CHAPTER I

STRATEGIES OF THE CHRISTIAN ARTIST

When poet Robert Lowell recalled days spent at Yaddo, the writers' colony at Saratoga Springs, he remembered Flannery O'Connor and J.F. Powers as his "two close Catholic writer friends." No two contemporary writers more in agreement in their basic fictional concerns can be more complex in the strategies they adopt to express these concerns. Both Flannery O'Connor and J.F. Powers were practicing Catholics. Both believed their faith the basic premise for their fiction.

In a letter to Father John McCoun, Flannery O'Connor commented on the Catholic contribution to art: "Powers and I are, I suppose, the only two young writers in this country who are well thought of and connected with the Church. We both have the same kind of horns." Five years later, when Powers received the National Book Award for his novel, *Maps D'Urban*, in 1963, Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must

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"Converge" was judged best story of the year for the O. Henry Prize.

Flannery O'Connor is assertive about her Christian faith: "... I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." This personal conviction enters and controls her fiction to the extent that in an age that denies the need for Redemption, Flannery O'Connor found her faith an asset rather than a hindrance to her calling as an artist:

I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.

Rather than limiting the scope of the artist's perceptive vision, commitment to a fixed set of

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4 Ibid., p. 31.
doctrinal values would, she believed, "add a dimension to the writer's observation which many cannot, in conscience, acknowledge exists ..."5

J.F. Powers, who has written so much about the Roman Catholic priesthood as to be burdened with the undeserved reputation of a narrow specialist on priests, however, lays claim to much less spiritual poise, confidence and reliance on the assets that his faith offers him. Preoccupied with tensions between art and belief that Flannery O'Connor did not even admit as operative, he preferred to be considered "a writer who happens to be a catholic."6

Powers places artistry above religion and is plagued by the inevitable dichotomy between art and sanctity, between literature and religion. While he concedes terms such as "Catholic fiction" and "Catholic literature," he confesses: "... I do not like them ..."7 However, true to the experiences and values of his life, Powers does not deny his obvious identity in his art. Despite his disappointment

on the reception of *Morte D'Urban* in some quarters as a book for Catholics, about priests, on receiving the National Book Award, he stated without ambiguity: "Philosophically, I'm a Catholic writer...." Powers is clear with regard to his fundamental orthodoxy and his faith in a permanent religious ideal. Like Flannery O'Connor, he recognizes that the true artist cannot operate in a spiritual vacuum: "I would not fly blind and write without regard to a body of philosophy.... There are laws, moral laws, as real as gravity."

Powers does not state his religious bias with the vehemence of Flannery O'Connor. His attitude is marked by modesty, even diffidence. Still, a strong and unmistakable theological commitment pervades his fiction and the essential Christian mysteries of Incarnation, Redemption and Resurrection which dominate the work of Flannery O'Connor provide the pattern also of Powers' art.

Despite the assertions of both O'Connor and Powers to confirm the centrality of religious concerns

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\[E\] Ibid., 63.

in their fiction, and despite evidences in their work that support these assertions, both are repeatedly misunderstood by readers and critics alike as being "non-religious" writers. The reader who first encounters an O'Connor story is baffled by its theology and experienced critics, who have no quarrel with the "Christian" literature of Dante and Dostojevsky, find her work offensive. Josephine Hendin, in a critical study of Flannery O'Connor, denies all religious meaning in the latter's work. In support of the "de-mythologizing" of O'Connor's characters that she effects in her interpretation, Hendin cites Irving Howe's judgment that "there are no unavoidable pressures to consider these stories [Everything That Rises Must Converge] in a strictly religious sense."¹⁰ Novelist John Hawkes goes all the way when, appreciative of the diabolism of Flannery O'Connor's satiric impulse and what he terms the "demonic sensibility" in her stories, he concludes that "... as a writer she's on the devil's side."¹¹ A confused reaction to her bizarre comedy and sardonic humour saw Flannery

O'Connor as "a disciple of the nihilistic-deterministic writers spawned by the Depression and the Second World War and the spiritual and cultural stagnation which followed then."\(^{12}\)

