. Guizac is an enigma, no more human than

the flesh in those rooms "piled high with bodies" (G, p. 264) that she remembers vividly from newsreels. The very foreignness that she cannot comprehend and will not try to understand prompts Mrs. Shortley to repeated nightmares of death camp scenes in which she must flee from an onrush of dismembered, "indecent" bodies that she dreams are trying to displace the Shortleys. Like Mrs. McIntyre but to no greater degree, Mrs. Shortley is so wrapped up in her self and her place that, ironically, she must also be called short-sighted, unable to see her far, true country.

Her vision suddenly becomes clear in the aftermath of her discovery that Mr. Shortley is to be fired. Not waiting for the notice, she rouses her family to a frenzied exodus that is dramatized in its humor far beyond what Mark Twain merely suggests when Huck exclaims "Hump yourself, Jim." When Mr. Shortley finally asks, "'Where we goin'?" Mrs. Shortley cannot answer, for she is suddenly in the throes of her apocalypse, grabbing for parts of the bodies of her family crowded against her, clutching for bits and pieces of her miserable worldly goods, and then releasing everything in the passing of a fatal stroke.

" . . . [H]er huge body rolled back, . . . and her eyes like blue-painted glass, seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country" (G, p. 280).

Miss Baldeshwiler concludes that in this story "it is the displacer who is truly displaced."⁴⁰ But while she accuses Robert Fitzgerald of being vague, I think she ignores the imagery of Mrs. Shortley's death. Mrs. Shortley has been displaced in topographical terms, but the contemplation of "her true country" is surely the image of a final beholding and accepting of the grace she has rejected all along. In the fit of her dying "She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot . . . and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself" (G, p. 279). In another second she hugs "Mr. Shortley's head [and] Sarah Mae's leg" (G, p. 280), in an act that is clearly a victim's reparation and penance for denying the members of those thousands of other victims. In Christian theology, repentance at the last possible moment is efficacious, and Flannery O'Connor does not presume to damn Mrs. Shortley.

With Mrs. Shortley's death, as almost every critic observes, the mantle of the "giant wife of the countryside" falls on Mrs. McIntyre. But maintaining a solid defiance of foreign "corruption" soon becomes a heavy cross. Without the company of Mrs. Shortley, her doppelgänger, Mrs. McIntyre ironically begins to feel threatened. The last straw is her discovery that Sulk, the younger of the farm's two Negro hands, has agreed to pay the passage over for

Mr. Guizac's sixteen-year-old cousin, still in a detention camp, and to marry her.

The scene following the discovery has very curiously gone unnoticed by critics, although it seems a cameo sketch of the major flaw in Mrs. McIntyre's life. Traumatized by the news, she can think of nothing but that she has been attacked. Entering the house, she goes "into the back hall, a closet-like space that was dark and quiet as a chapel." Exhausted, she rests her elbow on her first husband's old roll-top desk, a marvel of design with myriad drawers and pigeon holes for organizing the religion of management. At the back center of the desk "there was a small safe, empty but locked, set like a tabernacle. . . . Since the judge's death, Mrs. McIntyre has left the room unchanged, "a kind of memorial to him, sacred because he had conducted his business here." "When she sat with her intense constricted face turned toward the empty safe, she knew there was nobody poorer in the world than she was" (G, pp. 286-287). Clearly in meditation, "She sat motionless at the desk for ten or fifteen minutes and then as if she had gained some strength, she got up . . . and drove to the cornfield" (G, p. 287). It is equally clear she receives no consolation; the dusty papers have no comfortable words. She seeks her strength at the altar of mammon, but the tabernacle is empty; there is nothing in reserve.

Confronting the priest after her fruitless excommunication of Mr. Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre is totally unable to communicate her turmoil. As usual, the glorious, transcendently beautiful peacock has appeared during a conversation about Mr. Guizac, and the bird occupies, apparently, the whole of Father Flynn's attention. Staring at the tail, the priest first exclaims "'Christ will come like that!'" and then murmurs "'The Transfiguration.'" Mrs. McIntyre "had no idea what he was talking about." Her only thought is that "'Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place.'" Still watching the peacock, the priest subliminally catechizes, "'He came to redeem us'" (G, p. 291). If we have by now accepted the peacock and Mr. Guizac as personae for Christ, we can comprehend the full, self-damning import of Mrs. McIntyre's ironic, exasperated exclamation, "'As far as I'm concerned . . . Christ was just another D.P.'" (G, p. 294).

In the meantime, Mr. Shortley returns to the farm, and re-hired by Mrs. McIntyre, pursues even more actively than his wife had, an advocacy for the Devil. Like the toad at Eve's ear, Mr. Shortley convinces Mrs. McIntyre to think the Guizacs a threat to her profits, her patriotism, her white superiority, and "advanced religion." Still, she cannot bring herself to fire Mr. Guizac and simply remove him. It remains for an act of violence to take his physical presence but stamp him indelibly on her

mind. Just as it is impossible to know whether Margot Macomber intentionally shoots Francis to end his happy life, we cannot say that Mr. Shortley deliberately brakes the tractor inadequately so that it will race down the hill to crush Mr. Guizac, while Sulk and Mrs. McIntyre stare silently. Whatever the truth of the formal cause, Mrs. McIntyre feels "her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever . . ." (G, p. 298).

While Mr. Guizac is carried away, she feels as if she were alone "in some foreign country" (G, p. 299). Justifying the feeling, Shortley leaves that day, the Negroes follow suit, and she collapses, physically and mentally. Selling her cows at a loss, she retires on her meagre funds, visited only by Father Flynn who, in the imagery of the communion and sermon of the Mass, comes to feed breadcrumbs to the birds and explain the doctrines of the Faith to Mrs. McIntyre. The effect of losing everyone and everything that she could understand is a displacement. Rejecting the peacocks, she shuns the glory of Christ, and rejecting Mr. Guizac, she ignores a vehicle for compassion. Faithless, she has been hopeless and without charity. Like Mrs. Shortley's, her topography figuratively undergoes an earthquake. But most critics miss the point that she is not so much displaced as she has displaced herself. Anxious to recognize Flannery

O'Connor's supernaturalism, many critics ignore the dangerous free will of her characters.

Much of the story's irony, of course, rests on the assumption that we believe Mrs. McIntyre is finally educated to the nature of real poverty. Like Peter De Vries and J. F. Powers in a number of stories, Flannery O'Connor frequently sees fit to conclude without saying explicitly that her characters have epiphanies. But from the remainder of Miss O'Connor's work, we can, for example, only assume that in confrontation with the Misfit, the grandmother realizes the fruits of her pride ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find," G, pp. 129-143); we must believe the fire burns into Mrs. Cope the lesson that people are more valuable than property ("A Circle in the Fire," G, pp. 215-232); and we are sure that Sheppard's penance for denying "one of the least of these my brethren" follows his son's soul to heaven ("The Lame Shall Enter First," E, pp. 131-165). In the same manner, it seems certain that as Mrs. McIntyre's physical eyesight fails in her decline, she sees ever more clearly the returns for spiritual improverishment. With her new eyes she rises to converge with the D.P.s, Negroes, white trash, and Catholics she has feared. This image of convergence is central to Miss O'Connor's whole vision in Everything That Rises Must Converge, and has its parallel and perhaps

its roots in the works on one twentieth century Catholic thinker.

As Robert Fitzgerald in his introduction to Miss O'Connor's posthumous volume⁴¹ and Carter W. Martin in his analytical essay⁴² point out, Flannery O'Connor was extremely interested in the writings of Père Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, probably The Phenomenon of Man in particular.⁴³ However, other critics forego discussion of the French priest and paleontologist, almost surely on the grounds of the great difficulty in all but the essence of Père Teilhard's thought. Fitzgerald's remarks are merely a notice of Miss O'Connor's reading and Martin's are only slightly developed. Nonetheless, he asserts "there is no systematic, allegorical representation of Teilhard's ideas in her fiction."⁴⁴ However, he feels it incumbent upon his position to devote two pages to epitomizing Père Teilhard's cosmogony, stressing--in his own words, not Père Teilhard's-- that "Separate souls carry their consciousness upward but become synthesized at the Omega point, at which the convergent nature of the universe is achieved."⁴⁵

Martin's statement is a radical simplification of Teilhard's conception of man's evolution through the extent of tempero-spatial existence, but it introduces, indirectly, an important point. In terms of Flannery O'Connor's fiction and Teilhard's cosmology, the stated idea means

those desperate persons who strive for or believe they already have an absolute autonomy of being are on the one hand ignorant of the creative drive in the universe toward Christ as the center of being, and on the other hand they are functional in the "evil of disorder and failure"⁴⁶ which is an inevitable concomitant of the universe's striving toward "hominisation" (Père Teilhard's term for "the process by which potential man realize[s] more and more of his possibilities," according to Sir Julian Huxley,⁴⁷ or the "leap from instinct to thought," according to Christopher Mooney).⁴⁸

Still following Teilhard, when men are ignorant of the significance of that which is outside and beyond themselves, i.e., Christ, they cannot comprehend the nature and consequences of their "petty" evils or their gross impediments of the world's movement toward Omega. T. C. Tanner's daughter can offer a hundred "rationalizations" for denying her father's desire to go home when he dies ("Judgement Day," E, pp. 207-224), and the Misfit cannot believe there is any pleasure in life because he knows, with an ironic rightness, that Jesus "thown everything off balance" (G, p. 142). He will not believe because he was not there and did not feel the wounds. He cannot accept that with Christ at the redemptive center of the universe the Incarnation is an ongoing process. Like Peter De Vries and J. F. Powers, Flannery O'Connor understands man to be

a finite creature of time and space in his individuality, but concurrently she would have every man open his eyes to gaze beyond himself. In the Misfit, Miss O'Connor seems to be drawing one who cannot believe that

the primary motive of the Incarnation is not to counteract the effects of sin in the world, either original or personal, but to unite all reality, material and spiritual, natural and supernatural, divine and human, in the Person of the Incarnate Word, God's masterwork, the goal and crowning achievement of his goodness, power and love.⁴⁹

Only the grandmother acts in this belief when she suddenly cries out, seconds before the Misfit kills her, "'Why you're one of my babies, You're one of my own children!'" (G, p. 143). Unity is no longer just a theory for her consciousness.

