Southern Reflections on Solzhenitsyn

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> . . . my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. I have . . . found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil. You discover your audience at the same time and in the same way that you discover your subject; but it is an added blow.
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> —Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

THE WORRIED QUESTION as to whether Solzhenitsyn will now be able to write, being a displaced person in the West, apparently troubles some of his Western admirers more than it does Solzhenitsyn. But the question itself suggests that we are already beginning to miss the point of his witness, taking him as a chronicler of historical detail (he *did* write *1914*) rather than the prophet of the human spirit that he is. Because he is displaced and on our hands, we have to deal with him. But he is such a prickly refugee—we hardly call him guest with comfort. Already he begins to appear something of a freak. That would be a comfortable enough name, since we can't decide whether he is an enlarged figure of ourselves, projecting mankind's suffering as a pop tragic hero or martyr, or just a damned fool—unlike ourselves. He's making piles of money off his books here in the West, isn't he? So *fool* isn't right. But to give it away to other fools and that act not even through the American Red Cross or the various agencies of the United Nations? Strange. Strange indeed. Still, *freak* is a term we use, and laugh uneasily. For as Flannery O'Connor said, putting her finger firmly upon our erratic pulse and suggesting our malady, "The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share his state."

Prophet and witness of the human spirit. It is in this aspect that Solzhenitsyn shares kinship worth remarking to this other regional writer, Flannery O'Connor, who used to live right down the road from Crawford, at Milledgeville, Georgia. Of course, she suffered the lack of our attention because she did not literally suffer at the hands of her elected audience, as Solzhenitsyn did. That is, if we can safely assume his audience the Russian establishment, which is to be reached through the Russian people. But then, is the West perhaps his audience? A question to be asked. At any rate, Flannery O'Connor did not make good spectacle. She was interviewed, but not by Walter Cronkite.

Watching Walter Cronkite interview Solzhenitsyn for CBS, back in June of 1974, was an experience very like watching a puppy in the presence of its first porcupine. Curious, baffled, yet with the innocent confidence the puppy has in its own territory, though encountering the outlandish. And yet how confused in the presence of that live, mobile face. For Solzhenitsyn *in Russia,* the country he will not willingly leave, is nothing so shocking to us as Solzhenitsyn *in the West,* refusing to abandon Russia when expelled by her. (I have heard Southerners, and Miss O'Connor heard Southerners, who might have expelled her, given the opportunity. Or more likely, would have set her down to a lecture on the foolishness of a girl's trafficking in the unsavory.) "When we talk about the writer's country," Miss O'Connor says, "we are liable to forget that no matter what particular country it is, it is inside as well as outside him." And there it is, the writer's country, in that face to which questions are asked, a face not content to be a face or a name, but bursting out a living fire. It is the same force which arrests us in *GULag Archipelago.* For one does not escape a *seeing* in those eyes that reach searchingly from his sitting room in Switzerland into our own houses, in Crawford, Georgia, or into any other house on Mainstreet, U. S. A. Nor is it the *facts* in his book that arrest us, any more than it is the face played two dimensional. His news is, after all, old news. It is the burning intensity of spirit which is projecting the facts or questions or answers to questions. The facts in his voice become humanity's cry of violation at the hands of an evil we thought we had explained away. The burning intensity, which we call by the name Solzhenitsyn— whether talking of his image in the interview or out of the printed words—comes through (I say it for us with a kind of terror) because it emanates from some deeper insight into the reality of human nature than the facts or details of history alone can account for. Whence comes that force? Says Miss O'Connor, "a view taken in the light of the absolute will include a good deal more than one taken merely in the light provided by a house-to-house survey." The force then is projected "in the light of the absolute"? That possibility we should like very much to ignore, and so be left with neither the threatening force of this man's presence nor dependable statistics. We could abstract facts out of existence if it were not for the accusing presence.

