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there is a constant demand for it in libraries, so I presume that the sales are o.k.

Question:

What did you mean by calling your novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a meditation on history?

Styron:

I think I used that in the most metaphysical way. It's very hard for me to explain it. I think I used it to try and lift the book out of the mold which most historical novels have found themselves mired or stuck in. Historical novels do not have a very good reputation for some reason in this country, largely because they are usually written by people without a great deal of talent and are often quite just simply sensational. I think I used that phrase to say that I was using every resource that I had in order to brood and dream about history and somehow come up with a sense of history which was large and round and

which would give a sense of the place and time that I was writing about in a way that other books had not yet done. Whether I succeeded or not is a different question, but that is what I think I was trying to get at with the idea of meditation.

Question:

You seem to have implied that growing up in a segregated apartheid-type South that you grew up in left a wound, but has it healed or whatever?

Styron:

I would say to some degree yes. I think that the writing of Nat Turner again and I'm saying "pace" to my black critics, gave me something. It helped me a lot, whatever laceration I had received by growing up in an atmosphere of extreme hatred. It was a cathartic act, I think. And though I'm far from perfect, in terms of any apprehension of the racial situation now, I think that the book was a good

and rewarding experience for me to have done personally.

Questioner's statement:

Just to give some closure then, it seems like in the first part of your discussion this evening that you talked about the intense concern of the white with the black man as part of the landscape and at the same time the extreme lack of any realistic measurement. In other words, people were dealing with stereotypes. So your writing, perhaps then, was an attempt to break out of the stereotypic mind, because that's really where the situation arises and still is now.

Styron:

Right.

Questioner:

So breaking out of that and personalizing...

Styron:

Yes, that was not a question but a statement and I would think a very honest and good one.

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# Catholic Sensibility and Southern Writers\*

by Lawrence Cunningham

My topic this evening is the Catholic sensibility of Southern writers. It will be, in fact, a talk about two writers, the late Mary Flannery O'Connor of Milledgeville, Georgia and the very lively Doctor Walker Percy of Covington, Louisiana. Before I talk about these two people I need to say something about my use of the phrase "Catholic sensibility".

The notion of "Catholic sensibility" is one of those protean catch

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phrases like "The American Way of Life" which nearly defies accurate definition. Yet it is important for me to tell you how I understand the term and in what sense I am going to use it in this lecture. Let me begin, in the manner of the medieval mystics, with the *via negativa*, i.e. the ways in which I am not going to use the phrase.

There are novels in which it is extremely useful to know something about Catholic belief and mores in order to comprehend what the novelist is trying to do. In that sense an intelligent reader needs to be sensitive to Catholic theology to grasp fully the point of the novel. James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* is a case in point. One can read that

novel without being conversant about Jesuit education and spirituality or the notion of the Catholic priesthood or the doctrine of Transsubstantiation but a knowledge of such topics would aid the reader in seeing how Stephen Daedalus, the hero of the novel, rejected the traditional Catholicism of his youth to become, as an anti-type, a secularized priest who changes bare words into art as the older priesthood changed bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

There are yet other novels in which a knowledge of Catholicism is not presumed but is gained. In the very reading of such novels there comes an awareness of the peculiarities of being Catholic in a given historical situation.

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Today, for example, there is much interest in the ethnic experience of Americans; one can learn a great deal about this topic by reading the literature which has its roots in the Catholic ethnic experience of the immigrant generation. Few sociological or historical narratives can match the portrayal of Irish life in a big city given in the Studs Lonigan trilogy of James T. Farrell. For anyone interested in the socio-cultural milieu of the Kennedys or House Speaker Tip O'Neill the novels of Edwin O'Connor are a reliable and entertaining source of insight and shrewd political wisdom.

When one looks at the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy there is little explicit Catholic theological language in either of them. Indeed, in the case of Percy, one is more aided by a reading of that arch-Protestant, Soren Kierkegaard while in the case of Flannery O'Connor one would more profitably spend one's time listening to the ubiquitous radio preachers of the Southern airwaves than the dialectical clashes of Thomist theologians.