The Roman Catholic Church is the subject of Powers' fiction and the details of rectory life provide the formula for his irony, but he is no less misunderstood. fellow Catholics are made uneasy by the obvious lack of reticence and an apparent lack of reverence on Powers' part in describing the workings of life within the rectory. In his introduction to Powers' *Lions, Barts, Leaping Does and Other Stories*, a collection of stories on priestly life, Peter de Vries states that Powers is not a religious writer, that he is writing not about souls agonising over belief or unbelief but about ages in conflict and that his concern is not with faith itself with the "Household of Faith."\(^{13}\) The illustrious Father Urban does not seem to convince one reviewer who observes of *Worte d'Urban*, Powers' only novel: "... I cannot imagine a book in which religious feeling would be


\(^{13}\) Peter de Vries, *Introduction to Lions, Barts, Leaping Does and Other Stories* (New York: Time Reading Program, 1963), pp. xv-xvii.
more conspicuously absent...or one whose artistry would make its compromises with the world with better grace.\textsuperscript{14}

The reasons for this confusion are clear. As Frederick Huffman aptly observes, "An important fact of modern attitudes is that religious metaphors and lines of thought have become secular; or they have been partially secularised, and religious and secular images are confused with one another."\textsuperscript{15} Much modern literature does not distinguish between "sacred" and "secular." Religious myths and motifs are used in secular contexts in fiction that has no religious commitment at all. Christ figures and Christian symbolism abound as universal myths in the work of existentialist, agnostic or atheistic writers. On the other hand, religion has become "secularised" to the extent that definite religious ideas find expression in purely secular terms.

The fictional strategies that O'Connor and Powers adopt are uncommon to the religious writer. Their stance is deliberately unorthodox and, at face value, irreligious. Committed to a religious


viewpoint, both writers are aware that they wrote in
an age and for an audience that does not share these
values. To a secular audience unwilling to experience
a fiction whose assumptions are the central Christian
mysteries, they communicate by creating an illusion
of contemporary "alienated literature." Their
characters begin with secular viewpoints which prove
unworkable in their experience. Comic ridicule
reinforces these viewpoints and the developing action
is designed to fulfill a moral vindication of good over
forms of dishonesty, corruption and evil. Comic
expectations are violated when the action turns from
the ends of comic ridicule and fails to provide the
rewards of comic pleasure. An unexpected, hardly
pleasing twist at the end of a story converts the
comedy into "serious" fiction. This ironic reversal
robs the reader of his sense of superiority over
ridiculous or absurd characters and situations in the
fiction, or pulls the rug from beneath his feet by
excluding him from the spiritual redemption of those
with whom he has sympathized and identified himself.
By initially assuming a secular attitude, and through

16 Susan Stevens Fissell, "For a 'Hostile Audience':
A Study of the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor,
Ironic, indirectness and comic reversal, the stories of O'Connor and Powers challenge the reader's prior judgment of right and wrong and force him to a reassessment of his basic values and priorities. The movement is from the despair and absurdity of their fictional worlds to an affirmation of life despite of imperfection.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction employs the most popular elements of the secular literature of the sixties. Parcissal, violent, and grotesque; celebrating the anti-hero, the social reject, the misfit; obsessed with the absurd and the nihilistic; and set in a nightmareish, Kafkaesque landscape, her writings are a strange juxtaposition of elements which seem alien in a Christian context. She explains her apparent affinity for the extreme, the perverse and the violent thus:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; an he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience... to the hard of bearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and starting figures.

17 Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 33-34.
Freaks, fanatics, and psychopaths stalk Flannery O'Connor's landscape. The manicidal vision of "A Good Man is Hard To Find," poor dim-witted Lucynell Crater of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the hermaphrodite in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and wooden-legged Hulga of "Good Country People" are only representative of the numerous physically, emotionally and spiritually maimed characters who people her fictional world. These violent and flawed beings, whom Browning designates "criminal compulsives," are a character type essential to the evolution of Flannery O'Connor's plot pattern: "It is they who act as spiritual catalysts, administering the shock which awakens the positivists and the positive thinkers from their dream of a world made secure by superficial rationality or conventional goodness." 12

In one story after another, Flannery O'Connor turns the tables on her reader and exposes the follies of "secularity" as an attitude toward life. Her protagonists, godless and self-sufficient, are forced to a point of utter bewilderment in the face of evils that they cannot comprehend. Hulga, the omniscient Ph.D. ("Good Country People"), Shppard, the agnostic

12 Proctor Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 15.
social-worker ("The Laws Shall Enter First"), resourceful Mrs. Cope whom no ill can assail ("The Circle in the Fire"), amiable Mrs. Turpin ("The Revelation"), and the worldly-wise grandmother ("A Good Man Is Hard To Find") are all brought to bitter realizations of their own limited understanding of evil and the terrifying proportions it can assume in the world. The ironic reversals at the end of each story jar the self-satisfied, liberal-minded reader out of his complacency and bring him to terms with his own inadequacy and need for spiritual salvation.