He looks strangely like one of Miss O'Connor's prophetic writers, the kind "who operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet." For such a writer, the "problem is to find that location." But for his reader, unless he is a brave reader indeed, the problem becomes how to explain such a writer away. Did Walter Cronkite ask questions for us about the spiritual dimension of Solzhenitsyn's meaning while I was turned away for a minute? Did he ask about the hard journey our refugee made back to Bethlehem, the journey Gerhart Niemeyer gave us maps of two years ago in *National Review?* Or was the question rather whether that presence called Solzhenitsyn could continue as a writer, what with his papers and books and local scene not at hand as in the old days? "The writer's value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he ceases to see that country as a part of himself," says Miss O'Connor to Walter's question. But of course, one doesn't transport it so easily as that provincial Atlanta real estate agent supposes, whom Miss O'Connor quotes as trying to sell one of her Yankee friends a house in Atlanta: "You'll like this neighborhood. There's not a Southerner for two miles."

How far one must travel in Russia to find

a Russian I don't know, but one has to travel further than two miles of late, in Atlanta and in most parts of the South, to find a Southerner. I mean such a Southerner as Miss O'Connor treasured and put in her books, those freaks of the spirit that many of her readers prefer to consider Southern local color cartoons, though sociologically scientific, like graphs and tables. And increasingly he must travel further to find that Southern writer she valued, of whom and to whom she speaks when she says:

> The Southern writer apparently feels the need of expatriation less than other writers in this country. Moreover, when he does leave and stay gone, he does so at great peril to that balance between principle and fact, between judgment and observation. . . . The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory.

What it can lead to is a writer like Shirley Ann Grau or Carson McCullers or Truman Capote. The isolation of the imagination consequent upon the writer's willed expatriation from his true country: could it possibly account for the distance between the accomplishment of these two experimental reports on human nature, *In Cold Blood* and the *GULag Archipelago?*

The Southern writer has an advantage: this defeat and something (she named the Bible) to read that defeat in the light of. At least the Southern writer of whom Miss O'Connor is representative. And it continues to be so, in spite of that combination of acts by the secularizing gestalt, executed through the Federal agents of executive, legislative, and judicial divisions. For though they announce a final solution of the Southern problem through a variety of laws and programs, and certify it as accomplished, it seems not so. I notice the certification, from my point of interest, in the repeated announcement that Southern literature is dead. A premature announcement. But even if it were true of a geographical unit called the South we should discover that "Southern literature" keeps breaking out in new places in most confusing ways. I mean of course Miss O'Connor's kind of "Southern literature." It does so and it must. And Miss O'Connor's kind of writer will find his kinships quite often far from the swamps and cottonfields of home. Because as Stark Young said for us way back in 1930, "The South defends certain qualities, not because they belong to the South, but because the South belongs to them." And Walker Percy in his younger days could add to it, in explaining the flowering of Southern literature, that it blossoms "because we lost the War."

The "Southern writer" will understand the significance of such loss. ". . . What has given the South her identity," says Miss O'Connor, "are those beliefs and qualities which she has absorbed from the Scriptures and from her own history of defeat and violation: a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured." When the "Southern writer" recognizes the point, one of the things he may write is the *GULag Archipelago.* A Walter Cronkite may avoid questions about the grace of God and explain evil away as consequence of historical incidents—and so temporary—but the real truth burns in the words of that animated presence answering his questions. Still, maybe he will turn into an Irish pixie before our eyes so that we may put him in a movie to replace Walter Brennan, a comfortable sort of old scarecrow. But he burns. He burns. He burns.

And this latest work of "Southern literature," the *GULag Archipelago?* In an important way, Solzhenitsyn, like Flannery O'Connor, is reactionary, a term which so far only *Pravda* can get away with calling him but which we may expect to see gradu-

