

Southern Letters in the Twentieth Century: The Articulation of a Tradition

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SOUTHERN LITERATURE, like the South itself, is such a various creature that one is ill-advised to pronounce dogmatically upon it, though that is a temptation difficult to resist—caught up as we have been by that impressive flowering of letters in this century known as the “Southern Renaissance.” At risk of some presumption, then, I should like to limit attention to a particular kind of Southern literature—or rather to a particular kind of Southern writer who may be distinguished from a variety of his brothers, in and out of the South. I feel a special affinity to this writer, and for that reason let me here give warning that my testimony is partisan, though I believe it will support sound generalizations.

The writer I want to single out from his fellows is, however, an illusive creature, sometimes even to himself—self-knowledge being the treacherous knowledge it is. Besides which, our writer is not likely to practice his art from a position he has established firmly by dogma or ideology, though he may come to such a pass by the long labor of art. He is more likely intent upon looking at his immediate world with wonder and curiosity; he takes a delight in his immediate neighbor’s multitudinous engagements of that world, both for his neighbor’s and his art’s sake. He grows from within that world, rather than choosing to stand outside it as separate from or superior to it. Certainly he does not suppose himself its creator when he is pleased by its reflection in the work he makes with words. One of his habits is that, though he may wander from his neighborhood, he is apt to return and settle down in it. That is, he does not long believe that in order to make artful use of his world he must live in New York City or on the continent. He does not feel driven, as James Joyce’s young artist

Stephen does, into “silence, exile, and cunning.” Another sign of his peculiarity may be that he survives in his native, or even adopted, land in part through his sense of humor—without which he might well be left with only the resources of wit and irony to reach an accommodation with the mystery of existence. For wit and irony, unmoderated by some humor, become modes of dissociation from existence. The point is difficult to refine briefly, but I am attempting to point to a humor in the writer himself which reflects his acceptance of the limits of his power to shape or create existence, an acceptance of his own humanity, which is more difficult to the writer sometimes because he so easily confuses himself as maker of a world with God, the Maker of *the* world.

Compare the general attitude of two great writers toward the country and countrymen who feed their fiction, James Joyce and William Faulkner. There are many likenesses between them, particularly the strong attraction they share to the immediate and local, to a history that is in their blood and memory, at every point adjacent to their senses in an immediate way. Still, I at least sense in Joyce’s fiction a feeling of discomfort with the ordinary Dubliner, almost at times an embarrassment in his presence, which seems to require the poet’s distancing himself through irony and wit, but not for his art’s sake alone. Not just Stephen Dedalus, but Joyce himself must fight against sounding like that agonizing Quinton Compson at Harvard who insists at the top of his voice that he *doesn’t* hate the South. I’m suggesting that the distance between Faulkner and his Quinton is more marked than that between Joyce and his Stephen. In Faulkner one senses an amused acceptance of the ordinary Mississippian, an openness to the foibles of the simple, an

attitude that sometimes rises to lyrical paens or becomes entangled in a comedy of the ridiculous given an epic sweep, as in "Spotted Horses."

Incidentally, I am not suggesting that our Southern writer inevitably creates masterpieces—that such a fellow by his loving acceptance of limitations, the humility that evidences itself often as humor, is the superior of Joyce. In fact, irony and wit may afford such control of one's art that the writer protects himself against that excess of sentiment which so easily turns into sentimentality. The fear that sentiment may turn treacherous to his art haunts Joyce, I think, but I think one must search hard to find instances of just plain bad writing in the body of his work; the task is easier in Faulkner's. Our Southern writer is not always the consummate craftsman, though he is often so. For craft has to do more immediately with the mystery of a writer's particular gifts and with his industry in the service of that limited gift. These more personal characteristics will always set him apart as discrete from any category like Southern or Irish or Russian.

We must not confuse our writer with the Southerner who may be said to write "about" the South, anymore than we would confuse any writer using Irish matter with a Joyce or a Yeats. We certainly don't want to confuse him with those who intend to please a tourist curiosity—those who cater to an amorphous, deracinated audience whose number in this world is legion, whether they be titilated by "Too-alure-a-lure-a" or "Way Down upon the Sewanee River." Frank Yerby or Margaret Mitchell may serve as example here of the writer who cultivates an audience's residual interest in the historical—our vague nostalgia for origins which so easily atrophies into an appetite for the fanciful and sentimental—the last sad state into which our ontological hunger may fall. Our writer to the contrary is intense in his concern for concrete reality as it may give body to his art, incorporate his word world. But that interest includes his concern for the hard complexities of history. He knows that our history, anchored in place, has both a threatening and a loving immediacy which our

indulgent fancy violates at hazard to artist or audience. That is, he knows in words I adapt from T. S. Eliot that "A people without history/Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern/Of timeless moments" which bear inexorably upon this very moment, in this very place. Those moments may not be denied without fatal distortions of the present which, in a favorite Faulknerean word "be-queath" deformations of reality to the future—a sort of congenital spiritual distortion of community, if I may be allowed a metaphysical trope.