While comic writing is Flannery O'Connor's real forte, as Martha Stephens pointedly observes, one cannot avoid the religious fundamentalism that underlies her comedy: "...the piously absurd aspects of the search for belief, which in O'Connor are seldom lost sight of completely, are continually in the foreground."

Her comedy is tense and caustic. There is something sinister at work all along. "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" is a perfect example of O'Connor's comic sense which bears the reader on a wave of comical situations. But, "the grin wiped off our faces, we are sharply

brought up - the real, the serious world lies suddenly before us. What seemed like play, what, seen in a certain light, seemed comical, is not so comical after all. 20

Flannery O'Connor's is a hard-headed theology which comprises a tough-minded moral absolutism as opposed to the sentimental moral relativism of her age. "For her, good and evil were clear and opposite absolutes, and she judged her characters with the thoroughness of her God... She believed that despite of our vain attempts to blur the dividing line between right and wrong and to rationalize away the distinctions between good and evil, we are judged in terms of these absolutes." 21 O'Connor discerned in the social attitudes of the fifties a smugness and flautulent optimism that could be moved only by the harshest kind of attack. She rejects popular aspects of American culture and deflates the public wisdom of her ancestors. Liberalism, a naive faith in democracy, free enterprise and science as permanent cures for human suffering, positive thinking, and a fatuous belief in a rationalist technological society

20 Ibid., p. 17.
are caricatured and repudiated as meaningless values. She questions the validity of creation theories which dissolve the mysteries of moral evil and original sin and separate them from the riddle of man's incurable mortality. "Christ, who makes foolish the wisdom of her fictional world, is its only true physician."

Powers' fictional approach is from a polar opposite strategy. Considered within the group of prominent novelists of the first half of the sixties—yellow, Purdy, Heller, Updike, Malamud, Barth, Pynchon, Hawkes, Mailer and P糟, Powers would seem to be the exception. Prominent characteristics of modern American fiction, a pastoral preoccupation with innocence; an affinity for the violent and abnormal; and glorification of social misfits and rejects are hardly present in his work. "It is important for American fiction that he is part of a counterbalancing movement away from the preoccupation with violence, adolescence, and an almost compulsive assumption that society is the enemy." While alienation, despair, violence and innate evil are common contemporary themes, light and goodness in

mankind are rarely detected qualities. To modern readers who expect, as J.P. Sisk observes, writers to have "never recovered from the fourth book of Gulliver," powers comes as a surprise. His characters are lovable and genuine and capable of moral improvement. Frank O'Connor responds with enthusiasm to powers' second collection, "The Presence of Grace: "After the darkness of so much American fiction, this book produces a peculiar shock of delight." However, to readers accustomed to harsher writing, powers may seem low-keyed in comparison to contemporaries, Capote, Vidal, or Salinger. His universe is so controlled and well-lighted that even Catholics prefer the work of Graham Greene and Mauriac.

Powers has rediscovered and developed the comedy of Roman Catholicism - a subject which no other writer has successfully embodied in American fiction. Catholicism provides powers with the images and atmosphere of his fiction. He uses it as his scene "in much the same way as Conrad used the sea or Kipling India...." In the vocation of the priest.

24 ibid., p. 31.
Powder finds a subject which eventually possesses him and draws forth his best. "At the heart of powers' satire, for example, is a contemporary figure of incongruity with a long history (a figure satirized by Ronti and Chaucer and Francis) - the servant of two masters, the man-of-God serving Satan."