Again and again in Miss O'Connor's fiction the grotesque, however ostensibly humorous, is an emblem of disunity, of isolation and alienation, both from man and God. Often the grotesque life culminates, through violence, in death. But the violence is usual, whether a death occurs or not. Through the violence the individual's soul is burned clean. Usually, the burning is imaged in the eyes--for O'Connor's characters the eyes are the mirror of the soul. They appear scorched or burned out, often so much that nothing but a distant pinpoint of light is visible to anyone looking into them.

I would not pretend that the foregoing discussion exhausts the possibilities of relationship between Miss

O'Connor and Père Teilhard, but it does suggest both her closeness to an eminent theologian and her continuity with a strain of trans-Catholic thought, that is, not mere Roman Catholicism, but Christ-centered thinking. Too, Miss O'Connor and Père Teilhard share the awareness that as everything rises to converge, the person must succumb as individual. The pain of this submission paves the way for the violence which Miss O'Connor sees as requisite for the deaf to hear and the blind to see, and in hearing and seeing, live. As Christopher Mooney explains from Père Teilhard's writings,

Most of all is this the case with that "final stripping by death which accompanies our recasting in Christo Jesu." Just as he submitted to death, so we must "undergo an eclipse, which seems to annihilate us before being reborn in Christ. . . . It is Jesus who forewarns us: . . . the same pain which kills and putrifies matter is necessary for a person's growth in life and spirit."⁵⁰

In his essay on Miss O'Connor's short fiction, Harry J. Mooney, Jr. sees three categories of delusion among her characters:

One of the primary sources of evil in these stories arises from persons so self-sufficient or, in terms of the stories themselves, so limited, that they either reject or deny God because they cannot conceive the need of anything outside themselves. . . . There is another delusion of self-sufficiency, deriving from the power of property. . . . A third kind of individual occurring regularly . . . is the righteous⁵¹

In the latter category, as one can tell from his development, Mooney means "self-righteous." Then, all the categories amount to the same thing: the problem of people who cannot look outside themselves. Of such characters, Mrs. Shortley is an archetype. Waiting for the call to prophesy against the Guizacs of the world, she stands with eyes directed outward, but really looking inward. When her "call" comes, she is described as having an "inner vision." She cannot even see the peacock's tail that hangs, spread out, from the tree directly in front of her (G, pp. 176-77).⁵¹

In spite of the frequent critical thesis that Flannery O'Connor's fiction works with the repetition of only a few types--giant wives of the countryside, antagonistic Negroes, avaricious landowners (usually women), spiritually blind preachers, spiritually dead intellectuals, and others--she, in fact, deals with so many variations of the types that in the totality of her work they merge into all mankind. Her Southern countryside is a Ship of Fools, who are minimally similar in being isolated figures. I stress this point because Flannery O'Connor says again and again that everyone rises to converge. In the final vision of each piece, type differences are obliterated in the large redemptive scheme.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction gives dramatic, concrete form to the humble and often banal insight that enables the individual man to move toward grace by rising only slightly. It is this movement that she means when she speaks of our slow participation in redemption.⁵³

To examine the idea of rising toward union in Everything That Rises Must Converge, one should consider the title story. It turns upon two people, Julian and his mother, who in a multitude of ironies manifest both differences and similarities.

Julian is a college graduate, one of Flannery O'Connor's intellectuals--along with Hulga, Asbury Fox ("The Enduring Chill," E, pp. 87-110), Rayber (The Violent Bear It Away), and Sheppard ("The Lame Shall Enter First," E, pp. 131-165)--who, like De Vries' pretenders to braininess, are really no more than pseudo-intellectuals because their education has only turned them bitter toward themselves and vindictive toward the world, whatever their stated altruism. Obsessed with the mind, they deem it alone capable of working a kind of temporal salvation, there being no soul to save for any kind of heaven.

Julian's mother is fat, with excreble taste in clothes. As the story opens she wears a ludicrous purple and green hat that alone depresses Julian. Prejudiced, she is unable to talk except in clichés. Julian makes himself look just as foolish and has a vision really no wider than his mother's. To fully perceive Julian's perspective, one

must be alert to the places at which the narrative shifts to Julian's point of view, for reading him only on the surface of his acts and conversation, he seems to be a liberal, alert young man saddled to a bigoted half-wit.

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. . . . His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity. . . . She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot. The law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. . . . What she meant when she said she had won was that she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and that he had turned out so well--good looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be a success), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him). . . . The further irony of all this was that in spite of her, he had turned out so well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother. (E, pp. 35-36)

The main arena for their conflict is the contention of Julian's mother that she knows who she is and where she is and that such knowledge is all that is important for anyone: "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere" (E, p. 31). Whatever the ironic truth of her statement in the abstract, Julian's mother thinks of herself and speaks

to Julian only in terms of a prestigious lineage: "Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state.

. . . Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh" (E, p. 31). To escape the conflict of pride and sacrifice, Julian's mother functionally exists in the past when Julian's "great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves," and "the old darky" (E, pp. 31, 32), Caroline, was Julian's mother's nurse.

In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury Fox wants to teach his mother about integration and show up her ignorance of an artist's life and death. Hulga wants to teach the Bible salesman about the nothingness behind everything. Another intellectual, Thomas of "The Comforts of Home," intends to show his mother he will not share his home with a nymphomaniac (E, pp. 111-30). And O. E. Parker thinks the tattooed face of a Byzantine Christ will squelch his shrewish wife's religious fanaticism ("Parker's Back," E, pp. 187-205). Alternately smug and savage because of his mother's density, Julian wants to teach his mother once and for all, that "knowing who you are is good for one generation only" (E, p. 31).

Ironically, Julian does not know where he is, and being confused in time and space, he strives to escape them in much the same way as Peter De Vries' daydreamers. "He never spoke of it [the old Godhigh mansion] without contempt

or thought of it without longing. . . . It appeared in his dreams regularly" (E, p. 32). But taking the suggestion of "Godhigh mansion" (my phrase), Julian seems another of Miss O'Connor's characters who unwittingly have knowledge of the heavenly home which they ignore or deny.

That time past is cherished in the heart by Julian's mother and fancied in the brain by Julian is reinforced as they argue their respective groundings:

"True culture is in the mind, the mind," he said, and tapped his head, "the mind."

"It's in the heart," she said, "and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are."

"Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are."

"I care who I am," she said icily. (E, p. 33)

The point is already clear that neither the mind nor the heart alone makes the whole man, and in Miss O'Connor's fiction that phrase should always be placed in the context of its scriptural overtone, "saved."

In the bus on their way to his mother's YWCA reducing class, Julian yearns for the opportunity to "teach her a lesson that would last her a while" (E, p. 37). He thinks he has it when a Negro executive enters the bus and sits beside Julian. Julian tries to make conversation and borrow a match, but the Negro will not talk and Julian remembers he no longer smokes. In front of a Negro, of all persons, he makes a fool of himself.

The lesson, but one not only for Julian's mother, comes unexpectedly and violently when "a large, gaily

dressed sullen-looking colored woman" (E, p. 38) and her son enter the bus. She has on a hat identical to that worn by Julian's mother. A point curiously ignored by all critics is the sensitivity of Julian and his mother to the Negress' hat. Flannery O'Connor uses exactly the same sequence of thirty-five words to describe the black woman's hat as she used for that of Julian's mother. His mother apparently perceives instantly that they have matching hats, but her heritage stands her in good stead at the moment, and she does not create a furor that could only be embarrassing for her. Julian does not perceive the sameness until minutes later, and is then unaware that his mother knows. Secretly exultant, "He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson" (E, p. 39).

When Julian's mother from her habitual condescension tries to give the Negro boy a penny as they all leave the bus, his mother--the doppelgänger of Julian's mother--knocks her to the sidewalk. After Julian finally gets his mother up, she can only mutter thickly "Home." But she does not mean their apartment. She has become as a child: "Tell Grandpa to come get me . . . Tell Caroline to come get me" (E, p. 43).