Our writer, we are saying, has a strong sense of place and person in a relationship which is nucleus to the growing body of a community in time; community always bears deep down both the past and future. He does not suppose that the particulars of either setting or character in his fiction are created *ex nihilo* by the artist, though he may and should enjoy those special freedoms Aristotle distinguishes in art as opposed to history, the freedoms of the possible or probable. He knows through his very breathing that in the world he inhabits as man, the seasons of being are affected at a depth more profound than any empirical measure of time or place allow. Thus, although he is likely to focus upon a single house and family, a small town, a county, he does so—not to lament social poverty or psychological isolation, as temperal uses of the world might be content to do—but to reveal a largeness hidden in the limited. Nor does he use the local—the "Southern"—to dramatize what turns out to be only a private, isolated version of the fabulous Self lost among the accidental stars. That sort of writer may write of any place or no place, since place is neither congenial to nor particularly relevant to his concern; he is a displaced person by preference. If he were to put the point, he might preach it as Haze Motes does in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*:

I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth. . . . Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were

going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place. Nothing outside you can give you any place. . . .

The placeless writer may use the same material world as a Flannery O'Connor, but it will not be used in the same way, for what Miss O'Connor sees and what our Motes-like writer sees are quite different, though they look at the same object.

Our Southern writer does not see himself as merely the creator of a textual world, a cage of words such as Haze's, which he builds to serve as an arena for the antics of that aberrant modern god, the Self, which has lost its belief in any reality separate from its own marooned awareness. And if he does not believe that his own consciousness occupies such a closed world, neither will he see art as so divorced from his fellows that each lonely mind is forever trapped within its symbolic posturings—its symbols having no extrinsic referents and its order internally willed but irrelevant to any meaning, even to the trapped Self. That is the current fad in much of our criticism and philosophy and art, but he sees it as a fad, perhaps not unrelated to such mass isolationism as disco dancing.

Put in a positive, older, and intellectually more viable way: our Southern writer is mimetic. He believes that art, however else it may differ from the other modes of the mind's hymns to existence—the modes of science or philosophy or theology—also bears an appreciable relation to reality beyond itself. His position on art and its ends is a corollary to his belief that the individual Self has real and not illusional relations with other Selves in communities wherever two or three are gathered together. That is, he believes we are bound in a mystery larger than his mastery of art, without which binding one's art or science or philosophy becomes only a form of magic. Such a binding is larger and more inclusive than any particular calling to us within the world—to be a doctor or lawyer or writer. And our writer will very likely begin to suspect that we are bound not only in time but beyond time, in a calling which speaks to him

through the one given which underlies all the structures of his awareness, all the symbols through which he may attempt to touch reality. That one given is *existence itself*.

That larger binding, he at least senses, is within an ordering of all being which should satisfy our desire for beginning and end; without the limits of beginning and end, particularity itself ceases to have any meaning. Those are deep hungers in us for a completeness of the Self, hungers buried essentially in the soul. For *ontology* and *teleology* are not merely technical names of categories of thought created by the rational mind for its entertainment, though often so used. If the philosopher, scientist, theologian wrestle in their several ways with these seemingly abstract terms, our writer attempts as poet to incarnate a reality that feeds the hunger, to give local habitation and a name to our desire—whether he presents his hero as struggling to return to some Ithaca, or as a pilgrim with momentary vision of a multifoliate rose embraced by an inexpressible light beyond all our purgatorial struggles with dark and light, or a possessed creature trying to subdue a hundred square miles of Mississippi wilderness to his own bent desire. The end we reach toward may be a false one; our struggles for origins within the middle of reality may be quite misguided. But our beginnings within the complexity of reality stirs a valid desire for large ends. Caught in the muddling middle, we begin where all drama of the spirit must begin, in that middle. As Flannery O'Connor says of us, recognizing our shared experience of this confusing *metaxy*, this "in-between-ness" that threatens us: "There is something in us as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored."

For our writer, man's being—man's Self—cannot be an absolute agent without originating cause or proper end, not an accident of accidents and thus always and only the meaningless victim of a meaningless middle. For he senses or believes or knows that even accidental existence must happen within some inclusive reference if the concept of the

accidental is to have any meaning at all. And he cannot believe that his own mind is a sufficient inclusive reference. For him, the hunger for a "chance to be restored" will become foil in his drama of fallen man's several dreams of progress, spawned by gnostic presumptions against being that are as ancient as that first fall in the garden, the old presumptions of the Self as dominant power in this infinite, swampy middle. Thus pride or hubris—however low and common or high and royal his agents may be—becomes the high theme of his storytelling.

Now the modern reader hungers for the redemptive act, in spite of his being inhabitant of a world which tries to deny redemption except as it may be used metaphorically to describe some psychological or sociological recovery that implies man the ultimate god of the meaningless middle. And I contend that such a hunger is a sign of the possibility of his return to health. One hungers because there is such a creature as food, St. Thomas says. One is ill because there is such a state as health. One founders or fails or falls only as measured against some high calling to a graceful dance. Such modern hunger speaks ancient origins. But, as Miss O'Connor adds in the passage just quoted, our writer's audience has largely forgotten the cost of restoration, for our "sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether." From her own position, the cost of evil to the individual is an absolute beyond all worldly inflations, all relative scales, being the absolute loss of the Self. Her Tarwater, in *The Violent Bear It Away*, discovers that the cost exceeds the Self's solvency. He is consumed almost to extinction, but also discovers some restoration in the terror of an absolute mercy which beyond all reason buys him out of self-centered bankruptcy.