The irony of the worldly priest is often the pivotal point of a Powers story. Marked by qualities of spiritual dedication and physical denial, handling the mysteries of ritual and incanting in an ancient tongue, the priest smokes cigars, is choosy about his liquor, improves his golf and drives expensive cars. Conscious always that, in order to survive, the church must gain wealth and political power, advertise, build and compete, he follows his spiritual vocation in a rather worldly fashion. "Powers has found the formula for his fiction in all this. He regularly sees the priest in a worldly role. The necessity of this role makes Powers' satire kind. The contradiction implied makes his irony deep. Nevertheless it is a formula, for we can feel the force of it before we read, and in great part predict its course before that course has

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Rectorly life provides power with opportunity for exploitation of ironical situations. Characters pit their forces against each other, not in any sensational issues but in petty fencing matches, a parrying of wits to achieve some mundane but contextually all-important end. Ambitious Father Bourne, cast as a time server in a large corporation, powers' equivalent for the institutional Catholic Church, hopes for a transfer which will mean promotion. He toadies the rich, plays golf and practices wearing a collar in the privacy of his room. A typical twist of irony finds him deposed, in the end, instead. The Monsignor's ambition to be a bishop is thwarted ("The Forks"), Father Votre wrangles and maneuvers in vain to get a desk for his room ("A Losing Game"), and the Mother Superior fails in her efforts to persuade the pastor to replace a faulty stove at the convent ("The Lord's Day"). Besides the rich irony of situation that the rectory has to offer the writer, the easy vulgarity of the priests' speech is a device by which the shock of contradiction is freshly felt: "What powers, the

artist has found in Catholicism, particularly American Catholicism, is the perfect juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the exalted and the vulgar, the material and the spiritual, which provides the classic satirical irony of his fiction. 29

while the tension between the priest's religious vocation and the secular culture in which he is called to operate forms the serious intent of Powers' fictional exploration, his humorous intentions should not be overlooked. In contrast to the comic writing of Flannery O'Connor that highlights a serious if not tragic vision, Powers softens the sharp edges of his fiction with an essentially comic outlook. The incongruities of salt that has lost its savour are portrayed with a touch of benign comicality that is often concerned only with surfaces, not depths. Father Dunsany's hours of agonized soul-searching in "Lions, Harts, Leaping Doe's" do not appear in the portraits of Fathers Burner, Philbrick, Meadon or Udovic, protagonists of other short stories. "The Valiant Woman," which deals with the curious relationship

between a priest and his termagant housekeeper, is a perfect illustration of Powers' talent as a comic artist: "What would otherwise be a dreary cliché of married life becomes deliciously comic when the participants are house-keeper and priest. They even play honeymoon bridge."  

The kaleidoscope of Powers' characterization shifts from the stock figure of the worldly priest, to his spiritual counterpart in several stories. The presence of grace in imperfection and its working through the bumbling limitations of well-meaning servants of God is portrayed in many instances. The old pastor in "The Presence of Grace," who triumphs in brushing aside the scandalous accusations of a group of gossipy women, and Father Farly in "Zeal," who in his simple-hearted meddling is an instrument for good, are lights, however glimmering, in the darkness of ill-will and unconcern around them. Powers' review of Gordon Zahn's in Solitary Witness assesses the latter's attitude to the role of the Church in terms which may well be applied to his own viewpoint as evident in his fiction:

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30 I.S.D., "Ringo Sane at the Foot of the Cross," The Nation, 153.
professor Zahn believes that the church alone among the institutions of society has the potential to counteract the force of the secular authority. What hope he has for the individual is in the church. But since the church has so often run with the hounds, it is a forlorn hope, really only a wish. There are too many people with the best and the worst of intentions (as in the Third Reich) who are anxious and able to keep such potential as the church has from being put to the test.31

In the Church and its ministers, despite human limitations and worldly distractions, Powers sees God's representation on earth. In the burgeoning institution of the Roman Catholic Church he finds positive elements of grace and hope that offer intimations of perfection's goal in the midst of human frailty and failure. "The irony of Powers springs from a recognition of the estrangement man brings to himself through a foolhardy rejection of the presence of grace in every action of love and openness, offering connection to man and God."32

In an analysis of the fiction of Powers and O'Connor, as in the analysis of most twentieth century fiction, one is brought up against violence both as

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fictional content and as strategy, and with the problem of evil that is inevitably entwined with it. Violence, brutal, gruesome and very often gratuitous, pandering merely to the modern propensity for the sensational, has become a hallmark of the literature of our time. So that the success or failure of a particular work often depends on the violence that it portrays. However, violence is the artist's tool and there is, in theory at least, a distinction between violence for its own sake (Spillane and Caldwell), violence of clarification and revelation (Faulkner and Penn Warren); violence as surrogate for religious experience or search for meaning (Salinger and Henry Miller); and violence as despair of meaning (James Jones & Serouse).