ally emerging as we try to explain him away.[1] He wants to turn the clock back, doesn't he? Yes. All the way back to Bethlehem. He wants to turn the *calendar* back. But the pejorative sense of *reactionary* isn't quite right—yet. So let us use Miss O'Connor's term, *prophetic*. Kinder denomination, but there is buried in it the same potential for discrediting him. For, grace denied or explained as style, all prophets are false, and the next step is toward the acceptable label, *reactionary enemy of the people*, couched in words howsoever one may, even words like *anti-progressive*. Now Miss O'Connor reminds us that "There is the prophetic sense of 'seeing through' reality and there is also the prophetic function of recalling people to the known but ignored truths." The latter, she suggests, fits her fiction. It also fits Solzhenitsyn's, as Gerhart Niemeyer has been pointing out. One is well advised to recognize in both writers a fundamental spiritual position that unites their concern, which makes them both keen observers of what Miss O'Connor called "our fierce but fading manners" as seen "in the light of an ultimate concern." For there is a mystery both seek to recover to us so that life may be larger than animal existence in managed social zoos or statistical abstraction in computer banks. Both recognize, in Miss O'Connor's words, that "grace and nature have been separated." What follows is that "imagination and reason have been separated, and this always means an end to art" for the artist who makes such a separation. Her remark makes fruitful entry into the failure of Capote's *In Cold Blood* when we compare it either to Miss O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or (on a stricter analogy of genre) to the *GULag Archipelago*.

One is struck by a similarity between Solzhenitsyn's arrested admirers (the puzzled ones, not the incarcerated ones) and the common reader of Miss O'Connor's story. Solzhenitsyn suggests that international detente is an illusion which lures the innocent to ultimate destruction, and a Walter Cronkite looks thoughtfully puzzled. One never heard that in the United Nations before! Such shocking argument, as registered by Mr. Cronkite for us millions, that we might recall the truth of Miss O'Connor's statement that when a writer has to assume his audience doesn't see as he does, "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 pictures." But that the largest and most startling picture Solzhenitsyn draws should be his portrait of the Western media; confronted by "a wretched little Red Guard!"

Our captive celebrity nevertheless suggests that newsmen turn away from confrontation with evil at any crucial moment. Though his tone is that of pained disappointment, it is a point very like Miss O'Connor's more acid remarks of that same mentality as she finds it exhibited in the "Northern critic" of her work, by which term she means to characterize a provincial mind not a geographic problem. Similar remarks are safely registered in *Mystery and Manners*, in letters, in various interviews (none of them, I repeat, with Walter Cronkite). It is Solzhenitsyn's remarks that bear notice here:

> Honestly, the Western press is really not stopped by anything. Not the police, nobody can stop them, keep them off a person. . . . But what is strange is when this Western press gets to Moscow or Eastern Europe, or even to China . . . the great majority of them, they suddenly, those very men who here will stop at nothing, they become so modest and so cautious there, and so very careful. . . . [In Red China] if they hang up some kind of leaflet and a corre-

> spondent comes up to read it, and some wretched little Red Guard tells him not to read it, the correspondent turns and walks away . . . I insist that if the press has such freedom in the West then it must carry the same kind of freedom when it gets into the East.

The Southern writer has a way with the grotesque, Miss O'Connor says somewhere, because he can still recognize distortion when he sees it. And again, ironically, she says, "I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic." But Solzhenitsyn writes such a mean realistic phrase, and he is, in his attack on the Western press, seeing it as grotesque, and he refuses to allow it to call itself realistic in not reading the leaflet guarded by the "wretched little Red Guard."

Some sort of nut or prophet, this Solzhenitsyn. "The prophet-freaks of Southern literature are not images of the man in the street. They are images of the man forced out to meet the extremes of his nature," at one end of which spectrum lies the Western media man or the "Northern critic."

It is little wonder that Southern writers like Miss O'Connor find themselves drawn to the great Russian writers, for both have —as Miss O'Connor remarks of herself— "preoccupations with belief and with death and grace and the devil." But such preoccupations move our thoughtful concern with a Solzhenitsyn into a new and uncomfortable dimension. Walter Cronkite's interview of this Russian defector, who won't defect, dramatized a reporter increasingly baffled and puzzled by the answers he received to what seemed the easy and obvious questions a celebrity might expect from a good newsman. To have suddenly to consider a "wretched little Red Guard" in the same way that years of journalistic liberties have conditioned us to see the "fat Southern sheriff" is to have the last of one's gods of liberalism made too much a stuffed teddy bear.