Our Southern writer may not, of course, be so resolutely convinced by faith and reason of a transcendent God. Flannery O'Connor is; William Faulkner is not. But it is in the light of such argument as she makes, I think, that one begins to recognize the considerable difference between the visions radiated by the God-haunted writer like Faulkner and those

versions of existence made by Man-haunted writers like Flaubert, James, Hemingway, Fitzgerald. Or, nearer home, the difference becomes conspicuous between Flannery O'Connor, Andrew Lytle, Madison Jones as Southern writers and Carson McCullers, Shirley Ann Grau, Truman Capote as Southern writers.

To borrow from our writer's Eastern cousin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, we may say that he is reluctant to stray too far from the town pump or the well on the old family place precisely because, despite the reflections of the local in such waters, he knows they are deeper than time and more healing than any words the Self may speak of and to itself alone. Still, this inclination to the local is easily misunderstood by those who would believe the homeplace well polluted by provincialism. As I have already hinted, there is misunderstanding not only by the postmodernist anarchist mind that would drink of any muddy puddle and smack in delight to outrage the supposedly innocent among us, denying the existence of thirst even as he does so. I say supposedly innocent, remembering the Bible salesman in "Good Country People," who shatters Hulga, the existentialist with a Ph.D.: "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born."

In another direction, our Southern writer is misunderstood by that post-naturalist mind which is so heavily at home in the academy, particularly by those who see literature as a sector of our intellectual estate to be seized by the pseudo-sciences of sociology and psychology and turned to social and political ends. The anarchist of whom we spoke first sees mimesis as an illusion; for him, in Gerald Graff's words, there is "no such thing as a real object outside language, no 'nature' or 'real life' outside the literary text, no real text beyond the critical interpretation, and no real persons or institutions behind the multiplicity of messages human beings produce. Everything is swallowed up in an infinite regress of textuality."¹ Such anarchy, while destructive of the fabric of society, is not so conspicuously destructive as the alliance of sociology and psychology when turned upon the social

fabric. One is tempted to remark then with the irony Chaucer uses about his Doctor of Phisyk and apothecaries: "ech of hem made other for to winne." The socio-psychologist or psycho-sociologist takes our writer's work as a local naturalism which may be made to yield evidence suited to his own gnostic ideology.

Yet his denial of nature or life is only partial in contrast to the anarchistic structuralist's. He must admit the existence of some reality—the social world for the sociologist, the psychic world for the psychologist. Still, he sees it existing for the sake of being shaped, being restructured to suit some primarily human dream. It is no accident that sociology and psychology have become dominant forces in the civil state since World War II, subordinating even Harvard economics to janitorial status in the halls of Congress and in the White House. For since the days of Auguste Comte the state has been gradually transformed into the gnostic son of the world, the substitute Emmanuel, and the Holy Spirit of social humanity has been increasingly called into a presence as lord and giver of life to individual man, filling the embarrassing gap between human knowledge and human power in the ideological struggles to subjugate existence to human will. A humanistic priesthood has emerged, through which one is required to worship an abstraction—humanity—as the official state religion under the threat of exile for both heresy and treason. Its principal established college of priests is called H. E. W., pronounced *hew*, as you know, and its energy and our substance are spent largely in hewing individual persons to fit its vague dream of an ideal citizen.

II

WE MUST OBSERVE carefully, then, how our Southern writer differs in his address to reality, not only from the anarchist mind, but from the gnostic directors of social and psychic being also. No matter how particular nor how local his material, however deeply colored by literal social and psychological aspects of man's being, he is not so much acting as reporter or statistician of particularity as he is bearing witness to depths in

reality beyond all facts or photographs. For he knows, again to summon Flannery O'Connor, that 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." One is not likely at this late date, despite those large forces that distort reality, to miss this point in Faulkner's postage stamp county, unless one's intellect and sensibilities have been fatally atrophied. To cite once more that very articulate spokesman for our Southern writer, Miss O'Connor, "the longer you look at an object, the more of the world you see in it; and it's well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene." That is why the dedicated, unblinking naturalist will always write more largely than the academic definition of *naturalism*—assuming in him a talent and industry in support of his courage in the presence of creation.

To misunderstand this point, as many critics have done in attempting to come to terms with the complexity of the Southern Renaissance, is to see this Southern phenomenon only at its social and psychological level, the point at which our Southern writer himself begins. That is why I keep underlining my theme: for our writer, the slant of the sun upon a particular person in a particular place is more deeply significant of the large mystery of creation than is allowed by any conception of existence as a continuous accident or dead mechanism with which man is forced to struggle for an order of his own devising. He sees both the postmodernist anarchist and the gnostic disciple of old Enlightenment thought attempting to reorder creation under their Banner of Progress, when he is seeking the dance. We turn toward an immanence that denies transcendence with the coming of nominalism, of Machiavelli, the Philosophes, and their disciples. It is a turning Chesterton capsules in remarking the difference between Chaucer's world and ours: up to a certain point in the West life is understood as a dance, after which we decide it is a race.