That violence is the leitmotif of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is evident from an overall view of her work. Of the nineteen stories in her two collections, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, nine end in violent death, three in physical assault or bodily injury, and seven in arson, theft of a leg, theft of a car and abandonment of a wife. The novels,
wise blood and the violent near it away, deal with vice, sexual immorality and murder. Flannery O'Connor uses violence in combination with the grotesque to create an alienated perspective. Her technical strategy is to bring home through shock of violence the horror of man's grotesque state to him. While violence in gothic fiction has little moral foundation and exists to satisfy itself, "when violence appears in the grotesque, or in the necrotomb which frames A Good Man Is Hard To Find, it is used to suggest the lack of any framework of order in the universe."33

Though the violence of O'Connor's fiction is real, it is revelatory. The characters discover at the moment of agony that their relation to the world and the universe is suddenly transformed by mysterious forces of violence. Hulga of "Good Country People," Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," and Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" are some O'Connor characters who are confronted with themselves in their confrontation with violence.

Violence, in Flannery O'Connor, forces the reader to reckon with the problem of evil in the world and to seek alternatives to it. Violence intrudes as a vast and incomprehensible evil into what is until then a predictable, familiar and seemingly secure environment. Each of the victims is unaware even of the existence of such evil, its potential and possibilities. The intruders on Mrs. Cope's farm, Manley Pointer, Shiftlet, and Rufus Johnson far exceed, in the manifestations of their evil natures, the estimate imagined by their victims. The magnitude of evil in Flannery O'Connor's fictive vision shakes the complacency, and the naiveté of the reader as it does that of the victim in the fiction.

The absence of violence in modern literature is often mistakenly considered a deficiency on the part of a writer. There is a tendency to take extreme displays of violence as the sign of the true writer, "as if to confront the violent is automatically to confront the meaningful."^34

American fiction. In contrast to Flannery O'Connor's openly aggressive technical strategy in the application of violence, Powers' technique is muted and subtle. Except for a few stories on racial issues, early in his career, ceased to feature in his fiction that violence which erupts in physical assault and brutality. In later, mature work, he employs unsensational and commonplace situations. "Powers, like Wordsworth, chooses 'incidents and situations from common life,' and the choice costs him readers at a time when, as Wordsworth complained in his own time, the taste is for outrageous stimulation."35

However, Powers uses remarkably effective means to achieve his ends. By opposing subtle psychological forces against each other, he achieves a dialectical tension that is equal in effect to the most violent physical conflict. The battle, in Powers, is a warring of minds, the loss more than material or physical. "Unlike Miss O'Connor, whose plots may involve wholesale murder, arson, seduction, or death by a maddened bull, Powers writes of everyday

incidents which when accumulated achieve as great a horror as the more violent subjects of the Southern storyteller, because they represent treason to an ideal. 36

The darkness in Powers' work lies not in the extent of violence present in his stories but in the intensity of his incidents and situations. Events, as ordinary and unspectacular as a neighborhood coffee party or a game of bridge between priest and housekeeper, assume subtle psychological dimensions and deeper human significance. Small human and moral events contain intense drama, for Powers operates a qualitative rather than a quantitative standard of expression: "...like James and Dickinson, he can also remind us, rather uncomfortably, that in art it is not the event so much as the quality and intensity of the imagination that apprehends it that is important." 37

Powers balances his attitude to violence with an appropriate vision of evil. Extreme attitudes to

37 Sisk, 37.
violence often indicate a lack of perspective and a balanced scale of values. Writers tend either to exaggerate or drastically diminish effects of good and evil in fiction. Portrayal of blatant violence does not always express a proper understanding of moral values, abstract or practical. Sisk rightly observes:

The imagination of evil in such a violent literature has a tendency to be melodramatic and naive, and undefined by a corresponding ability to imagine good, often because it is an expression of the despair of goodness that follows from the American habit of expecting too much from human nature ... A naiveté about goodness breeds a naiveté about evil ... Both extremes can be disguised as realism, both tend to the distortions of melodrama.36

In avoiding overt violence in his fiction, Powers exhibits a realistic understanding of good and evil as forces at work within man. His characters present in a true measure, both, the potential for failure and the possibilities for right action. The presence of grace balances the presence of evil and the resolution of the tension between the two results in the triumph of one over the other. In most of Powers' stories, the

36 Ibid.
confrontation with evil is, in contrast to Flannery O'Connor and the majority of his contemporaries, "a small and unexciting thing." Evil is the officious small-mindedness of Father Zovvic or the cloth of Father Burner; it is the possessiveness of Mrs. Stoner, the selfishness of Father Didymus and the lack of imagination in the eccentric pastor of "The Lord's Day." With peculiar perception, "Powers asks us to believe a hard thing about evil and virtue: that they do not necessarily make a great noise in the world." He portrays subtle evils through disciplined techniques and subdued tones.

O'Connor and Powers have, both, to varying degrees been influenced by the American South, a region rich in cultural and literary heritage. The South is Flannery O'Connor's milieu, the greatest influence on her life and work, next only to her Catholicism. Confined by circumstances of crippling illness to her native Georgia, her insuperable identity as a Southerner provides her

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
with the materials that shape her fiction. The essential features of the South—the familiar range of Southern character-types, Negroes, white labourers and middle class, and nostalgic pseudo-aristocracy; agrarian settings, Southern speech and Southern literary motifs of Gothic violence and grotesques—mark her fiction as recognizably regional in its attributes. O'Connor is, however, wary of the dangers of lapsing into narrow provincialism: "The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious southern writer that he will become one of them." 41

Though the surface of Flannery O'Connor's work affords little to distinguish it from the writing of her southern contemporaries, her creative imagination is radically different from that of Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, or Tennessee Williams.

In this context, Caroline Gordon clearly distinguishes: "Miss O'Connor's talent in such a milieu, is as startling, as disconcerting as a blast from a furnace which one had thought stone-cold but which is still red-hot." 42

Flannery O'Connor

41 "The Fiction Writer and His Country," Mystery and Manners, p. 29.
transcends a restrictive regionalism by imposing upon her fiction her larger, universal, Christian vision. "Catholicity has given me my perspective on the south ..." she states very plainly. While the South constitutes an essential part of her personality and art, irrespective of regional attributes, God is the central mystery of her fiction. She sees the reality of the contemporary South "only in relationship to the higher reality of Christian mystery." 

Flannery O'Connor was fortunate in the circumstances that determined her regional background, for the South provides a peculiar ethos congruent with her own urgent preoccupations. In the South, the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological and as she observes, the region if hardly Christ-centered is most certainly Christ-haunted. The average Southerner is on familiar ground with Christian myths, scriptural allusions and biblical theology. Flannery O'Connor has no difficulty in reconciling of her own ritualized Catholic dogma with the fundamental

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faith of her region, though she is aware of the somewhat odd, dichotomous situation of the Roman Catholic writer in the Protestant South. "What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find, when he descends within his imagination, is not Catholic life but the life of his region in which he is both native and alien." 45

Flannery O'Connor is quite at home, however, with the fanaticism and bizarre practices of Baptist fundamentalists and, in fact, finds in their fervour an equivalent to the fiery faith of biblical days. The unflinching and fearless commitment of evangelical Protestantism is the recognisable indigenous medium to which she does not hesitate to relate her own message of Christian faith. "The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognise it in many forms not totally congenial to him." 46

Likewise, Flannery O'Connor's treatment of the relationship between the races in the Southern context oversteps its immediate implication. The black as a familiar figure in the Southern landscape is present throughout her work. In stories which are not themati-

45 **Mystery and Manners**, p. 197.
46 Ibid., p. 206.
ally concerned with the race question, the black appears as an inevitable reality of daily life. Later stories from *Everything That Rises Must Converge* which deal with adjustment problems between the races reflect the rapidly shifting racial conditions in the South. However, even in these, the primary issues are not racial. The common theme of spiritual illumination always supersedes the narrower concern of racial conflict and violence. While blacks and whites attempt to communicate with each other, "convergences" are spiritual rather than racial. Both blacks and whites are confronted with their state of spiritual poverty and must reassess their personal position in God's hierarchy of values. Flannery O'Connor subordinates the race question to the larger theme of enlightenment through grace.