In the same fashion neither Percy nor O'Connor speak much about "Catholic" topics. Explicit Catholic themes rarely appear in the short fiction of O'Connor. Percy's satire of Roman Catholicism in *Love in the Ruins* could have been written by a fairly literate reader of *Time* magazine.

So, we are back to square one. In what sense are Percy and O'Connor "Catholic" writers? What is common to both of them that marks them off from the Protestant or post-Protestant sensibility which is characteristic both of the "New South" in particular and Western culture in general?

The answer to that question, I would submit, is that the worldview of both Percy and O'Connor is pre-modern. That is, both writers believe that the world itself is a locus for the Sacred and, likewise, that the natural world has sacramental value — the world is a sign from God and a sign of God's activity.

I say that this sensibility, which I have called a "Catholic" one, is pre-modern. What is being suggested here is that the modern view of reality, derived partially from Protestantism, does not view the world as showing forth the Sacred. The Reformation, especially in its Calvinist variant, polarized an all powerful God with a totally sinful people. The mediator between these two poles was the Word, Jesus Christ. Divinity was not mediated through any material thing whether it be church, sacrament, rite, ritual, or human action. The world was a given to be explained, subdued, and understood. More than one scholar has pointed out that it is in this desacralizing tendency of the Reformation that one must see the rise of natural science in the West. There were other factors at work, to be sure, but for our purposes we will adopt the conventional wisdom of scholarship and affirm that the modern secular view of reality had a long intellectual development with one of the critical factors being the secularization implicit in some areas of Reformation theology.

By and large the Catholic world resisted this shift in intellectual perspective. Until very recently Catholic theology insisted that the *analogia entis* — the notion that one can see something of God by analogy with created being — was true and fundamental for a true theology. Furthermore, Catholicism held on to all kinds of religious phenomena that testify to an acceptance of a sacred worldview; phenomena almost entirely absent from the world of Protestantism and, *a fortiori*, from the secular world: sacred places (shrines, sanctuaries, etc.); sacred objects; a fully developed sacramental system; a continuing fascination and religious use of the symbolic; and a strong acceptance of the concept of miracle.

A wit once observed that the Second Vatican Council pulled Catholicism kicking and screaming into the Eighteenth century. There is more than cynicism in that remark.

The current trauma in Catholicism (as Prof. Langdon Gilkey has argued cogently in his recent *Catholicism Confronts Modernity*) must be understood as its belated struggle with the problem of modernity and the process of what has been called secularization. The desire to "update" the Catholic Church is really a reaction to forces inherent in the larger culture so that some kind of accommodation can be made with the modern and post-modern concepts of reality.

The agony of confronting modernity can be seen clearly in Walker Percy's satiric portrayal of Catholicism in his futurist novel *Love In The Ruins* (1971). A close reading of that novel shows clearly that Percy reflects a great deal of ambivalence about the capitulation of Catholicism to modernity. He depicts a badly fractured church with the left wing of Catholicism now headquartered in Holland where married priests and nuns are now agitating for the right to remarry after divorce. The right wing has its home in Cicero, Illinois where it defends the sanctity of property rights and plays the "Star Spangled Banner" at the Elevation of the Host at Mass. The old Roman Catholic Church (portrayed as sympathetically as the old Church in Brian Moore's novella *Catholic*) is now only a remnant with the local priest in charge so poor that he has a job with the local Forest service as firewatcher where his job is "to climb the fire tower by night and watch for brushfires below and for signs and portents in the sky."<sup>1</sup> This future world shows many signs and portents: buzzards circle overhead and vines seem to be growing everywhere, like kudzu run amuck, although the local citizenry deny any significance to the phenomenon with a passion that is touching; when the hero of the novel tells a neighbor that vines are coming up through his driveway and cracking the concrete, the reaction was vigorous: "That'll be the day!" said

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<sup>1</sup>Walker Percy. *Love in the Ruins*. (New York: Dell, 1972), p. 5

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Barry, flushing angrily. (p.10) Nature has gone beserk and its insanity is a faithful mirror of the alienation, fright, and bewilderment of humanity. At root, Percy is a moralist and his wildly exaggerated humor is a vehicle for his bleak vision of the evil inherent in the modern condition of humanity.