Having a stroke, like Mrs. Shortley, Julian's mother is described in terms very much like Mrs. Shortley at her death. The realization of who she is and where she is has almost literally killed her. But her death is the lesson

for Julian. As he runs for help, "The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow"

(E, p. 43).

Both Julian and his mother have fallen from pride into sorrow. Both have been isolated, Julian because of his intellectualism, Julian's mother because she thought herself inherently superior. Thinking herself displaced from her heritage, she was actually displaced from her true country. Discovery that a patrician past cannot exist even for her reveals her self-separation from the Kingdom of Love which accepts all equally. Père Teilhard writes in The Phenomenon of Man

I doubt whether there is a more decisive moment for a thinking being than when the scales fall from his eyes and he discovers that he is not an isolated unit lost in the cosmic solitudes, and realises that a universal will to live converges and is hominised in him.⁵⁴

When the scales fall, the individual experiences a revelation, and it is to the story "Revelation" that I turn for Miss O'Connor's clearest exposition of the idea that everyone who rises must converge.⁵⁵ "Revelation" is perhaps her simplest story, and in my estimation vies for the position of being her most overtly humorous. The inane conversation in the waiting room and the image of a woman talking to God while staring eye-to-eye with a pig are sheer fictional inspiration, and except for the grotesquerie

of body, might have come out of De Vries' work. But aside from its humor, the story is far less complex in point of view, irony, and structure than "Everything That Rises Must Converge." It moves in a straight line with no digressions from the establishment of Mrs. Turpin's insularity to the apocalyptic vision of her place in the line of pilgrims to heaven.

Most of the story takes place in the small, crowded anteroom of a doctor's office. The assemblage is a minor panorama of Flannery O'Connor's characters: Mrs. Turpin and Claud, a "giant wife of the countryside" and her Caspar Milquetoast-ish husband; a "pleasant" lady and her grimly intellectual daughter, a Wellesley student; a doubly lewd, slovenly "white-trash" woman, her dim-witted son, and her ancient mother in a feed sack dress and tennis shoes; briefly, a self-assured young Negro; and several others, atmospheric on the periphery of the scene. It is Claud's office visit, not Mrs. Turpin's--"He has an ulcer on his leg" (E, p. 168). However, we soon see Mrs. Turpin's soul is sick. Before they leave the office, Claud gets his leg examined and Mrs. Turpin gets her medicine: a gross insult and a violent physical assault from the Wellesley girl.

Mrs. Turpin, like many of Miss O'Connor's characters, has long contemplated her blessings in life and speculated on where she stands among all the classes of society. She

delights in imagining a dialogue with Jesus, in which she states her preferences--rather a "neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black" (E, p. 170) than white-trash, but rather herself than either. Yet, "What if Jesus had said, 'All right, you can be white-trash or a nigger or ugly'!" (E, p. 171). At other times she attempts a hierarchy of persons, but when she envisions, below her, such complications as wealthy Negroes, or, above her, such enigmas as ugly, unhappy rich people, the woman's mind boggles. In the end, she merely thanks Jesus that she has a little bit of everything: a pleasant disposition, cleanliness, land, a home, a truck, some cotton, some hogs and chickens and cows, a pig parlor, some Negro hands, and Claud. The obvious similarity of my list, with Negroes and Claud at the end, to the satiric inventory of Belinda's dressing table--"Here files of pins extend their shining rows,/ Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux (The Rape of the Lock, I, 137-138)--should suggest Mrs. Turpin's egocentricity.

All of these speculations and thanksgivings she happily iterates, piecemeal, to her companions in the waiting room. However, deeply bothered by the girl's fierce looks during her periodic diatribes against "niggers" and "trashy people," Mrs. Turpin finally asks the Wellesley student if she has something to say. With that, the girl launches a violent physical attack upon Mrs. Turpin,

concluding just before she is subdued with the words,
 "'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'"
 (E, p. 179).

Still in shock at home, Mrs. Turpin goes alone to the pig parlor, and while furiously hosing down an old sow-- baptizing the pig, as it were, and by association receiving the sacramental grace herself--she castigates Jesus for sending a message like that when she is already saved, kind to niggers and trash, churchgoing, and industrious. Finally, with a violent anguish more shocking than Hemingway's nada prayer, she screams

"Go on . . . call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!" . . . A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, "Who do you think you are?"
 (E, p. 185)

By way of answer, "A visionary light settles in her eyes," and "a vast horde of souls" trooped toward heaven. In front are clean white-trash and Negroes robed in white, and last are those she recognizes as like herself, those who "had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away" (E, p. 186).

Two portions of Scripture should coalesce in our critical reaction to this story, one germane to this particular story and the other a source, doubtfully unconscious, for all of Flannery O'Connor's fiction in

which characters have such apocalyptic visions as Mrs. Turpin's or epiphanies of some kind, or are on the verge of a new seeing. The first is Christ's answer to Peter who asks what the disciples shall have when they forsake all to follow Him: "And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, . . . or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."⁵⁶ The answer of the last verse at first appears irrational, even absurd in that it would seem to make meaningless all gestures of faith. But it must be read minimally in the context of the preceding verse. It then says that the truly righteous, not the self-righteous--the smug, the satisfied, those really oblivious to others--shall be rewarded by the vision of God.

The second is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, in which even those workers who begin late in the day receive the same wage as those who have toiled since morning.⁵⁷ This, too, seems immediately offensive, a slap in the face of long-suffering. Yet, what the parable really teaches is "that the gift of eternal life is not the reward of human merit but the free gift of divine grace."⁵⁸ For Louise Gossett, "Revelation" would seem to bear out Flannery O'Connor's intuitive grasp of the essence in these two Scriptural passages, for she calls the story an expression of

Miss O'Connor's certainty that man can never dictate the conditions in which truth will be revealed. Because human definitions of God's ways are too limited to be wholly accurate, they must often be corrected by violence which disturbs the creature so that he may be open to the creator.⁵⁹

The structure of most of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is the movement through an insistent, although usually unwitting, rejection of God and his grace to an apocalyptic vision of grace's imminence that burns the eyes of the beholder. Flannery O'Connor's two novels, which I wish to consider next, are complex developments of her vision of the violence that alone can open our dull eyes in these times of insensitivity to grace.

Wise Blood is the story of Hazel Motes, a Christ-haunted man, "a Christian malgré lui" as Flannery O'Connor calls him in her introduction to the novel's second edition of 1962. In "Parker's Back," O. E. Parker satisfied his spiritual restlessness by having Christ's face tattooed on his back, but Haze's unrest cannot be quieted by any means as amiable to him as tattoos are to Parker. In Flannery O'Connor's estimation, "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God."⁶⁰ Yet, deny his God as he will, Haze proves in this story that he is his grandfather's son.⁶¹ "His grandfather had been a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who

had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" (W, p. 15).

Haze's grandfather had preached at him incessantly that Jesus would have everyone in the end, whether the individual wills it or not. As a boy, Haze decided, even when he thought he was still going to be a preacher like his grandfather, "that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (W, p. 16). The fact that a man had a soul caused all the trouble--if one could get rid of his soul, every problem would be solved. So, in the army Haze decided that the way to get rid of it "without corruption" was "to be converted to nothing instead of evil" (W, p. 17).

Haze opts for nothingness to flee the "wild ragged figure" (W, p. 16) of Jesus who beckons him to come off into the dark where he cannot be sure of himself. Haze is afraid that if he followed Jesus he might be walking on water and not know it, then suddenly wake up and drown. Haze wants footing, wants to know where he is, so he plans from the outset of his army tour to keep himself from the lusts of the flesh, not for any puritanical reason, but to avoid Jesus, and return home to Eastrod, Tennessee. When he returns, nothing is like it was before the war--you can't go home again--and Haze takes the train to Taulkinham to preach the "Church without Christ."

Having chosen "to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because

there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two" (W, p. 60), Haze has difficulty in carrying out his resolves. As soon as he arrives in Taulkinham, he sees in a public place a scribbled advertisement for Mrs. Leora Watts, who has "the friendliest bed in town" (W, p. 21). To affirm that he has no soul to be corrupted he decides to visit her, but she, and the taxi driver who delivers him, insist on mistaking him for a conventional preacher. To them and to everyone he meets he must insist, "'I don't believe in anything'" (W, p. 21).

On the streets of Taulkinham, Haze meets his opposite, the lonely young Enoch Emery, who is desperately anxious to believe in something, to identify with something or someone else. When he hears Haze preach about a new Jesus, he decides to please his friend, and for Haze steals a museum mummy that has long been an enigma for him. Symbolically, Haze throws this false god out the window. Enoch, though, not present at this iconoclastic moment, wanders on expecting some miracle to follow consequent upon his gift. His faithfulness seems to him repaid in the sudden opportunity to steal the gorilla suit being worn for local theater promotions. With the suit on, Enoch approaches a pair of lovers, anticipating the same enthusiastic welcome he had witnessed for the suit's original wearer. However, they flee and Enoch is left, as alone as ever. His god has failed.

