CHAPTER V

THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

Flannery O'Connor and J.F. Powers make a significant contribution to the fiction of the latter half of our century. As Catholic writers with a special vocation in art, they suggest the universal in the specific, without recourse to the didactic or the preponderantly symbolic in their fiction.

In an assessment of the contemporary American fictional scene, Flannery O'Connor gives priority to Powers over some of her more famous Southern compatriots. Without apprehension, she states: "I would throw outCapote in favor of Malamud and Carson McCullers in favor of Powers."¹

Powers, however, has had little attention from major critics or from that most influential body of discerning readers, college students. Perhaps because of the unassuming tone of his fiction or the rather long lapse of an average of ten years between the publication of each of his collections, Powers has suffered the neglect of the literate public of our time. Deploiring this unwarranted neglect,
9. W. Bates asserts: "Few important contemporaries... deserve and need this special stewardship as much as James Farl Powers." However, Powers receives the praise of many eminent fellow writers. Several of his stories found their way into the annual C. Henry Prize Collections, and his only novel won the National Book Award. Powers' achievements in fiction would justify Flannagan's judgement on the spurt of literary activity in the American Mid-West: "There is no present need for the Mid-West to abdicate the position of literary leadership which it won in the 1920s, not even in favor of the South including the State of Mississippi."

Quite in contrast, Flannery O'Connor won significant critical acclaim during her lifetime and in little more than a decade of writing, managed to establish a reputation which continues to grow. When she died in 1964, at thirty nine, her imaginative powers were at flood tide. Obviously, O'Connor had not given expression to the full


amplitude of her creative genius at the time of her death. Her reputation, since, may eventually rival that of some of the most respected authors of the later twentieth century.

For definite reasons, however, and especially because she makes an issue of faith as many Christian writers before her have not, Flannery O'Connor has lost some very perceptive readers and attracted much negative criticism. Self-professed Christians who, as a matter of policy, refuse to make moral judgements and many modern college students, who do not formally identify themselves with any theological movement, resent her fiction as narrow-minded. They agree with her about man's predicament of isolation on this planet, his self-imposed spiritual isolation, and his need, even longing, for a saviour of some sort. But the larger section of O'Connor's audience cannot condone the specifically Christian terms of her fiction. Drake rightly perceives: "For a young woman from Milledgeville, Georgia to get up in broad open daylight in mid-twentieth century America and confess the name of Jesus above all else was simply too much for some of even her most
sympathetic readers, to say nothing of her hostile critics."

There is a sense of urgency in O'Connor's proclamation of the Good News. While Christ looms behind Hawthorne's greatest work, secularism had so triumphed in the New England of his day that his most obvious moral allegories are hedged about with qualifications and ambiguities. O'Connor, writing a century later, given the present state of the world and those citizens of it who read books, pulls no punches. Jesus Christ is in the centre of her fictional stage. Her religious commitment is vital and motivates her art.

The problem of "secularity" asserts itself repeatedly in the fiction of J.F. Powers. Many of the stories in Powers' first collection are without any distinctively Catholic theme and even when he is working with explicitly Catholic material, Powers frequently treats religion itself as a secular phenomenon. His reader is made to question whether religion is a separable phenomenon or simply one

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particular phase of a secularized culture. However, even when a Powers story does not explicitly present man-to-God relations, its man-to-man relations are judged implicitly, by invariable spiritual standards. An insistence upon the presence of grace sharply distinguishes Powers from other important contemporaries, no less emphatic than he in their condemnation of the pursuit of materialistic ends and sensual pleasure. "Unlike Powers, the others have largely ignored the proposition that God is a force in the world, and when they have not ignored it, they have ridiculed it. With philosophers and other intellectuals, they have helped inaugurate what some people call a post-Christian era." Powers' special Christian commitment must not be confused, also, with the apparent renaissance of religious concern in writers such as William Styron, John Updike and Phillip Roth. Their protagonists are not men of God but seekers after God, and the cosmic realities they discover lack the personality of Father Urban's God.

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5 Gates, Midwest Quarterly, 105.
Not to see beyond Powers' strictly realistic frame of reference is to observe a high mass as an entertainment, a fascinating ritual with interesting psychological and anthropological connotations but with no spiritual significance. Hagopian rightly asserts: "If neither ceremony - the mass or a Powers story - has meaning in spiritual terms to a given reader, he will be gravely deficient in his total comprehension. Readers who do not personally believe in Catholicism must at least see it at work in even the most casual details of a Powers story." The theology of Powers' fiction is not dogmatic but moral, natural, pastoral. O'Connor and Powers illustrate, through their fiction, the truth of Hoffman's observation that grace in modern literature "is first of all influential in extremely naturalistic cases as a spiritual residue. Even blasphemy and profanity testify to its persistance. Some of the extreme forms of what appears to be 'non-Christian' literature give evidence to its endurance."
The confusion, uncertainty, alienation, and violence of modern literature appear together in style as well as in theme in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. In images of isolation and entrapment she defines a world where life is a constant struggle, erupting in acts of violence, subsiding in an emotional void. Her themes evolve a conflict, variously expressed in social, religious, and psychological terms. Contrasting images of rural and urban life, of differences in colour, class and race describe social conflict. Religious conflict emerges in the tension between absolute, literalistic values and secular, relativistic faith in human perfectibility. In an uneasy alliance of the traditional and the modern, O'Connor bridges the gaps and resolves these conflicts with a violently descending grace. The consistency of her thought patterns and the mechanical structure of her plots explode in unexpected and unconventional spiritual directions.