For all that, Percy recognizes that such a vision of humanity creates an opposite temptation — to flee the world as we know and experience it. That is why Percy is so unsparing in his criticism of the Western vogue for the new gnosticism; the contemporary preoccupation with Eastern religion is, for Percy, a flight from the reality of our created condition. Consider this description of Dr. Thomas More's wife in *Love In The Ruins*:

My wife, who began life as a cheerful Episcopalian from Virginia, became a high priestess of the High Places . . . Books ruined her. Beware of Episcopal women who take up with Ayn Rand, the Buddha, and Dr. Rhine formerly of Duke University. A certain type of Episcopal girl has a weakness that comes on them just past youth, just as sure as Italian girls get fat. They fall prey to gnostic pride, commence buying antiques, and develop a yearning for esoteric doctrine. (p.62)

In the final analysis, Percy sees the true integration of the human personality as being in that precarious balance between the bestial and the angelic. Humanity has a place in this world but a destiny beyond it. Further, it is in this world that one will find hints of God; the world signals the redemptive presence of God. While the hero of *Love In The Ruins* is in the hospital recovering from one of his periodic attempts at suicide he cries out a prayer that could have been penned by Thomas Aquinas but not by John Calvin, much less by Jean Paul Sartre:

Dear God I can see it now, why can't I see it at other times, that it is You I love in the beauty of the world and it is in all the lovely girls and dear good friends, and it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels. Why can I not be merry and loving like my own ancestor, a gentle and pure hearted

knight of Our Lady and Our Blessed Lord and Saviour. (p.104)

In Percy's novels much attention is paid to the world of nature since it is in the natural world that God's presence may be signalled. Percy himself has said that these nature symbols are religiously rooted. In an unpublished interview with Professor Bradley Dewey he made a very revealing statement about a major influence on his fiction:

. . . if you want a contrast with what the novels owe Kierkegaard — they owe something to an entirely different source: the English poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was a great nature poet and who wrote some beautiful nature diaries. And this is a much more, I guess, consciously Catholic attitude towards nature . . . nature, created nature, as a sacramental kind of existence. Hopkins made a great thing in poetry of being able to look at a cloud or a leaf or even a piece of rock and see in it what he called a certain "inscape" and thinking always that if your gaze was sufficiently fresh, and if you could see it sufficiently clearly, you would see it as an act of existence, a gratuitous act of existence which was evidence of God's existence. He saw it in a very sacramental and religious way, which really owes a lot more to Aquinas than it does to the Kierkegaardian tradition.

One way in which you can get a sense of this "sacramental vision" is to be sensitive to the ways in which Percy uses specific aspects of nature to reinforce his point about the grace of God in the world. In the novel *Love In The Ruins*, for example, the many references to birdlife have a decided symbolic use in the work; they are, in fact, major symbols. I have already noted the buzzards wheeling overhead as a symbol of death and decay; that symbol must be seen in counterpoint to the hawk who hovers over the same scene and who is, according to Percy, Hopkin's windhover — a symbol of Christ's love in the world. Even more basic are the references to the Ivory Billed Woodpecker — an elusive and probably extinct bird which is the object of a hunt by birdwatchers throughout the novel. At the end of the book, at a time when the hero has finally settled down to some kind of

regular life, the news comes that the bird has been sighted again. The sighting is a sign of the earth's renewal. Doctor More returns to his home and when he goes to bed with his wife they are described as "twined about each other as the ivy twineth (p.379), a final image to cancel out, as it were, the earlier references to the vines gone wild.

In a sense, Percy's sacramental sensibility is non-complex and straightforward. If one reads his novels with attention he tells the reader rather plainly that his world is not that of the brooding blood and cotton exhausted earth of a Faulkner; the magnolia scented air is not a cloying perfume to hide essential decadence and decay as one generalizes about Tennessee Williams. In that sense, at least, Walker Percy is far from the Southern stereotype. His world, like that of his mentor, Gerard Manley Hopkins, celebrates a vision where "nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things . . ."