Powers is not in the strictest sense a Southerner. The Midwest is his "diocese." However, the years of his childhood and early youth spent in Illinois, in what was culturally a part of the South, have left their mark upon his attitudes and literary themes. Born in Jacksonville, Illinois, Powers grew up conscious that religious affiliation placed him in a minority position among a majority of Southern Protestants. Unlike O'Connor, who did not find this a source of the
slightest discomfort, Powers confesses that living in an area which was culturally a part of the South wasn’t entirely pleasant. “The town was Protestant. The best people were Protestants and you felt that.”

Powers recalls personal experience in the predicament that his hero, Harvey Roche faces in *Worte D’Urban*:

“Protestants were very sure of themselves.... If you were a Catholic boy...you felt that it was their country, handed down to them by the Pilgrims, George Washington, and others, and that they were taking a risk in letting you live in it.”

In contrast to Flannery O’Connor to whom the South contributes positively with a fictional landscape, in Powers, the region and its attributes supply the conflict in his fiction. O’Connor is at home in the South, that except for a very few stories which deal directly with Catholics, priests, or the Church, native fundamental Protestants provide for the majority of her characterizations. Powers, on the other hand, aware of the tension between his own religious identity and that of those around him, confines himself in his fiction to the Catholic Church, its institutional

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problems and its priests. However, Powers has been celebrated as a specialist on the priesthood so that what might have seemed a limitation in his personality has proved to be his greatest fictional asset. Frank O'Connor, who places Powers "among the greatest of living story-tellers," justly divides his praise: "Of all modern writers known to me, who have dealt with Catholic religious life, J.F. Powers ... is far and away the best."\(^{49}\)

Unlike Flannery O'Connor, Powers becomes totally involved in the race question and in the problems of blacks in a white society. Though his characters find their solutions in religious ideals and practice, Powers' black stories, written early in his career, reveal a rage at the cowardice and injustice with which white meets black in American society. Powers depicts blacks, often Catholics who find the faith to transcend their suffering, as morally superior to their white oppressors. Powers' youthful anger at the black's predicament shows forth in the fact that in these alone, of all his stories, he resorts to a portrayal of physical violence and assault as a tool to achieve

a social purpose. Race riots, lynchings and murder
find detailed description in these pieces which
constitute an exception to powers' technical more of
quiet, introspective, low-action satire.

Intelligibility being a key factor in all art, the
techniques adopted by powers and O'Conner may be
questionable. Both readers and critics face the
problems of obscurity of meaning in the work of each of
these writers. In their highest achievement, both
prove difficult to understand. Flannery O'Connor makes
it clear that she is not writing for entertainment and
that her stories will not serve as bed-time reading.
In fact she is hardly intelligible on a first
encounter and it is the persistent reader who is
rewarded with the deep insights of her fiction. O'Connor
deplores the tendency among readers to sympathize with
such characters as the misfit or Rufus Johnson as
social outcasts and victims, and the inability of the
modern audience to recognize her freaks for what they
are. Irony and ambiguity make her work difficult to
understand. Similarly, powers' indirection and
introspection makes his fiction complex and difficult
to disentangle in terms of meaning. From a survey of
major reviews of Monte D'Urban, B. Gates concludes
that "even acute readers do not understand what powers
is trying to say."50 In his list of reviewers, Phoebe Adams (The Atlantic) confesses: "... its meaning is not at all clear to me." Robert Taubman (The New Statesman) is "much aware of having missed much of the point," and to Richard Sullivan (New York Times Book Review) "it remains elusive."