Haze, on the other hand, will brook no disguises. He thinks he is being true to himself and expects the same of others. Of this mind, he fiercely denounces imitators and detractors who quickly see that his new line will fill the passed hats that conventional pentecostal preaching leaves empty. Haze is convinced that such men are hypocrites, really believing all the while they pretend not to believe.

One of those with whom Haze conflicts is Asa Hawks, a disreputable Church of Christ preacher who fakes blindness for sympathy. Years ago Hawks announced that he would burn out his eyes with lime "to justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him" (W, p. 64), but his nerve had failed, and since then he has travelled with his daughter, Sabbath Lily, piecing out a living by his deception. Haze learns most of Hawks' story while fornicating with his daughter who likes being "pure filthy right down to the guts" (W, p. 92). And for a while Haze can work this means of disavowing his soul because, like "courage" and "honor" for Frederick Henry, fornication and blasphemy "ain't nothing but words" (W, p. 33).

Another charlatan is Solace Layfield, hired by a greecy preacher, Hoover Shoats, to imitate Haze--down to the glaring blue suit and the "high rat-colored car" (W, p. 41) that Haze uses for a pulpit. Haze knows Layfield "ain't true" (W, p. 110); he believes in Jesus. "'Two things I can't stand,' Haze said, '--a man that ain't true

and one that mocks what is'" (W, p. 111). And so Haze runs over Layfield, and runs over him again.

As I have noted above, Lewis A. Lawson considers absurdity an element of the grotesque. If one kind of absurdity in art is that act which is totally unprelaced and unmotivated within the literal action of the work, I think the one utterly absurd incident of the book follows Haze's murder of the false prophet. A patrolman stops Haze, and with no reason beyond "I just don't like your face" (W, p. 113), pushes Haze's car over a cliff. This seemingly gratuitous act, however hilarious within the scene, is more than a parody of Southern law officers. Its effect is to virtually strip Haze of everything. Haze had protested that a man with a good car did not have to be justified. But now that he has no car, he must fall back upon his real soul, and justification is imminent.

Haze begins with a denial of Jesus, and to effect that denial affirms only the things he can touch--a suit, a car, a woman. But successively, he discovers that he cannot hold on to anything in this world if he tries to make a god of it. For example, from thinking that an affirmation of nothingness could come through the blasphemy of fornication with Sabbath Lily Hawks, he comes to decide that such acts for that reason only confirm that there is something to blaspheme against.

With his car gone in what, despite Carter Martin's disclaimer,⁶² is a violent act, Haze sees the truth, not that there is no truth, but that he cannot escape Jesus. Having seen, he blinds himself like Oedipus, although, as Martin makes clear,⁶³ it is not an act of despair, but rather one of faith, an act of sealing in that which he has at last seen. From affirming nothingness, Haze has turned to the positive act--although his landlady cannot understand such a deed; she would have committed suicide, preposterously not realizing until later that in death one is blind.

Haze cannot preach any longer because he comes to understand that every man must see for himself. Like Oedipus' act, Haze's self-blinding is a climactic moment with its roots in much that has gone before. For example, the eyeglasses of Haze's mother which he carries out of Eastrod to the army and later into Taulkinham are a complex symbol adumbrating the irony of the blinding. In the army Haze tries for a while to read his Bible with his mother's glasses, but they tire his eyes and he must stop. Obviously, he must receive the Scriptures--or Truth, as they bear it--through his own eyes. Later, the glasses indirectly assist him. Just before Sabbath Lily Hawks appears in front of Haze with Enoch Emery's "new jesus" in her arms, Haze has donned his mother's glasses. In his consequently blurred vision, the "mother and child" are

clearly an unholy pair that call him to further blasphemy. Acting intuitively, Haze smashes the mummy and throws it out the window. Then, in an act that affirms that he must hereafter see entirely with his own eyes, he also throws the glasses out the door. When Haze loses his car, all the external accoutrements of his religious heritage are gone, and he must stand on his own, not to use Jesus ironically, but to accept him.

In ceasing to use another, Haze contrasts with every character in the novel but one. Asa Hawks could not blind himself, for he was a hypocrite. He did not know Jesus, but used him. Enoch Emery fails, too, because he hoped the "new jesus" could be used, would do something for him. Like the scribes and Pharisees, he asks, "Master, we would see a sign from Thee," but it is "An evil and adulterous generation [that] seeketh after a sign."⁶⁴ To Mrs. Watts, Haze is only a customer, although an eccentric one, and Sabbath Lily Hawks wants to use Haze as satisfaction for her lust and as a livelihood after her father's departure. Haze's landlady, Mrs. Flood, also wants at first to get everything out of him--or anybody else--that she can, feeling that anyone or anything she cannot understand completely must be cheating her. However, in the last chapter, the discovery of the blind Haze's self-torture by rocks in his shoes and barbed wire around his chest because he is "not clean" (W, p. 122) sweeps Mrs. Flood beyond her will

toward a compassion she has never had. In fact, Haze becomes an ironic Christ-surrogate for the avaricious landlady, as she inclines to an understanding that she would forsake everything and follow Haze away if he desired that.

Haze's self-imposed displacement, his flight from Jesus, is violent from beginning to end. In fact, standing off from this novel, its main character seems to move about wildly, erratically. To say that he stumbles blindly into the arms of Jesus is neither facetious nor derogatory to Flannery O'Connor as an artist. The ending is not weakened by sentimentality although our last sight of Haze is of his prostrate body on his landlady's bed. Rather, he dies in a squadcar whose patrolmen find him crawling in a ditch, moving his hand as if he "were hunting something to grip." Haze suffers and in his traumatic, reminiscently brief career he becomes a point of light.

She had never observed his face more composed and she grabbed his hand and held it to her heart. It was resistless and dry. The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light. (W, p. 126)

The conclusion is all the more dramatic and powerful when we perceive we are standing in the company of this solitary woman who only now is coming to look outside herself.

There is an old admonition--"Live Dangerously"--that has an ironic application to Flannery O'Connor's works, in spite of her roadsign warning "Drive Carefully." In its general idiomatic usage the phrase has been the vehicle of an invitation to throw off shackles of any kind and indulge oneself in the pleasures or thrills that are to one's taste. With regard to Miss O'Connor's fiction, the adverbial "living dangerously" first of all applies to her characters who unwittingly or insistently operate in defiance of God's grace as it appears to the reader, bent on making itself known. But at the same time, the phrase applies equally to those characters who manage before the moment of death to accept "the terrible burden of mercy" and live it or even preach it. The image of that dangerous life is summed up in the title and epigraph of Flannery O'Connor's second and last novel:

From the days of John The Baptist until now,
the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and
the violent bear it away. (Matthew 11:12)

The Violent Bear It Away is, next to "The Displaced Person," Flannery O'Connor's masterpiece. More structurally adventuresome than her other work, it incorporates flashbacks, a figmentary character, and a large amount of narrative irony as the point of view shifts from that of

the omniscient narrator to that of a character. None of this is original, however, and the most impressive quality of the novel is its thematic interest in violence. The characters of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, if they achieve any insight or manifest the bestowal of grace in any way, gain it at the price of disruption, trauma, or what can finally be called only violence. This novel hammers relentlessly at the idea that violence is the avenue to grace.

One might be tempted to add that such is Flannery O'Connor's peculiar vision for our time because of its propensity, as Miss O'Connor says, for seeing the outrageous as normal. One might propose that as a writer Flannery O'Connor had in mind Matthew Arnold's surprise and shock at an M.P.'s assertion, "That a thing is an anomaly, I consider to be no objection to it whatever." ("The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.") Yet because of her Catholic, or better, truly Christian, perspective, I would suggest that her fiction affirms and is informed by the understanding that the glory of Easter cannot be attained except through the agony of Good Friday.

If protestants look for the phrasing of Miss O'Connor's title in the King James version of Scripture, they will find a different wording which will only confuse the picture: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the

violent take it by force." Even Catholics using the modern Confraternity text will be disappointed, for Miss O'Connor's source is the Douay version. One construction easily and frequently put upon this passage in the Authorized Version is that violent men are seizing the kingdom, i.e., usurping it by force. However, although it, too, probably invites this interpretation, the Douay makes it easier to see that the passage means violent men carry off the kingdom, that is, achieve it.

The Cambridge Bible Commentary suggests "enthusiastic people" for "violent men,"⁶⁵ and they are that, but the phrase does not quite cover the case in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. In the first place, many of her people are not consciously seeking the kingdom, as "enthusiastic" implies. Secondly, others are determinedly seeking to reject the kingdom and that is scarcely enthusiasm in its usual sense. Rather, the passage should stand as Flannery O'Connor interprets it: that violent acts, intentional or otherwise, are an important and frequent means to the kingdom of heaven.