Flannery O'Connor's view of nature and reality is, like that of Percy, sacramental but there is something far more apocalyptic and prophetic in her approach to the world. O'Connor is a far sterner writer than Percy, more tough-minded and rigid. She recognizes that her fiction represents a point of view that is shared by very few of her readers, even by her religious readers. She believes in sin, redemption, and judgment as clear realities — not merely as symbolic transformations of some deep human need or impulse. "When I write about the devil," she once said, "I want people to know I'm talking about the devil, and not this or that psychological tendency." On another occasion, when questioned about her "Eucharistic symbolism" she said, "If the Eucharist were a symbol, I'd say the hell with it."

I said earlier in this lecture that "Catholic sensibility for my purposes meant a "pre-modern" sensibility. O'Connor operates from this sensibility as her fiction indicates and as her non-fiction makes clear. At a

lecture at Sweetbriar College (Virginia) in 1963 she said:

For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God in a double way, or at all. For nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man. Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind. In 20th century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected.<sup>2</sup>

O'Connor looks at the world as it is, not to explore its surfaces (which reveals only the world of "manners") but to "see" (a favorite word) the deepest sense of mystery. In story after story her characters come to a terrifying sense of reality; they see themselves for what they are for the first time in their lives; a judgment is passed upon them. Rare it is in a story of Flannery O'Connor where this enlightenment — conversion, if you will — is not partially accompanied by some revelation that is rooted in the landscape of the world itself.

In the short story "Greenleaf" Mrs. May, a self centered and grasping materialist, is killed at the end of the story by a rogue bull.<sup>3</sup> The bull belonged to some "trashy" neighbors whom she despises. In the moment of her death, however, Mrs. May recognizes the vanity of her life, her absurd pretensions, the vacuity of her stinginess. The moment of awareness is described by the author not from the mind of Mrs. May but from the omniscient narrator who sees the mystery of God's judgment revealed to the dying woman: "She stared at the

<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor. "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery And Manners*, Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977), pp. 157-58.

violent black streak bounding towards her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried its head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed — the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky — and she had the look of a person whose sight had been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable." (p.52)

Revelation comes to Mrs. May in a moment of wrenching violence; other O'Connor characters end less violently but their eyes are just as dramatically opened. The self pitying Asbury (in "The Enduring Chill") excuses his failure to produce any written work despite his self posturing of being a writer as coming from his ill health. He returns to the family farm announcing his imminent death. At the end of the story, much to his surprise, he learns that his "fatal" disease is undulant fever (the same thing as Bangs disease in cows) and far from fatal. All of his defenses and pretenses are gone; there are no more excuses left for him. His revelation comes on his sickbed as he looks at a curious stain on the ceiling, a stain that he had noticed since his youth: "The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of the new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring,

<sup>3</sup> All stories discussed in this lecture are from the posthumous volume *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977).

he would live in the face of purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. (p.114)

Examples of this kind could be multiplied but would only serve to reinforce one basic point. Let me simply make a further observation not only for the sake of being better readers of O'Connor but also to give you a more sympathetic entry into her peculiar sensibility. It is this: for O'Connor life is far more mysterious than we can intuit from the surfaces of things. The awe-ful dimensions of human activity and the world itself reveals real mystery and that mystery is God's presence in the world.

When any character in an O'Connor short story makes a statement of total autonomy ("I know who I am"; "I see things clearly"; "Things are plain to me"; "He had advanced vision") you can be assured that such a character is in for a revelation that will shock him from the world of manners into the life of mystery. It is not a just a question of the autonomy of the self. Such revelations will also come to anyone who puts ultimate trust in things; the paradigmatic person here is Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*; his change is assured when early in the story he announces that "Anyone with a good car don't need to get saved."

Life, then, is such that one always runs the risk of an encounter with the mysterious; such a risk is the stuff of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. She was vividly aware of the fact that not many shared her vision but it was her vision. It was a sensibility that she had and wanted to share even at the risk of being misunderstood; as she trenchantly observed once about her own style of writing: "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".

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