The Southerner of whom we are speaking is

going to be suspicious of any appeal to progress as substitute for a profound teleological object. He remembers something of the grace of the dance. He will know, in his heart if not his head—by *intellectus* if not by *ratio* as the medieval man of letters might put it—that the anarchist or the Sons of the Enlightenment dedicated to power operate out of the same false ground. For both of them the In-between they wish to manage is an accident which has inexplicably thrown them up on the shores of a dead world. Our writer, to the contrary, sees both being itself and the conditions of man's particular being as givens. And the given implies a giver, however confounding the approach to the giver through the agency of those gifts. Therefore, our writer by his art opposes those violations of the world that procede from any premise of existence as either random chaos or ordered but spiritless mechanism.

A reading of his work at what criticism has called the naturalistic level, as a ground for exercising social or psychic manipulations of complex existence, will overlook the spiritual dimension of that work, particularly its reverence of person and place and thing. For our writer, whether he presents us a version of community on so small a scale as one of Miss O'Connor's decimated families or so large as Faulkner's rich Yoknapatawpha County, reflects the community as a spiritual organism, though fallen from fullness. Nor need one be the Thomist Miss O'Connor is to realize that in man's limited estate he necessarily approaches the spiritual in the concrete, created world that is always just at hand. To touch that world is already to reach toward its cause, even if one realize that act as a spiritual one only feebly or not at all. The gnostic manipulator is himself subject to such a shock of recognition, as occasional conversions suggest. Man has believed for a very long time that the first intellectual step along the spiritual road is made within the country of naturalism, through one's body; it is a step made within a context of our sensual response to some reality separate from the self. The belief is in Homer and Aristotle, in Dante and St. Thomas.

So the Southern writer we speak of observes that the increasing power claimed by a denatured naturalism these past hundred years or more—*denatured*, since nature divorced from its cause by gnostic will can be seen only as unnatural—that growing power has strangled the spiritual dimension of creation itself. Or rather, it has estranged us from that spiritual dimension, for such gnostic reconstructions of reality are fundamentally illusions. Our writer understands such a power to be a retrogression into a provincialism, into a primitivism, more limited than that we encounter in Homer or find revealed by the highly sophisticated explorations of scholars like Mircea Eliade. It is a provincialism exposed to us by Richard Weaver, Gerhart Niemeyer, Eric Voegelin—such scholars whom our writer may or may not have read. Our writer sees the distortions of reality, but he knows also that it is still at the level of nature that he must work. That is where the artist begins, and particularly at the level of human nature with its spectacles of the psychological and sociological and historical upon which he depends heavily for his incarnational act as artist. Each person, he says along with John Donne, is a little world made cunningly of elements and an angelic sprite. And through representations of that little world—which he places in the larger context of family and community in nature—a much larger world is revealed by his practice of similitude and dissimilitude. The more fully he reveals that little world, the more largely he speaks outward to a world beyond the boundaries of any literal time or place.

He recognizes, in words I adapt from Stark Young's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, that he is called to witness certain principles intrinsic to creation, not because those principles belong to him, but because he belongs to those principles. To put the point as Allen Tate might do, he is a spiritual regionalist,² not an intellectual provincial, that secular gnostic of whom Eric Voegelin has written so revealingly. In Voegelin's sense of the term, which we have used repeatedly here, our writer finds himself deeply engaged

by the "In-between," the only immediate source for the material of his made world.³ But he does so with an openness of mind and spirit toward the complication of existence, in consequence of which he finds himself inevitably anti-gnostic. Thus he celebrates the rich complexity of existence, although to celebrate that complexity does not mean to present it with an artificial sweetness and light. We may see this point everywhere in William Faulkner's work. In *Absalom! Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen attempts to limit existence to an arena of a hundred square miles by sheer dominance over the land and the creatures bounded by that artificial measure of nature; his attempt to manipulate man and nature is tragically shadowed. And in *Go Down, Moses* Ike McCaslin attempts to reject any binding by place or history, abandoning his inherited land and sacrificing persons dear to him beyond his romantic imaginings, as he comes at last to realize. For Faulkner distinguishes between the responsibility of a man's stewardship within the grounds of being and man's old temptation to control being itself, the gnostic principle which Christian orthodoxy sees in our first parents' violation of creation in the Garden. There is a very complex dramatization of this distinction in *Go Down, Moses*, which I may only touch upon here to make my point a little clearer, though the rich texture of Ike's place in nature and history warrants a longer devotion.⁴