The Violent Bear It Away, like Wise Blood, is plotted on a young man's flight from his destiny, but because the novel concludes on the eve of a prophetic mission finally accepted, it will seem to some readers a more affirmative story and perhaps Miss O'Connor's fullest development of the redemption scheme. The protagonist, Francis Marion Tarwater, is cast in the mold of his grand-uncle, a violent,

humorous backwoods prophet who incongruously minds his Scripture and tends his still, but the novel is, as a number of critics have pointed out, still a chronicle of the boy's initiatory experiences. To achieve the tradition of prophecy, Tarwater must go through the brackish depths of a violent initiation.

Old Mason Tarwater raises his grand-nephew and assigns him the mission of baptizing the idiot son of his nephew, Rayber, a schoolteacher with delusions of eminence as a social-psychologist. Although minimally grotesque in physical appearance--a hearing-aid is his only sign of physical defect--Rayber is, with his twin Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First," Miss O'Connor's most contemptible character: he never provokes even vicious laughter from the reader. John Updike's Conner of The Poorhouse Fair,⁶⁶ another utopian social-scientist locked in conflict with the ideals and beliefs of an older generation, arouses far more compassion in the reader than Rayber. Indeed, one of the means by which we know Miss O'Connor sympathizes with Mason and not with Rayber, is that Mason's antics make us laugh.

Before the novel's main action, Mason had triumphed over Rayber by stealing the infant Tarwater away. The note he left read, "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN."⁶⁷ Part of the old man's victory was that he could act, while Rayber could not even retrieve the

boy by legal means. At the same time, Mason has feared Rayber because the latter analyzed him in a journal article as an example of an almost extinct type, the self-called prophet. In consequence, the old man warns Tarwater that after his death Rayber will try to get him, and get him inside his head. He shouts to the boy, "'I saved you to be free, your own self! . . . and not a piece of information inside his head!'" (V, pp. 312-13).

When Mason dies, Tarwater is faced with a clearly existential choice: obeying or defying the old man. In a stranger's voice the devil tells him that any choice lies between Jesus and himself, but with an instinctive rightness, Tarwater says the alternatives are "Jesus or the devil" (V, p. 326). Ironically, at the conclusion of this long argumentative dialogue over whether Tarwater should now claim his freedom from the old man, the strange voice prophesies, "That old man was the stone before your door and the Lord has rolled it away. He ain't rolled it quite far enough, of course. You got to finish up yourself but He's done the main part. Praise Him" (V, p. 330).

Demanding his freedom, Tarwater leaves the farm, thinking he has cremated the old man in his house, an act of heresy against Mason's belief in the physical resurrection.

Hitchhiking to the city, Tarwater seeks out Rayber's house with no clear plan other than seeing this man imaged in diabolical terms by his grand-uncle. At their meeting,

Rayber takes Tarwater in greedily, explicitly anxious for an opportunity to "save" the boy for himself, save him from the fanaticism of old Mason. He had told his uncle once, "'You've got to be born again . . . by your efforts, back to the real world where there's no Saviour but yourself'" (V, p. 348). Plainly, Rayber is as eager as Mason to have a disciple.

With every remark of Tarwater's, Rayber instructs him that his words reveal his continuing slavery to the old man. In truth, and the dangers of such egocentrism have been discussed earlier in this chapter, he himself is a slave to his own ideas, to an intellectualism. He has even gotten himself inside his head. A suggestion of this emerges through the humor of the boy's first reaction to the hearing aid: "For an instant the boy had the thought that his head ran by electricity" (V, p. 355). Later, when he has begun to grasp Rayber's weaknesses, he presses his questions with as much cynicism as genuine ignorance: "'What you wired for? . . . Does your head light up? . . . Do you think in the box . . . or do you think in your head?'" (V, pp. 366-367). It is clear to Tarwater, who has been nourished on instincts and deeds done from impulse, that Rayber is a mechanical man. Even to a strange woman, not conditioned to fear him, Rayber's "eyes had a peculiar look--like something human trapped in a switch box" (V, p. 396).

Self-conditioned against the wrenchings that accompany love, Rayber's mechanical conduct parodies real compassion. He tells Tarwater that he has a father now, but he is not even a father to his own idiot son, Bishop.

For the most part Rayber lived with him without being painfully aware of his presence but the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity. It was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood. (V, p. 372)

The curse is that of humanity, of love. In his cold humanitarianism, Rayber takes up an argument that sounds like Ivan Karamazov's: "'How can I be grateful . . . when one--just one--is born with a heart outside?'" (V, p. 386). Rayber's greatest shame is that once he was unable to finish drowning Bishop, and since then he has been reduced to mere preachiness on the superiority of rationality over love. "'I may not have the guts to drown him,' he said, 'but. . . . My guts . . . are in my head'" (V, p. 405).

Tarwater, on the other hand, has sufficient grace to know that one cannot only say; one must act.

"You can't just say NO," he said. "You got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you're not going to do one thing by doing another. You got to make an end of it. One way or another."
(V, p. 397)

Strongly and prophetically assertive, with the exchange of "YES" for "NO," this will be Tarwater's unarticulated motto at the novel's conclusion.

After weeks of contending with Rayber and battling with himself against baptizing Bishop, Tarwater does act. Rayber decides to take Tarwater back to Powderhead and confront him with what he had done. Rayber hopes for a shock that will finally send Tarwater into his arms. When they stop overnight at a fishing resort, Tarwater takes Bishop out in a boat to drown him, but in the act, inadvertently pronounces the words of baptism. With that, the mission is complete.

However, Tarwater's own soul must be taken care of. In the narrative we are not present at the baptism, and therefore know that Tarwater's ultimate destiny is not merely the act on the lake, either the murder or the baptism. Dazed by his own action, Tarwater strikes out alone for Powderhead. His first ride is with a truck driver to whom he reveals a great hunger that has him on the verge of physical illness. We know it is a hunger for the Bread of Life that his spiritual progenitor had identified with Jesus, even before Tarwater says "'I ain't hungry for the bread of life'" (V, p. 429). Given one of the trucker's sandwiches, Tarwater learns his hunger is not physical.

Next, he is given a ride by a gaudily-dressed "pale, lean, old-looking young man" (V, p. 438), who gives Tarwater a marijuana cigarette and drugged liquor. In his final definace, Tarwater cries, "'It's better than the Bread of Life!'" (V, p. 440), but minutes later he is raped and left

in the woods. When he comes to, "His eyes looked small and seedlike as if while he was asleep, they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head" (V, p. 441). Immediately he sets fire to the spot to purify it, and begins the last miles to Powderhead. "His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (V, p. 442).

Once there he discovers that his grand-uncle had been buried while he had lain drunk. Suddenly not guilty of having destroyed Mason, Tarwater realizes his hunger is the same as that which had gnawed insatiably at the old man. From the fire that he sets to this ground, he hears the final command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (V, p. 447). Marking himself with dirt from the grave, he turns to his work. "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (V, p. 447).

Tarwater passes from the Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea, the love of God. As if Thomas Carlyle were the author of the novel, Tarwater discovers, despite the temptations of the devil in his several disguises, that "there is in man a Higher than Love of Happiness: he can

do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness!" (Sartor Resartus). In this novel and in Wise Blood, the terrible mercy of God burns out the protagonists' eyes until they see as they have never seen before that a "freedom" from Jesus is bondage in darkness. Once their eyes have been scorched from their sockets, Haze and Tar-water see--in one of the Christian paradoxes--that real freedom comes in the blessedness of perfect submission.

As I have proposed with the fiction of De Vries and Powers, this submission is not cowardice. In fact, explaining Teilhard's thought on the matter, Father Mooney writes

Christian submission to the will of God is in fact the very opposite of capitulation. Far from "weakening and softening the fine steel of the human will, brandished against all the powers of darkness and diminishment," such submission is precisely a resolute resistance to evil in order to reach through faith that "chosen point" where God is to be found. . . . There is thus to be found in Christian resignation a truly human value, a positive aspect corresponding in the individual's life to that positive aspect of Christ's total work of redemption.⁶⁸

Those who advance the argument that submission is capitulation have a type of mind defined concisely in Père Teilhard's short credal statement, How I Believe.

[T]here are basicly [sic] two types of mind, and only two: those who do not go beyond (and see no need to go beyond) perception of the multiple--however interlinked in itself the multiple may appear to be--and those for whom perception of this same multiple is necessarily completed in some unity. There are only, in fact, pluralists and monists: those who do not see, and those who do.⁶⁹

Aside from the image of seeing, Père Teilhard's conception of the monist is immediately relevant to Flannery O'Connor's fiction in her dramatized assertion of a single home, a true country from which men separate themselves by their pluralist evaluations of that which is adequate for being "saved" in their myriad ways. Some men who are less than whole believe "'Jesus is a trick on niggers'" (W, p. 45). Others believe the mind is sole master of salvation. Whatever the heresy, Flannery O'Connor's fiction is populated by broken or partial men, most of whom secretly yearn to be whole, that is, to be redeemed to a vision of the whole and its center, Christ. The great irony is, of course, that as long as their yearning is secret, men do not consciously move toward the center, but rather away from it in the denials and fragmentation that find their objective correlative in some form of violence. Yet, with a final irony, the violent bear it away.