While it is necessary that the writer must present his conceptions in a way that will be grasped by the reader, the use of complex techniques by the modern artist has its justification and purpose. Friedman's viewpoint with regard to intelligibility in modern fiction justifies the fiction of Flannery and O'Connor, its means and ends. "There is nothing in the principle of intelligibility," he asserts, "which is necessarily hostile to paradox, irony, and ambiguity, or which is inherently anti-modern or pre-Freudian .... the principle remains; the artist must adopt those means which will best achieve his effect, and if his effect is to be ambiguous, then his means must be chosen accordingly."51

"though in writing from a Christian standpoint,

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[Numbered annotations]
Flannery O'Connor and J.P. Powers have a special mission to fulfill. It is noteworthy that its fulfillment results in art of the highest quality that rarely degenerates into propaganda. "For both Flannery O'Connor and J.P. Powers, writing from the vantage point of the rock, the exercise of their craft is a literary, not a therapeutic matter." The short story form disparaged as a genre "tainted by commercialism and damned by condescension -- running a poor fourth to poetry, drama, and the novel in the books and journals devoted to serious theoretical criticism," is raised to a qualitative excellence by O'Connor and Powers. Literary perfectionists, they prove their merit as writers of fiction with their handling of the short form. Though each has attempted to write novels, the short story is their special métier.

In contrast to innumerable masters of fiction, Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Faulkner and Penn Warren, from her own native South, who turned to successful short-story writing from distinguished careers as novelists, Flannery O'Connor receives acclaim not for her novels, Wise Blood or The Violent Bear It Away, but for the short stories into which she pours her best efforts. The remarkable success of her

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52 Quine, "View From A Road," Critique, 27.
53 Friedman, For and Waning in Fiction, p. 166.
short pieces arises from technique and characterization:

"...to get the outrageously drawn, spiritually tormented character, it is necessary to sacrifice the subtlety that long fiction demands. Complex characterization is the sine qua non of the novel; the characters must not only have epiphanies, they must change and develop in terms of what they have done and seen. It was the nature of Flannery O'Connor's fictional vision that discovery on the part of the people was all. When one has witnessed the flaming bush or the tongues of fire or the descending dove, the change is final and absolute and whatever happens thereafter is anti-climax. This is why the characters in O'Connor's novels fade and become static and often bore us, with their sameness before we are done with the book. But fulfilling their proper roles — that is revelation, discovery — in the short stories, they are not boring and they do what they were conceived to do. 54

O'Connor stories offer a rich treasure-house of insights and revelations, a rare depth and focus of meaning for life.

powers, in brilliantly humorous and quietly effective pieces of narration, repeatedly distinguishes himself a master of the short form. He published his first and only novel after proving himself for twenty years as a writer of short stories. Reviewing this work, Granville Hicks justifiably concludes:

"The novel, I'm afraid, is not Powers' métier; at any rate, this particular novel is clumsy in comparison

54 Walter Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin and Grace; Everything That Rises Must Converge," The Hollins Critic, 2 (September, 1965), 5.
with the best of the short stories. It is episodic, and the parts, many of which have appeared in a variety of magazines, are better than the whole.\(^5\)

Stretching Powers' pattern of recovery and reconciliation over tensions of a life-time, Marta In'Urban has no more to offer than "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," or "Prince of Darkness," where the material is held under greater pressure and which reconcile the tensions of a day. Powers receives unqualified praise for his short stories from major literary figures such as Evelyn Waugh, Alfred Kazin, and Sean O'Faolain.

Craftsmanship and a good satirical subject account for Powers' success:

Part of Powers' greatness is technical. A literary perfectionist, he works with a story until it possesses an almost poetic ironic tightness. But more than natural talent and painstaking craftmanship, what accounts for Powers' achievement is that he alone of today's working satirists has discovered (perhaps rediscovered) a great satirical subject; the comedy of Roman Catholicism, especially the comedy of American Catholicism, but essentially the comedy of Catholicism through the ages...\(^5\)

As Catholic writers with a commitment to their faith, Flannery O'Connor and J.F. Powers make

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Redemption, grace and the problem of evil their primary concerns in fiction. Through complex, varied, and unorthodox strategies each seeks to communicate the central mysteries of the Christian faith to a modern audience that has carelessly discarded these values. Their fiction illustrates the working of grace in every context of human life. Technical masters of their craft, their skilful use of violence dispenses with the demarcation between secular and religious, sacred and profane. Flannery O'Connor and J.R. Powers are writers with a message to proclaim, a mission to fulfill. They realize their fictional aims not in cheap propaganda but in art of the highest order.