In those stories we witness two gnostic forces in conflict. There is the obvious active destruction by the invading timber companies that ravage the Big Woods, but it is an encroachment upon a world Ike McCaslin has already abandoned through the illusion of his sacrificial act. Ike McCaslin may be described as a passive gnostic; in an ultimately destructive way he abandons his responsibility as steward of place in time. Caught between these two forces, trying to rediscover and redefine man's ordinate responsibility in nature is McCaslin Edmonds, who must even bear Ike's name more heavily in consequence of Ike's refusal. For he is an Edmonds and not so directly descended as Ike. Ike supposes

that by relinquishing his title to Old Corothers McCaslin's land, he may separate himself from tainted history by repudiating it and in some degree "anneal" the wrongs of his forefathers. He intends a sacrificial act, but he presumes to rescue the world he inherits, to redeem time as it were, as if he could command grace. As he comes to realize at last in the story "Delta Autumn," man may be a waster of the world through the ravenous appetites so general in community, but man may also mistake himself as sufficient agent of grace, whether grace will or not. That is, Ike presumes a role which orthodox tradition allows only to Christ.

If we call this kind of Southern writing mimetic, we acknowledge that its limits are determined by the order of creation. Its limits must also be distinguished from those of science or philosophy or theology. The possible or probable are displayed as dramatic speculation upon the complexity of existence in a way quite separate from those explorations made by biochemist or historian or metaphysician, as the artist slowly learns, sometimes with great difficulty. He may nevertheless present our nature in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult for the sensitive mind to deny a spiritual dimension to reality, most particularly that spiritual dimension in man that is man's by virtue of the elemental gift of his existence. For it is out of this gift that scientist or philosopher or historian or poet fashions his responses to creation. Whether one clear and plant a few acres or exercise civil authority in Washington, D.C., the gesture toward order and growth is inevitably a gesture beyond the Self and toward the cause of order, however willful or blind one is to the root cause of his gesture. It is the gift of being that makes gesture possible, and within this gift we are inexorably bound one to another.

For this reason we must not overlook, in our brief sketch of the Southern writer, his appearance in places other than the American South, as if we supposed him to be found only below the Potomac River and east of the Mississippi. So then one may well put "Southern" in quotation marks. I have, for instance,

called attention to a close kinship between those Soviet dissidents who published a collection of essays called *From Under the Rubble* in 1974 and those Southerners who published *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. And Allen Tate's essay of the 1940's called "The New Provincialism" has passages strikingly interchangeable with Solzhenitsyn's essay "The Smatterers," particularly as they express a mutual reverence for place and a concern for man's stewardship in place as that commitment to the created world relates to man's spiritual nature. Solzhenitsyn, like our Southern writer, recognizes in the aberrant refusal to serve, or in the rapacious pursuit of self-service, the shadow of an evil inclination in man's will that neither anarchy nor gnostic reconstructions of reality have succeeded in explaining away.

It is to this problem of evil in man that we might turn in detail, given world enough and time, to suggest why the Southern writer's very conspicuous concern for willful violence reflects a failure in man not peculiar to the South nor to recent history, though modern responses to violence are so confused as to make it appear that we here encounter a new problem. It is a sign of hope in a dark time that this literature speaks resonantly to the world in general. It is a prophetic literature, prophetic in the sense that it recalls us to the once known but now largely forgotten gifts of being. And it is this aspect of our writer's work, as well as his superb craftsmanship, that attracts attention outside the South. Man's deliberate and random evil, in the face of his obligation to pursue the good, speaks to the large confusions all about us—wherever man touches the created world. But wherever man touches the world, somewhere among his number will be found this creature we have been pursuing, the so-called "Southern" writer. He does not turn away from the problem of evil, nor attempt to explain evil away in such a manner that we may be left comfortably irresponsible, the self-made victim of appetites we tend to elevate to the role of spiritual callings of the Self to the pathetic Self.

III

I BEGIN with a quotation from Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, that very large little book which traces the intellectual decline of the West back to William of Occam. But let us recall here that Weaver's small book was written after his intense study under Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, published posthumously as *The Southern Tradition at Bay*. The intrusion of Occam's nominalism into that larger realism which held creation in relation to its transcendent cause, Weaver argues, is an intrusion whose consequences divided man against himself. Early on in *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver says that we moderns find ourselves trapped between sentimentality and brutality: "sentimentality, with its emotion lavished upon the trivial and the absurd; . . . brutality, which can make no distinctions in the application of violence." "Those who [base] their lives on the unintelligence of sentimentality fight to save themselves with the unintelligence of brutality." Thus our senseless affections and hatreds, rising out of the "unintelligence of sentimentality," lead to the large destructions of recent history with which we are so familiar, effects out of our struggle for self-justification. In our time—that is, from the time of Adolf Eichmann and Auschwitz down to the Reverend Jim Jones of Jonestown, Guyana—the gnostic's detachment from being seems increasingly to assault our residual sensibilities in terrible tableaux. It disturbs us particularly when the effects reach a level of sensational action whose spectacle no longer allows our inattention. The horror at Auschwitz or Jonestown seems a personal assault because we have forgotten the evil that is potential in each man's power over nature but are reminded by events beyond our understanding that we are nevertheless members one of another, even in such dark displays of community as mass murder. The gnostic manipulators of being, Voegelin's "directors" of the reconstructions of reality to fit millennial dreams of an infinite variety, find it expedient to obscure that potential evil common to all men, for in order