Flannery O'Connor's decision to dramatize Scripture that could not be more serious sounding--or more truly serious--through some of the most insistently funny situations and characters in modern fiction has unfortunately but inevitably left many readers ambivalent toward her work. Yet, the commixture of the serious and the comic presents difficulties at every appearance. Reading Peter De Vries' fiction, many readers see only the "mere funniness" and miss De Vries' intense concern for the crucial nature of

compassion and the necessity of hope. Others, glimpsing the seriousness, are upset that the humor should be so tainted. In the case of J. F. Powers' work, the reputed sanctity of rectory and cloister prevents many readers from laughing aloud at merely human foibles and laughing inwardly at the discovery of grace's presence. But for others, the "levity"--really a humanity and compassion--with which Powers treats his men of the cloth only means Powers is an anti-clerical satirist.

The problem of seeing a harmony between the serious and the comic is compounded in Miss O'Connor's fiction by the element of violence, which is unpalatable to many who could either laugh at a dull widow with two disrespectful sons or many who could soberly approve of a young girl's resisting the destruction of a beautiful landscape. It is when the widow is gored to death by a bull and the young girl's head is smashed on a rock by her grandfather that both groups of readers recoil. However, in Miss O'Connor's fiction, the comic vision operates on both sides, as it were, of the violence, and in doing so aligns itself with a high seriousness. The elemental comedy of the incongruous, the ludicrous, the absurd tempers the shock of the violence to allow us an approach of such proximity that we cannot ignore or misread the depth of Miss O'Connor's horror at the demonic possession which has precipitated the violence. This is not to say that

Flannery O'Connor uses "comic relief." Certainly the humor and the terror of the Misfit's speeches and deeds are coincidental, not sequential. On the other side of the violence, the high comedy in an epiphany of a joyous fulfillment under the aegis of grace evokes a final laughter of the kind this essay has sought to equate with the Christian's vision of his true country. And for the Christian, nothing could be more serious than entering the Courts with laughter.

NOTES

¹Roy Newquist, "Peter De Vries," an interview in Counterpoint (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), p. 146; Evelyn Waugh, "Scenes of Clerical Life," Commonweal, LXIII (March 30, 1956), 667; Granville Hicks, "A Holy Kind of Horror," Saturday Review, XLIX (July 2, 1966), 21.

²Newquist, p. 149.

³Ibid., pp. 153-54.

⁴Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 197.

⁵"The Test by Fire: Flannery O'Connor," Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 80.

⁶"Paul Bowles and the 'Natural' Man" in Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 143.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Both Irving Malin and Carter W. Martin in their books cited below prefer the term "new American Gothic," for as Malin demonstrates, Gothicism has a tradition in this country and is not indigenous to the South, but appears even in such writers as J. D. Salinger.

⁹"The Outside and the Inside: Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away," Critique, III (Winter-Spring, 1960), 19.

¹⁰College English, XX (April, 1959), 346.

¹¹New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1962), p. 161.

¹²In Patterns of Commitment in American Literature, ed. Marston La France (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 165-66.

¹³Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁴Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 33-34.

¹⁵Quoted in Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (1961; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 79.

¹⁶The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), pp. 153-54.

¹⁷"Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque: Wise Blood," Renascence, XVII (Spring, 1965), 137-47, 156.

¹⁸The True Country, p. 154.

¹⁹In Mystery and Manners, pp. 36-50.

²⁰Robert Donald Spector, "Introduction," Seven Masterpieces of Gothic Horror (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), p. 9.

²¹Mystery and Manners, p. 41.

²²William F. Lynch (1960; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1963).

²³Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood, 2nd ed. (1962; rpt. with A Good Man Is Hard To Find and The Violent Bear It Away in Three, New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 102. Hereafter, all page references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text with W and the page number.

²⁴Mystery and Manners, p. 44.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," A Good Man Is Hard To Find (1955; rpt. with Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away in Three, New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 164. Hereafter all page references to short stories in this volume will be noted parenthetically in the text with G and the page number.

²⁷Flannery O'Connor's method in this story's conclusion seems informed by a tradition noted by Arlin Turner ("Introduction," Southern Stories, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. xvii:

The early Southern humorists seem to have contributed also something to the technique of the short story as it developed from Poe to O. Henry. The humorists had as a model the oral tale, which normally is shaped to hold the listener for a brief period and then to release him after a quick and final turn of affairs. Such a tale is more effective if there is a second turn which, in the fashion of the anecdote, modifies and improves the first turn just at the moment the reader has comprehended it.

²⁸Here and elsewhere I am indebted for definitions of grace to A Handbook of the Catholic Faith, ed. John Greenwood (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1956).

²⁹"Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Critique, II (Fall, 1958), p. 9.

³⁰Ibid., p. 5.

³¹"The View from the Regency-Hyatt: Southern Social Issues and the Outer World" in Southern Fiction Today: Renaissance and Beyond, ed. George Core (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 28.

³²The True Country, p. 112.

³³Flannery O'Connor, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Everything That Rises Must Converge. Introduction by Robert Fitzgerald (1965; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 43. Hereafter, all page references to short stories in this volume will be noted parenthetically in the text with E and the page number.

³⁴"The Experience of Difference: Southerners and Jews," The Curious Death of the Novel: Essays in American Literature (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 266.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶"Moments of Eternity: A Study in the Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor" in The Shapeless God: Essays in Modern Fiction, ed. Harry J. Mooney, Jr. and Thomas F. Staley (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), p. 122.

³⁷"Such Nice People," Time, LXV (June 6, 1955), 114; "The Countryside and the True Country," Sewanee Review, LXX (Summer, 1962), 380-94; Sister M. Joselyn, "Thematic Centers in 'The Displaced Person,'" Studies in Short Fiction, I (Winter, 1964), 85-92. Miss Baldeshwiler was formerly Sister M. Joselyn.

³⁸The one other notorious item in the O'Connor bibliography is William Esty's "In America, Intellectual Bomb Shelters," Commonweal, LXVII (March 7, 1958), 586-88. Without further comment, I quote from p. 588:

There is the Paul Bowles--Flannery O'Connor cult of the Gratuitous Grotesque. . . . All of these overingenious horrors in "Good Country People" are presumably meant to speak to us of the Essential Nature of Our Time, but when the very real and cruel grotesquerie of our world is converted into clever gimmicks for Partisan Review, we may be forgiven for reacting with the self-same disgust as the little old lady from Dubuque.

³⁹"The Countryside and the True Country," p. 394.

⁴⁰"Thematic Centers," p. 92.

⁴¹Everything That Rises Must Converge.

⁴²The True Country.

⁴³In 1961, Miss O'Connor reviewed the book for The American Scholar (XXX, p. 618). The review is quite brief, and because it speaks to the point of finding the infinite in the finite, I quote its last half here:

. . . the poet, whose sight is essentially prophetic, will at once recognize in Teilhard a kindred intelligence. His is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it. Teilhard's vision sweeps forward without detaching itself at any point from the earth.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man. Introduction by Sir Julian Huxley (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 310.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁸Christopher F. Mooney, Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ (1966; rpt. New York: Doubleday Image, 1968), p. 44.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 129-30.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 123.

⁵¹"Moments of Eternity," pp. 117-18, 120.

⁵²I offer here a reading that no one else has ventured. I believe the peacock is in front of Mrs. Shortley because the imagery of her vision very closely parallels specific description of the bird in two other places (G, pp. 265-66, 267). In the latter, we are told explicitly that Mrs. Shortley's "unseeing eyes are directly in front of the peacock's tail," but she is oblivious to his existence. This reading is all the more important if the reader has by this time associated the peacock with Christ.

⁵³The True Country, p. 17.

⁵⁴The Phenomenon of Man, p. 36.

⁵⁵I stress -one because Miss O'Connor's work does not manifest any development of Père Teilhard's theories about non-animate matter or non-rational animals. Her fictional concern is for persons, exclusively.

⁵⁶Matthew 19:29-30 (AV).

⁵⁷Matthew 20:1-15.

⁵⁸A. W. Argyle, The Gospel According to Matthew, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 151.

⁵⁹"The Test by Fire," p. 94.

⁶⁰Mystery and Manners, pp. 44-45.

⁶¹Even an author as different from Flannery O'Connor as William Saroyan has some conception of the validity of spiritual fathers. In "The Beautiful White Horse," he writes, "A man could be the father of his son's flesh, but that did not mean he was also the father of his spirit." (My Name Is Aram, 1940; rpt. New York: Dell, 1966), p. 13.

⁶²The True Country, p. 125.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Matthew 12:38-39 (AV).

⁶⁵Argyle, p. 86.

⁶⁶(New York: Knopf, 1958).

⁶⁷Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear It Away (1960; rpt. with Wise Blood and A Good Man Is Hard To Find in Three, New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 348. Hereafter, all page references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text with V and the page number.

⁶⁸Christopher Mooney, p. 128.

⁶⁹Trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 23.

CHAPTER V

CHRIST AND OTHER DISPLACED PERSONS

The major purpose of the comedian is to remind us of how deeply rooted we are in all the tangible things of this world.