For we somehow have romantic feelings about the good country people of the East, having been reared on Pearl Buck and fairy tales about the rescue of peasants and elevation of Red Guards, who are not bullies but perhaps occasionally victims of power-hungry Commisars who betray the Revolution. (That's the sentimental way to deny a man—even a wretched little Red Guard—his humanity: to deny him any capacity for evil that is his very own.) If Solzhenitsyn doesn't try to take our teddy bear away rudely (he is a gentle man), he does suggest that we notice that alarming ticking in its little tummy that hints explosion. Do we cling to it or immerse it in water? We may watch the critical treatment of *GULag Archipelago* to see how to put it behind us. Inordinate attention to its literary merit on the one hand or its statistical or political materials on the other will indicate the soaking treatment, in the hope that it may be dried out once more in the innocent sun and wind and so clutched once more to our bosom in the encroaching darkness. The latter alternative is already under way. The *New York Review of Books* in its early review points away from the center. Most recently, the *Reader's Digest* in its September 1974 issue presents a general biography of Solzhenitsyn that never mentions the spiritual dimension of the man or his work. Evil? What evil? For if we say the Red Guard and the Southern sheriff are figurings of *man*, we will somewhere along the way be forced to deal with *wormy* man, with that invisible worm that flies in night in the raging heart, to paraphrase another disquieting "Southern writer," William Blake.

But that such problems should be forced

publicly and with innocent fanfare upon our consideration! By the man whom the press itself had so elevated to hero in the public mind, as the latest great martyr to out ultimate secular mystery, Free Speech. And before either he or his book was before us. Some speech, it turns out, is freer than other, and sometimes that which seems most free is most controlled, and it is a shocking suggestion, almost beyond the bounds of propriety, that we have been deluding ourselves on such matters all this time. The pietism of the news media was being publicly called hypocritical by a hero it had created, media that discovered him a hero in spite of their attempted creation. (It is, after all, not so easy to discount Solzhenitsyn as an Edith Efron because of her *News Twisters* and *How CBS Tried to Kill a Book.*)

Of course, the *news* of Solzhenitsyn's position and his actions from it did not make him a hero; his heroism made the news. There's something almost nineteenth centuryish about the whole affair. No wonder we lose our balance.

One did not need to know Russian, alas, to experience the burning light that was Solzhenitsyn as he answered Mr. Cronkite's questions, never forgetting himself as the host and not CBS. For he was in his own house, though it was in Switzerland. (The intricate relation of mystery to manners is central to Flannery O'Connor's work, too.) It makes one wonder. And, as one reads his book of the dead, it makes one begin to suspect (as Solzhenitsyn clearly does, evidenced by many of his sharp reflections on the West) that in the West we have the *effects* of the evil he details at its most conspicuous level, but without the dramatic aid of spectacle, the actual destruction of the body, for our conspicuous self-righteous consumption. It is the effect on spirit that most concerns him, and it is that about him which is shocking to us, not his evidence.

But what should we have expected? When one no longer believes in the existence of the soul, he puts an inordinate value on the body. Evil gets transferred from its most subtly and profoundly destructive dimension, the realm of the spirit, to the merely physical world. It becomes quantitative, and by the magic of abstraction removed from us. The life you save may be your own, we are told, a slogan Miss O'Connor appropriates as title to a story on such a transfer. The good health of the nation (and therefore of the West in general) is measured by its reduction of the number of highway deaths, that slaughter of our innocents. But then, we become immune even to that reckoning of being.

When one moves into body count at the thousands, whether on highways or in industry accidents or on battlefields, he begins to move not into the spiritual realm but into that world of abstractions which is so typically American (a point Auden made about us). Hundreds of thousands or millions—German or Jew, Russian or Chinese. It boggles the imagination, if any. We become so far removed from life that it is safely denatured. Denatured, as we used to contend the "Puritan" influence did through its refined concern for such "abstracts" as *election* and *predestination.* We have learned to see, with the good help of literary and social critic, how Puritanism shifted itself to materialist denominations of being, a troublesome shift, which is matter for Hawthorne's great romances. (Miss O'Connor remarks, "my characters are not sociological types. I write 'tales' in the sense Hawthorne wrote tales . . . I'm interested in the old Adam. He just talks southern because I do.")

In our "final solution" of the Puritan dilemma by the critical media, we have learned to consider ourselves escaped such blind stupidity. Looking at that shady part of our history, we say along with Mrs.