to distill power from the ferment of the "popular spirit of the age" it is important that they not disturb that volatile source. Otherwise their reductions of being in the name of humanity make the power highly unstable. Not only must the dreamed end be persuasively presented as a common good, but the source of that power to be directed to the good end must be assumed uncontaminated, lest the hint of spiritual pollution at the source of power affect the consent of our will that the power be used to construct the dream. Little wonder then that "original sin" in that source—individual man—as either metaphorical or literal must be removed from our reflection as a species of Neanderthal theology. But when an Eichman or a Jones at last stands before us as agent of murder on a statistically grand scale, we are astounded by the seeming disparity between the destruction and the insignificant, obscure agent. Our easy dreams become disturbed. And the popular spirit stirs in a threatening way. The death penalty might even be reinstated.

We are shocked, I suggest, because we have been willingly led to forget the complexity of human nature spoken to by the concept of original sin, a doctrine many Southern writers are loath to abandon. For if the hero need not be an Oedipus or a Count Roland or a King Richard I, neither must the villain be so conspicuous a figure on the stage of our awareness as Iago or Count Ganelon, a point Faulkner makes with disturbing effect through his unfolding of Flem Snopes and Popeye. We tend to come to terms with a Sutpen, or with a Stalin or Hitler, our anger and bafflement assuaged as our understanding is flattered by submerged Hegelean thought. These agents are instances of a coincidence of power in dynamic if terrifying figures, when seen in that reduction of reality into the myth of our age, historicism. Through such figures move the great contending forces of an age. They become "archetypal" like Attila or Robespierre or Napoleon. Their great acts of destruction underline climaxes in the flux of history, seeming to give history a god-like direction in the flow of time when measured by our post-Hegelean mind. But then comes

such a functionary as Eichmann, a high school dropout, the failed son of a tram company accountant, who becomes an efficiency expert in transporting millions beyond time in a "final solution." He becomes an absolutist of ordered fact beyond his father's fondest dreams. And what of such a peripheral figure as the Reverend Jim Jones, who scatters the random lees of our progressivist social world on a jungle floor to be displayed in unliving color on the cover of *Time*? What of such an inconspicuous West Virginia child as that small boy buying candy at the corner store in West Virginia who suddenly blooms darkly in our evening papers out of California under the name of Charles Manson?

Anonymous, hidden evil breaks out, rises to the level of a name no longer inconspicuous, for the name itself gains a magnitude by the enormity of effect wrought by the obscure agent of history bearing that name. *Adolf Eichmann* is to be forever a substitute for the millions of nameless common and uncommon people he helped destroy in the name of an apocalyptic "final solution." Hannah Arendt, having attended the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, is arrested by a new idea, "the banality of evil." The apparent contradiction between her new concept of evil and what she calls "our tradition of thought" which sees evil as "something demonic" led her to a two-volume reconsideration of the problem, *The Life of the Mind*, in which she examines the nature of thinking, willing, judging. Whether she would have held to her new concept is problematic, since she did not live to complete the section of the work on judging. But in setting out she says of Eichmann: "I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deed was monstrous, but the doer . . . was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous." The "only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial . . . was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*." And

reflecting on the "macabre comedy" resulting from Eichmann's helplessness, caught as he was in his "cliché-ridden language," she adds: "Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality," lest we exhaust ourselves by the necessity of a constant intellectual engagement of the events and facts always pressing upon us. The consequence of such a withdrawal from reality is the disjunction of thought and action, leading to such macabre comedy as that in Eichmann as he stands before the Israeli court.

That staged spectacle leads Miss Arendt to the questions she is to pursue in her two volumes: "Is evil-doing (the sins of omission, as well as the sins of commission) possible in default of not just 'base motives' (as the law calls them) but of any motives whatever, of any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being 'determined to prove a villain,' *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?" If the answer to these questions is *yes*, as Miss Arendt implies, then we are left with an enormous problem in attempting to deal with an Eichmann. For we must conclude in this line of thought that he is innocent of wickedness, that his participation in the slaughter of other innocents is an accident of forces which have not yet yielded to the science of thought, an accident of forces loosed by history but not yet subjected to the control of gnosis. Even the ground of our outrage at brutalities is eroded, since outrage is itself presumably susceptible to the control of knowledge.

Now the supposition that wickedness is not necessarily a condition for evil-doing is scarcely new; it is a doctrine progressively advanced these past two hundred years till it has in fact become the new orthodoxy. But tolerance of evil as a social principle out of philosophical determinism has had little support in the American South, at least up to

the present. Indeed, the fierceness with which the South has resisted such a principle has intensified some judgments of the South as evilly and sinfully inclined, in a blatant violation of its own principle on the part of the principle's most rabid partisans. The murderer, an old argument said, is no more guilty of his so-called "crime" than is his knife, an argument still generally rejected as nonsense by most Southerners—and specifically rejected by some advocates of that principle when it is the South to be judged.