--Nathan A. Scott, Jr.

So far from being betrayed by particularity, God encounters man only in the structures of time and place.

--Paul Elman

In a severe indictment of what he calls "the Salinger industry," George Steiner laments the nature and causes of an apparent loss of discrimination in young critics between writers he differentiates as the "master poets" and the authors of "minor achievement" in our time.¹ In the former category he names Dante, Goethe, Moliere, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Mark Twain, and Joyce. When one recovers from marveling at the omission of Shakespeare, it is clear enough that, for Steiner, a classic work is one which manifests its author's "historical sense," to borrow Eliot's term.² In contrast, contemporary literature merely "flatters the very ignorance and moral shallowness"³ of its readers, and thereby bespeaks in its authors an obsession with personality. A great many other reviewers and critics, many of them before Steiner, have supported the essence of his statement, for like most invectives--and cliches--his accusation contains an element of truth. There is, indeed, much shallow writing. However, it finds its mate in that criticism which, seeing through black and white glasses, pronounces by its silence on any thought to the contrary that all contemporary literature is surely beneath consideration and probably beneath contempt.

The sensitivity to Steiner's remarks evident in this synopsis of his argument stems from my frank awareness that

the three writers discussed in this essay are not to be granted equal status with Dante and company. De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor clearly lack the inventiveness of form, the range of characterization, and the talent for broad action possessed by the Establishment which Steiner presents. Nevertheless, in trying to honestly estimate the worth of these three, an attempt should be made to gauge them in their own time, for even Eliot admits the compounding of the temporal with the timeless.⁴

Their time is one in which literature as a whole has turned overtly introspective and devoted to the singular man. Many critics interpret this shift as symbolic of the solipsism of our age, but they cannot deny the intensely traumatic isolation that modern man is vulnerable to as his traditional reliance upon metaphysical order is threatened or destroyed. Of course, writers in all ages have reacted as the established cosmic schemes were assaulted--John Donne is a favorite example--and many were themselves assailants--Thomas Hardy belongs to the latter group. But our age is the first in which an articulated denial of any order except that which is existential for the individual without recognizance of a metaphysical pattern has prevailed so greatly among artists in all the media.⁵

However, man is a creature who thrives materialistically, aesthetically, and spiritually on order. Joseph Waldmeir posits that "whether by force or by choice" the

protagonist of "the new American novel" has become a "modern quester" who believes "that somewhere, somehow, there exists a transcendent set of values which the individual can discover and achieve, if he suffers long and hard enough, and is very lucky in his search for them." In Waldmeir's thesis, the American novel since 1949 understands those values to exist in "the order of pure individual responsibility." But for the quester, unlike the existentialist, the "circles of love and responsibility expand outward rather than retreat inward," a motion hardly glorifying mere personality. Yet, and this is a crux of Waldmeir's essay, "the value and order they seek exist beyond causes and ideologies."⁶ That is, the modern novel cannot be construed, except indirectly, as social criticism. Neither, of course, should The Divine Comedy. Assuming Waldmeir's insight for the writers he discusses--principally Mailer, Styron, Bowles, and Bourjaily--it is at the point of "causes and ideologies" that the three subjects of my essay begin to veer off from the main line of the contemporary novel.

For sure, De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor are not primarily, either separately or collectively, advocates of social reform in any ordinary use of the term. True, De Vries does deal at times with society's sexual mores, Powers does plot some stories on racial bigotry, and O'Connor also writes of prejudice. But the context of

alienation for their protagonists is generally an established situation--suburban conformity, dreams of fame, hierarchical quarreling, property greed, religious fanaticism, family pride--that cannot be altered by legislation but which works in the everyday world to isolate the individual spirit. There is never an explicit confrontation with the draft, the bomb, war, communism, or women's liberation, but, to adapt De Vries' thought on Powers and to apply it to all three, it "does not require a major upheaval to crack somebody open or turn him inside out for us."⁷ Whatever the circumstances of alienation, De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor submit in their fictional form that all accommodation to or overcoming of man's isolation must be worked out in terms of the individual.

"In terms of the individual," but not finally by the individual alone. That is, all three seem to be saying that man's ultimate resource is not himself. If this point has been proven in the preceding chapters of analysis, then it may be acknowledged that their fiction does take on in its last import something for which "cause" is an equivalent term.

In his Man in Modern Fiction, Edmund Fuller epitomizes the image of man in modern literature as a being "collective, irresponsible, morally neuter, and beyond help." Juxtaposed with that and, from Fuller's point of view, suffering diminishment "in these bad days" is "the great

tradition of man as individual, responsible, guilty, but redeemable."⁸ One might argue that Fuller's statement on modern literature is now dated, that he was too much influenced by the gray flannel suits of the fifties, that, as a major objection, writers are presently seeing man as not irresponsible but responsible only to himself. However, the relevance of Fuller here is in his criteria for a "great tradition" which Peter De Vries endorses from afar, which J. F. Powers accepts and uses without fanfare, but which Flannery O'Connor chooses for both substructure and surface texture in her fiction.

This tradition, of course, is discernible from its key terms as orthodox Christianity, which does not accept Calvin's Total Depravity (a teaching De Vries managed to leave in his childhood) and which does affirm man's free will. This Christianity, which De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor affirm variously, has as a corollary of its basic premises of Original Sin and the Atonement the complex imperative regarding the salvation of one's soul. Christianity teaches man's singularity before God all the while it stresses the mystical body of Christ, the community of members. Each man's first responsibility is to save his own soul, but in a seeming paradox, Christianity warns that in an act of free will man must look outside himself or be damned from pride. Seeing beyond oneself and responding to others may exact the extreme penalty, but for that

Christians have the assurance that "he who loseth his life for my sake shall find it."⁹ In that is the promise that hope exists.

A theological virtue, hope is also at the root of comedy. Tragedy conveys a sense of conclusion, of finality. If there is vision, it is retrospective. At the end of Oedipus Rex, we must turn back, reflect upon a man's life that should not have been called happy before it was over. At the holocaust of Hamlet's conclusion, we are called upon to draw our breath in pain, remembering one likely to have borne himself royally, had he been crowned. Witnesses to An American Tragedy, we recall what Clyde Griffiths wanted and what he was determined for. But comedy looks forward, speaks of the happy hereafter, promises a compensatory bliss for the tribulations of the past. For the Christian, death is not tragedy but an occasion for rejoicing in a hope that metamorphoses into belief that "another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men."¹⁰ For the Christian, those who protest that hope is an escape for fools are right: it is an escape for God's fools, those who would dance before the Throne. And, in Christopher Fry's words, "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith."¹¹ As Barry Ulanov reminds us, "Hell is just around the corner . . . But so is paradise."¹²

Nevertheless, the matter is not so simple as just looking forward or backward or stepping around the corner to see the tiger or the lady. Reality must be presented in its complexity, the treatment of which marks more deeply the relationship of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor, one with another. As Barry Ulanov goes on to point out, with an obvious debt to Northrop Frye, "in classical comedy . . . no matter how doubtful the beginnings, or how embroiled the plottings, the ending 'by some lucky chance' is always in 'the joy and appeasement of all parties.'" However, for the artist with a Christian vision, even an indirect and unconscious one like De Vries', "a sense of truth generally precludes any such facile conclusion." The hope which is imaged at the end of a Christian comedy is "veiled . . . as it is in Christian life." To give substance to the veil, "Irony is the logical tone of Christian comedy. Its rhetoric is customarily oblique, its figures frequently very difficult to understand."¹³

Although none of the three is mentioned in Ulanov's discussion, his conception of the veiling seems immediately applicable to De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor. De Vries' fiction is crowded with irony, and particularly ironic conclusions, from Brian Carston's return to commitment through Tom Waltz' miraculous sickness to Hank Tattersall's descent from success. J. F. Powers' irony runs from the real letter which "kills" Father Udovic's spirit in "Dawn" to the image

of Father Urban as benign Provincial. And in Flannery O'Connor's work, irony is the substance of both utterances like Mrs. McIntyre's "'That Man is my salvation!'" and situations like Asbury Fox' visitation from a half-blind, half-deaf old priest who hadn't met James Joyce. But more, it begins to take on mythic dimensions as both Haze Motes and Tarwater find their ends in their beginnings, emulating their Jesus-bitten grand-relatives.

Examining rhetoric, one must plow through De Vries' Pepigrams and puns only to stumble against endings like "'What are we coming to?' . . . 'Connecticut.'" Powers' rhetoric is generally straightforward--a fact that has not endeared him to Freudian critics--but occasionally he delights us with such an image as the narrative description of the devil's traces in "The Devil Was the Joker": "He'd left a small deposit of gray ash on the rug near the spot where he'd coiled and uncoiled."¹⁴ Flannery O'Connor, of the three, is consistently the skilled rhetorician, not only in her rendition of the color and cadence in Southern speech, but in her talent for fine, hard, precise images such as the several in which she conveys the burned-out eyes of those who undergo a scorching epiphany.