While O'Connor uses the trappings of Southern life with its obsession with the historical past, one's personal ancestry, and the nature of violence,
all these preoccupations converge in an ultimate act of violence that exposes the gulf between C'Conner and the traditional literary South. Again, if violence in the social realist novels in the Thirties reflected the horror of life in Marxist terms, violence in C'Conner's work reflects a more modern brutality. In acts of violence her anti-protagonists give voice to their pent up fury. Violence towards strangers allows her social misfits to express and control their anger. Mary Grace and The Misfit can vent their fury upon strangers and yet remain detached from its source. Demanding neither hope nor salvation, C'Conner's heroes desire only certainty! They seek to equalize their crimes with the punishments they have endured, to resolve their doubts and seal their damnation in acts of irrevocable violence. Violence does indeed seem to impose a kind of order and equilibrium upon the insane, chaotic rage from which it springs:

O'Conner's hero comes most alive as he liberates his otherwise passive and silent rage. He tries to murder his way out of his own abyss, to escape through moments of self-transcendence in violence, the pervasive feeling of nothingness. At the moment of his most brutal act he is able to break with a
past in which he has been despised, scorned and ostracised....He imposes a kind of simplicity on the confusion about him...He has a kind of value out of a world where value is all too elusive-a value that, emerging from his own experience, is invariably an affirmation of hate, destruction and revenge."

But grace descends unexpectedly in this climactic moment of violence, if not upon the violent protagonist, in each case, upon his immediate victim.

While O'Connor employs techniques of violence to achieve bizarre effects, Powers' literary strength lies in the gentleness that pervades his work. He largely abandoned the marvellous lyric gift manifested in his first great story, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Doe," but perfects an idiom that is direct, colloquial, pleasantly conversational and equal to all occasions. Powers achieves his effects through undemonstrative simplicity and ease. Case reflects upon the elements that contributed to Powers' literary breakthrough: "From the start, nearly twenty years ago now, when his writing began to excite the

Read in, The World of Flannery O'Connor, p. 36.
admiration of the readers of *Ascent*, it was evident that the stories of J.F. Powers had a very special quality, a rare richness of theme and perception; and, for all their liberal zeal and satirical intent, often an even rarer gentleness of tone. 9

Powers never sensationalises and of the major contemporary satirists, Kingsley Amis, John Barth, Anthony Powell, and Mary McCarthy, "Powers depends least on the outrageous, the bizarre, the eccentric, the slapstick, to get his comic effects." 10 The conflicts he presents are timely as the quarrel between Church liberals and conservatives, yet timeless and eternal as the quarrel between God and Mammon, youth and age, the practical and the ideal. The best of Powers' lay and religious stories derive their force from a dialectical tension between secularism and divinity. The tension in Powers' stories is rooted in incongruity and expressed with extraordinary economy. Double intention motivates his introspective characters

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9 Dass, "Bingo Game at the Foot of the Cross," *Nation*, 182.
in whom the play between comic humour and moral seriousness reaches a level of rich complexity.

Though Powers' ultimate critical question is always one of morality, humour governs his situations, without distorting character or over-riding theme. Subtle psychological violation takes the place of the physically violent outbursts in O'Connor's fiction, as a strategy in Powers. Powers does not push his story towards solution, but emphasizes the importance of endurance, of suspension, of compromise made acceptable through the agency of humour. Complex moral tensions and the intensity of evil in Powers' stories are reflected in his attitude to the natural conflict within man and in relation to the universe. "It is the position of writers as different as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Penn Warren. It is the position that assumes that man is a limited social creature of mixed good and evil whose virtue must be earned in situations so complex that the weak will be tempted to despair or to escape into utopian dreams." 11

Though physical violence features as a vehicle for the expression of evil in Powers' black stories, grace redeems his situations and becomes a bridge of reconciliation between black and white, young and old, clergy and laity, in the total context of his work. The optimistic, humanistic and Christian implication of the whole body of Powers' fiction, despite the harshness of its inherent conflicts, suggests that man can not only grow up and live in society but is meant to. Grace is provided to the Church and to the world to confront complex, emotionally charged problems through spiritual transcendence and moral realization.

The central affirmation in the art of O'Connor and Powers is presented in the move from isolation to community that their protagonists make. In writers like Styron, Updike, and Roth, the individual moves from community to isolation. Only the individual seeker can attain the realization of cosmic reality. All searches are intensely personal. Contrastingly, as Powers' priests and O'Connor's protagonists move away from their fellowmen and the religious community, they move away from God. In O'Connor, as in Hawthorne, pride
and isolation result in spiritual downfall. A surrender of a sense of personal superiority always precedes the initiation into grace. Each assertion of individuality in Powers' priests is a futile little ploy in a life-long game of occupancy. When, in the grip of the unseen, Father Didymus and the Bishop in "Zeal" forsake perfectionism and relinquish individuality, unbelievers find a hundred mundane reasons for that relinquishment, but the devout keep polite silence, unrefuted, supported by the sense of the mystery of grace in life and in death.