What brings Miss Arendt's question into arresting focus is not that it is a new doctrine, but the enormity of its effects upon our world in recent history. And what is called into question most particularly is our growing tolerance toward evil, a tolerance established as one of the conditions of millennial progress from the days of Machiavelli into our own recent machinations of human rights as a political instrument in foreign policy. It is one of history's little ironies that we witness a president from the South operating within this new tradition, though professing its opposite. (Richard Weaver's warning of the relation between sentimentality and brutality ought to be heeded, particularly by a certain presidential hopeful from Massachusetts.)

When the Machiavellian figure is discovered operating in the large movements of history, our judgment is tempered by questions of net gain. Evil effects, in pursuit of progress, are a consequence of high motives. But when a figure who in his effects looms large and Machiavellian is discovered among the ordinary everyday members of humanity, rather than in the pantheon of the gods of progress, we are likely to reexamine our intellectual tolerance of evil. An Eichmann, a Jones, a Manson may be sleeping in the room upstairs or sitting down with us at our last supper. We might even encounter him on a deserted dirt road in Georgia, as Flannery O'Connor's grandmother does in her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

The argument that wickedness is not the necessary ground in the individual out of which evil deeds grow is the line of thought

which has, of course, been overwhelmingly advanced by those new sciences, sociology and its handmaid psychology; the arguments of those disciplines have generally narrowed the possibilities of individual freedom and responsibility until, in the cliché language of Miss O'Connor's Rayber Tarwater in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, such a creature as Eichmann must be logically excused on the ground that he is somehow "an accident of nature" no less than Rayber's own idiot child.⁵ If action is forced upon society by the enormity of an evil deed, it is considered a corrective of nature, execution or incarceration thus being reduced from any relation to retribution. For neither anger nor love find any rational role in such actions. Rayber Tarwater in spite of himself is so moved by love for his idiot son that he cannot kill the child, but he can understand his love only as aberration, an encroaching insanity.

Recently Walter Berns (*Harper's*, April 1979) has urged us to consider that anger directed against those who commit evil deeds at least "acknowledges the humanity of its objects: it holds them accountable for what they do. And in holding particular men responsible, it pays them the respect that is due them as men." The failure of his fellows to hold that degree of respect for him, who choose rather to explain him away as a mechanistic creature of nature, is the maddening pain in Miss O'Connor's *Misfit*. Good having been explained away, he has only his evil to give him any sense of being. Ironically, he's a better "Christian" than many who profess the faith, since his sense of loss is a sense of having lost the *good*. It would not be difficult to persuade the *Misfit* of the reality of original sin, as the grandmother discovers with shocking finality. Berns puts the conclusion to be drawn from our absence of anger: "If, then, men are not angry when someone else is robbed, raped, or murdered, the implication is that no moral community exists, because those men do not care for anyone other than themselves." It is a conclusion that the *Misfit* feels forced to: "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." Even then, "It's [*i.e.*, *there's*] no real pleasure in life."

One is struck on reading Miss Arendt's characterization of Eichmann by its aptness to Miss O'Connor's *Misfit*. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is, from its title to its concluding words, a story whose texture of clichés develops a macabre comedy; but that story suggests that clichés are something quite other than a means of protecting one "against reality," in their origins at least, though her characters pay a terrible price again and again for using them as a shield against reality. The relation of manners to mystery is a constant one in Southern literature as it attempts to rescue cliché in its origins. The sense of community as a body in time and place—of members dead and dying and to be born—focused upon a geographical point, is strong in its anti-gnostic stance. For what is implicit and often overt is the attempt to reaffirm the order of creation as transcendent in its origins.

What we wish to remark here is that the language which entraps an Eichmann is one which Eric Voegelin would describe as residual symbols that have become opaque; it is this aspect of cliché which effects one's removal from reality, a recovery of translucence in those symbols leading one back to reality, a point Miss O'Connor repeatedly dramatizes. But most important to our concern, we must remember that the individual, in the very act of using such language, participates in evil—bears false witness—and the incommensurate distance between the doer and the deed which is revealed in startling events awakens in us the realization that there is a mystery in evil itself, toward which we are often willingly drawn, since we do not will otherwise. The neutrality of the will is, alas, one of those comfortable illusions we cling to so that the tensions within the world will seem relaxed. We wish in the words of a popular song to this effect, to go "rolling with the flow."

The mysterious attraction of evil is a principle in human nature that our Southern

writer has rather constantly addressed himself to as he bears witness to the reality of man in the world, for he sees in each of us some degree of participation that makes each in some degree a Misfit. I have suggested that there is a celebration of good in the drama of our desperate fight to establish at least some claim to evil against social and psychological and philosophical attempts to deprive us of that birthright. It is only through a blinding pride, which may exhibit itself as a banal disjunction through cliché from the reality of the evil in our deeds—as with an Eichmann or a Jones or a Manson—that we are able to deny our kinship to such arresting figurings of man as Miss O'Connor's Misfit. In the Southern literature we have been talking about, we find ourselves already revealed in grotesque distortions that elicit both terror and laughter.