In difficulty of figure, De Vries is the least facile. He tries nothing more difficult than the identification of the clown and Christ in The Blood of the Lamb or the sensitive poet McGland's suicide by the grossest

mechanical contrivance. Powers offers substantially greater challenges to his readers' alertness and perceptivity with the identification of bishop and building keystone in "Keystone,"¹⁵ the symbolic female mosquito and statue of St. Joseph in "The Valiant Woman," the parallel of Lancelot and Urban, and other metaphors. Flannery O'Connor's figures are the most involved: a complex of peacock and displaced person and Christ, a bull that gores with "the terrible speed of mercy," a plaster hitching post that functions as an instrument of redemption.

But in all this, one can see that the veil between the exigencies of life and the hope in spiritual truth is largely woven of the material world, of the myriad concrete objects in this our finitude which on the one hand by their very multiplicity obscure our vision or, worse, in the opaqueness of their numbers diminish our desire to see beyond them. On the other hand, because of the familiarity of these objects, it becomes ever harder to see in them a means to grace. We are people bred, unfortunately and ironically in contradiction of the Church, on an informal tradition which teaches that grace is received from the non-secular. But in an increasingly "desacralized cosmos," to use Mircea Eliade's phrase,¹⁶ grace is ever harder to find. The Church, however, recognizes that the things we come to think of as non-secular are indeed shaped from the objects and substances which in another context are prime

secularities of our lives. Thomas Aquinas, when asked about metaphors in Scripture, answered that "it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Writ spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things."¹⁷ Eliade proposes that "for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality."¹⁸ Differing in the idea that the sacrality precedes the religious experience, De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor nonetheless also apprehend the manifestations of spiritual truth in everyday life.

As critics examining literature in the line from Dante through Flannery O'Connor, Fr. Lynch and Nathan A. Scott, Jr. insistently urge that it is in this life, in the here and now, that grace manifests itself to humans, if it is ever to be known at all. The daydreamers of Peter De Vries and J. F. Powers' Father Burner come to ends which dramatically verify this. But Flannery O'Connor, too, as fiction writer rather than critic reinforces the point in her commentary. She says,

Every serious novelist is trying to portray reality as it manifests itself in our concrete, sensual life.

.
 Whatever the novelist sees in the way of truth must first take on the form of his art and must become embodied in the concrete and human. If you shy away from sense experience, you will not be able to read fiction; but you

will not be able to apprehend anything else in this world either, because every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses. Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form, and he speaks to us now through the mediation of a visible Church. All this may seem a long way from the subject of fiction, but it is not, for the main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life.¹⁹

In Miss O'Connor's fiction, the objectification may work in a complex irony. Denying God who works through incarnation, Haze Motes begins his homeward trek when Enoch Emery presents him a concrete "new jesus"; in error, he cannot bear the intrusion of icons into his abstract religion. Again, it is only when the devil takes the form of a real homosexual that Tarwater finally recognizes and acts directly to purify himself of the devil's insistent presence.

While urging a distinctly theological reading upon the fiction of De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor, I am aware that much literature superficially seeded with the rhetoric of Christianity has become in application by religionists what Norman Podhoretz calls "a strictly polemical device for attacking the secularizing forces at work in Western civilization."²⁰ Quite another thing, the endeavor of this essay has been tuned to the work of those critics Stanley Romaine Hopper speaks of as discovering in contemporary literature an "intense expression of modern man's search for a soul, for comradeship, for inner peace, for a 'place in the

cosmos, ' for hope, for creative satisfactions."²¹ (my italics) This "search" and Waldmeir's "quest" appear to be two words for the same road of experience. The artistic vision informed by Christian theology is marked when the climax of the search is an epiphany of joy.

For De Vries, Powers, and O'Connor, truth to reality dictates that the search be erratic and unwitting, a concatenation of experiences that reveal what a whole man is, even if the particular quester is not such. The consequence of our observation of the quest is to

see man as he is, single and whole, reasoning
and choosing and believing, half of this world
and half of some other, the only animal who
must decide what kind of animal he will be,
the only beast it is shameful to call a beast,
whose soul, as Boethius said, "albeit in a
cloudy memory, yet seeks back his own good,
but like a drunken man knows not the way
home."²²

Home is the destination, but its nature becomes lost for the man who does not perceive his infirmity, who reasons without believing, who thinks himself entirely of this world, and who by two possibilities for abusing his free will remains either a thinking or an unthinking animal. Ignorant of his true country, man can at best be called displaced.

To find their place in the sun, to achieve an identity, Peter De Vries' protagonists must come to the understanding that compassion and charity are crucial. Although De Vries works progressively in the series of his

novels toward an ever more clear expression of this theme, it is evident in The Handsome Heart that Brian Carston does not exist until he shares in communion with another person. In The Blood of the Lamb, Don Wanderhope's life is a succession of losses until he understands that in giving he can be a recipient. In an interview, De Vries has said that art itself is "a way of sharing experience."²³ To note this is, of course, far from saying De Vries' fiction is fully Christian, but informed by the major theological virtue, charity, it is more than superficially orthodox.

Peter De Vries feels strongly that J. F. Powers should not be called a "religious writer."²⁴ And, to be sure, Powers has been reprimanded by segments of the Catholic Church for not dogmatizing, for not saying explicitly "Here is the hand of God." But his fiction says again and again that in the resolution of human affairs, man must open his windows to grace, to the operation of possibilities beyond the present ken of the individual.

In Flannery O'Connor's fiction, there is no hesitancy in affirming that grace exists. Exercising his free will, man can accept the grace or not. But before accepting grace or not accepting it at all, man is a displaced person, truly as much alienated from his rightful, that is, promised, element as he seems displaced from his due upon earth.

The ironies of appearance and reality and of locales in which and from which one is displaced become multiform in the fiction considered here, but for all of it Christ is the archetypal displaced person. In the Incarnation, he was by taking on human form, not losing anything, but merely displaced for a while from his true country. Yet in this world he maintained his position in that far place by knowing he had to be about his Father's business. However, rejected and alienated during his corporeality as he is now, he was and is in that sense displaced. Yet above all, the Incarnation into the human possibilities of faith, hope, and charity is an act that tells us it is in the finite world that we must find ourselves out. In overtly comic terms that mundanely mirror the ultimate joy, it may mean forsaking Moot Point for a real place in the sun; it may mean accepting a feeble, dim-witted pastor as one's shepherd; it may mean losing one's car but gaining one's soul. Displacement in De Vries is subtle, but deceptively so. In Powers it becomes more clear. But in O'Connor we plainly have, in Martin Buber's phrase, "the hell-tormented and heaven storming generation of men."²⁵

NOTES

¹"The Salinger Industry," Nation, November 14, 1959, rpt. in Henry Anatole Grunwald, ed., Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait (1962; rpt. Colophon Books. New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 85, 84.

²T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," The Sacred Wood (1920; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), p. 49.

³"The Salinger Industry," p. 83.

⁴Eliot, p. 49.

⁵This common idea is taken as a major premise in Edmund Fuller's Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing. Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1958).

⁶Joseph J. Waldneir, "Quest without Faith," Nation, November 18, 1961, rpt. in Joseph J. Waldmeir, ed., Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 54-62 passim.

⁷Peter De Vries, "Introduction" to J. F. Powers, Lions, Harts, Leaping Does. Time Reading Program Edition (New York: Time, Inc., 1963), p. xviii.

⁸Fuller, p. 12.

⁹Matthew 10:39 (AV).

¹⁰From the Christmas sermon of Thomas in T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935) rpt. in The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 199.

¹¹"Comedy," Vogue (1951), rpt. in Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 286.

¹²"The Rhetoric of Christian Comedy," The McAuley Lectures, 1961 (West Hartford, Connecticut: Saint Joseph College, 1962), p. 73.

¹³Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁴In The Presence of Grace (1956; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 95.

¹⁵New Yorker, XXXIX (May 18, 1963), 42-46, 48, 50, 53, 56, 59-50, 62, 65-67, 70, 72, 75-76, 78, 81.

¹⁶The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (1959; rpt. Harper Torchbooks. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 17.

¹⁷Quoted in G. Ernest Wright and Reginald Fuller, The Book of the Acts of God (1957; rpt. Anchor Books. New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 26.

¹⁸The Sacred and the Profane, p. 12.

¹⁹"Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), pp. 170, 175-76. By "serious" Miss O'Connor does not mean humorless, for as she asserts in her introductory note to the second edition of Wise Blood, all comic novels must be very serious. In Peter De Vries' estimation, to think serious novelists must lack humor is as senseless as to suppose one writing nonsense must lack sense ("Peter De Vries," an interview in Roy Newquist, Counterpoint [Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964], p. 154).

²⁰"The New Nihilism and the Novel" (1958) rpt. in Norman Podhoretz, Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing, Noonday Press (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964), p. 161.

²¹"Foreword" to Stanley Romaine Hopper, ed., Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. xi.

²²Stephen F. Bayne (no source), quoted in Fuller, p. 18.

²³Newquist interview, p. 151.

²⁴Introduction to Time Edition, passim.

²⁵Quoted in Fuller, p. 19.

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