Lucynell Crater of Miss O'Connor's story—she is responding to Mr. Shiftlet's remark that the monks of old slept in their coffins—"They wasn't as advanced as we are." The life we save may be our own, but if the devil has persuaded us that he does not even exist (a point Miss O'Connor keeps reminding us of in her work) life can be understood only as a statistic in national or international reports, against which to balance grain supply figures.

Still, we feel comfortable with neither alternative. Which is to say, happily, that in spite of our best efforts at denial we have unrest. As a civilization, we seem to dwell perpetually in an anti-hell, troubled but uncommitted to either good or evil. We are the victim of denatured violence on the one hand—the consequence of the destruction of such manners as point toward an acceptance of mystery—or on the other of that denatured abstraction that leaves us a digit which cannot point an accusing finger or raise hands in prayer.

That is why I suggest that Solzhenitsyn's presence before us, through the abstracting miracle of the television screen and counterpointed by Walter Cronkite's bland presence, strikes many of us in the unsettling way that Miss O'Connor's Misfit does in her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Both the Misfit and Solzhenitsyn put our alternatives inescapably, and so disturbing that we cannot simply rest discontented in our anti-hell. Either evil exists or it doesn't. One notices that Miss O'Connor's grandmother in the story tried all the modern explanation of the Misfit's unhappy state: he had a bad family life, society mistreated him; the grandmother even laments that he is distorted by that press coverage that has elevated him into a celebrity. All of these excuses he rejects, clinging to his evil as the last certification of his being that makes any sense to him. He regrets the weakness of his faith that will not allow him a Pascalian gamble. He sees our dilemma in a horrifyingly direct and inescapable way. Either Christ was what he said he was and "it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow him." Or he was a liar, and "it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." Because "Jesus thown everything off balance." He not only raised the question of his own being, but of the old Adam's being in each of us. Her Misfit disturbs because of Miss O'Connor's superb artistry, but that is only a part of it, for hers is an artistry put to uses beyond merely satisfying literary sensibility.

And the same is true of Solzhenitsyn's words as he stands before us through the pages of the *GULag Archipelago* or on the screen in the presence of Walter Cronkite. Their message is the same: either Christ *is* what he said he *is*, or he *was* a liar. The Misfit, clinging to his evil beyond all sociological or psychological obfuscations of it, terrifies us; Solzhenitsyn, thrusting the spiritual roots of the political and social and military phenomena of our age into our consideration, terrifies us. The Misfit says, when the grandmother recognizes him as the celebrity created by the press, and calls him by name (The Misfit): "It would have been better for you all, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me." The "good people" of the story are systematically executed. The Misfit is wrong, finally. For the grandmother's rescue comes when she sees him for the first time and recognizes a kinship as lying in the old Adam of Miss O'Connor's interest. "Why you're one of my own children," she says in wonder, and she is shot dead. (She would have been a good woman, the Misfit concludes, if there had been somebody around to shoot her

every day. How often one recalls this, listening to Walter on the evening news.) We're properly disturbed by Solzhenitsyn, that great Misfit embattled by the god that failed, embattled in the interest of his people, some of whom we may be. He says to us, in effect, "It would have been better for you all, Mr. and Mrs. North America and all the other ships at sea, if you hadn't recognized me. For now you must take *some* position on evil, an act you have been avoiding in the international arena of hungry lions for fifty years." Ours is a recognition almost as fatal to us as death. But not quite. For it is a recognition through grace that may help us escape that "territory held largely by the devil," the little country of our isolated selves, cut off from "a view taken in the light of the absolute." In that light, even lions aren't so powerfully overwhelming as spiritual timidity has led us to fear.

[1]Since I wrote these words, Solzhenitsyn and other brave souls have published an even later work of "Southern literature," *From Under the Ruins.* In reviewing this collection, *Time Magazine* remarks, rather wistfully, that "In the West, the essays may buttress the conviction of Solzhenitsyn's critics that he is a mystical reactionary who places much faith in the values of the Orthodox Church and Old Russia" (November 25, 1974). One finds surprising parallels in the reponse to that Southern version of *From Under the Ruins* from which I have quoted Stark Young: *I'll Take My Stand,* published by Twelve Southerners in 1930.