Our writer, then, is the prophetic poet, about whom I have much more to say, but on another occasion. I repeat in closing that he bears witness beyond the limits of art's projections of man's struggle within the *metaxy*, the "In-between." He knows this in his blood if not in his head, even as Haze Motes knows it in resisting his own calling to prophecy; even as so sophisticated a poet as T. S. Eliot comes to know it in his heart when he is at last able to make that gesture celebrated at the close of *The Waste Land*, that "awful daring of a moment's surrender/Which an age of prudence can never retract." I emphasize that distinction in closing, the old difference made between the *reason* and the *understanding*. One is required to bring those complementary faculties of the soul into an ordinate support, each of the other, for the good health of the soul. The failure to do so brings us to a dissociation of sensibilities at a greater depth of the soul than those spectacles of the soul—our symbolic ordering in art or

government. *Ratio ET intellectus*, says the old scholastic formulation, grown out of Heraclitus through our principal thinkers into its scholastic formulation in St. Thomas. The loss of that relationship may set any man at any moment on the road away from reality. But when a whole civilization loses it, that civilization has secularized the spiritual faculty of the reason or of the understanding and becomes secular gnostic, whether it be categorized as rationalist or romantic. There follows an inevitable abandonment of the dance for the race toward apocalypse, spectacles of which are everywhere about us, as in that encounter in Tennessee recently between the would be saviours of the snail darter and the champions of a water power Hawthorne would not understand. We have moved rapidly in this race of progress, from Monkey Trial to Minnow Trial in confusions beyond the art of satire.

If we learn this basic truth about Western man from our Southern literature as we enjoy its various gifts, we will have begun to move toward a participation in community, the living body of humanity. As misfits all, we may encounter with the shock of joy a recognition of "a good under construction" in us, in Miss O'Connor's phrase. Her Hulga, we remember, was christened Joy by a mother given to cliché, and so changes her own name to the ugliest she can think of, as if that might change her nature. The story "Good Country People" leaves Hulga thunder-struck by the Bible salesman. That tempter, walking up and down in the earth, is right about Hulga's futile attempt to raise nothingness to an absolute by reason. His prophecy fits us all in a special way; we're all born believing in nothing, a condition of the fortunate fall. The question is whether we have believed in nothingness "ever since." At that level, of course, there is no such thing as "Southern" literature.

¹*Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 61, Professor Graff's book is a searching critique of the sterility in post-modernist criticism.

²"Regionalism is . . . limited in space but not in time. The provincial attitude is limited in time but not in space; . . . provincialism is that state of mind in which regional men lose their origin in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday . . . what a difference—and it is a difference between two worlds: the provincial world of the present, which sees in material welfare and legal justice the whole solution to the human problem; and the classical-Christian world, based upon regional consciousness, which held that honor, truth, imagination, human dignity, and limited acquisitiveness, could alone justify a social order however rich and efficient it may be. . . . From now on we are committed to seeing *with*, not *through* the eye: we, as provincials who do not live anywhere." Allen Tate, "The New Provincialism," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 1945.

³"Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic metaxy, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l'âme ouverte* and *l'âme close*; between the virtues of openness toward the ground of being such as faith, hope and love and the vices of infolding closure such as *hybris* and revolt; between the moods of joy and despair; and between alienation in its double meaning of alienation from the world and alienation from God." From "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," and unpublished manuscript quoted by John H. Howell in his "Editor's Preface" to Voegelin's *From Enlightenment to Revolution*. See also Voegelin's extended exploration of the idea in "Experience and History," Part II of *Anamnesis*, translated and edited by Gerhart Niemeyer.

⁴I have treated this point at some length in Chapters 6

and 7 of my *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home*, forthcoming from Sherwood Sugden & Company.

⁵There is a growing body of revealing literature, some of the most cogent of it from within the preserves of sociology and psychology, on the theme of these new sciences' obfuscations of the mystery of evil, the distortions that remove evil from individual responsibility into the abstract country of personal and social adjustment. For instance, Professor Donald Campbell, a recent president of the American Psychological Association, shocked many of his colleagues when he said in his presidential address:

There is in psychology today a general background assumption that the human impulses provided by biological evolution are right and optimal, both individually and socially, and that repressive or inhibitory moral traditions are wrong. This assumption may now be regarded as scientifically wrong. Psychology, in propagating this background perspective in its teaching of perhaps 80 or 90 percent of college undergraduates, and increasing proportions of high school pupils, helps to undermine the retention of what may be extremely valuable social-evolutionary inhibitory systems which we do not yet fully understand.

If this late admission from an authority in the field still leaves the person entangled in "social-evolutionary systems" and the question of evil still rooted in "biological evolution," Professor Campbell does admit "social functionality and psychological validity to the concepts of sin and temptation and of original sin due to human carnal, animal nature." To remember sin and temptation in such terms is but small advance toward the spirit's territory, but it is a beginning. For a searching critique of psychology's deconstructions of reality that call forth Campbell's carefully hedged warnings, see Paul C. Vitz's *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, or the redactions he makes of his book in "Psychology: Advocate of the New Narcissism" and "Psychology: Enemy of the Family" in *The New Oxford Review*, April 1979 and May 1979.