In secular as well as religious contexts, Flannery O'Connor exhibits a strong distrust of the intellectual. In secular contexts, the superior, blind rationalist receives instruction in humility. The man of science, who often appears as a psychologist or social worker, is a godless meddler of human souls against whom her face is firmly set.

In religious contexts, the rational must bend to the irrational. The ignorant and the eccentric achieve true spirituality before those wise by worldly standards can begin to comprehend the working of grace on earth. Parodies of worldly wisdom abound in O'Connor's stories in the form of clichés, slogans,
and stock expressions which constitute disguised advertisements for the truth. Truth is hidden from the wise, though for those who will hear Him, Christ speaks even from bill boards: A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND; THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR OWN.

For those who refuse to listen, O'Connor reserves an audience with two of her most persuasive spokesmen - Death, and the Devil. These allegorical figures speak in plausible Southern accents so that very often, in her stories, "it is easier for us to recognize the mask of the devil than to comprehend the working of grace." Death is not the worst than can happen to a human being in O'Connor's scheme of things. Her imperfect specimens, deserving damnation, are blasted to salvation by a final, violent insurgence of grace produced at the moment of fatality.

In concurrence with life itself, which does not seal its subjects into neat compartments easily identifiable for purposes of evoking appropriate emotional attitudes, O'Connor blends disparate modes

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to produce a single effect. The criminality and
the spirituality of her protagonists are often
correlative qualities. The serious and the absurd,
the affirmative and the nihilistic constantly
overlap in her dual perspective. Love for God,
expressed by her characters, is perverted into any
number of odd channels so that, as Sullivan observes,
"how what is clearly intended to be murder may
issue into sanctity, can be explained only in terms
of Flannery O'Connor's sense of total reality."¹³

The diabolic appears in Powers, in the inherent
evil that contributes to an apparently mechanical
universe. Darwinistic processes of nature and
heartlessness among humans suggest the working of
complex, negative forces of evil in the world. The
devil has a hand in the machinations of the Church
and in the manipulation for power among the clergy.
However, humour softens the immediate satiric
intention of Powers' work. While Powers takes man's
alienation, doubt, and loneliness with high
seriousness, it is part of his great talent that he
can find life hopeful and amusing in spite of

¹³ Ibid.
contemporary agonies and doubts. He speaks with a voice that is comforting, amusing, and extremely gifted.

Powers consistently produces credible, living, realistic characters. He never caricatures but concentrates on the average person in the ordinary situation. With a keen eye and ear for detail, Powers knows what goes on in American families, neighbourhoods, parishes, suburbs and cities. He takes us into the typical home or rectory and lets us see and hear what is happening in these places. Perceiving and dramatising the irony in these "ordinary" characters and situations, Powers gives us an original and rich picture of the manners and morals, the social texture, of American religious and middle-class life.

By contrast, O'Connor is an incorrigible allegorist. The new stories in which she deals with recognisable people are by no means realistic. Caricatured and grotesque, outlandish and larger-than-life, her characters, in contrast to Powers' priests, are "two-dimensional saints who burn with a passion that is only spiritual." Smith, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," Thought, 559.
of characterization, a frequent flaw in Hawthorne, is one of the graver limitations also of O’Connor’s work. “It is not brilliance of invention one misses in ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find,’ but something of real human dignity and the more sensuous sympathy of dust for dust.”

While the tendency is to overlook the intensity of conflict in Powers, affirming only the optimism of his positive message of grace, one of the ways of averting the harshness of religious absolutism in O’Connor has been to overemphasize her comedy. While Powers concentrates on effective satire, he operates on the presupposition that, as one of his protagonists concludes, “all problems are at bottom theological.” Catholicism and the mystery of redemptive grace work their way into life’s daily concerns in his fiction. Though O’Connor provides us with small masterpieces of life in the Southern hinterland, she is not a clever satirist of modern society. Clearly, she does not care for social hierarchies except as a

contrast to the eternal. A.R. Coulthard assigns the priorities with which O'Connor's fiction must be approached for a realistic study of her art:

In spite of the steadily-growing cult of Flannery O'Connor scholars, the general readers who appreciate her writing do so mainly because of its humor. I too love O'Connor's wit, but we must not allow our students to pick only the cherries from O'Connor's humble pie. In addition to delighting, she wrote to instruct us in how to become healthier and happier people, and ultimately to save our souls. 16

However, neither Powers nor O'Connor is urged by Catholic convictions into propagandist measures in fiction. Religion and the mysteries of the life of the spirit elevate their themes and provide a universal standard for their art. O'Connor provides no pragmatic answer to the main question that her stories raise: "how must life be lived?" No solutions are offered to the mysteries of the spiritual salvation. Her stories celebrate the fact of mystery, that is all.
Reflecting her temperament, and an inner discipline of the self her stories contain extravagances of behaviour in closely knit formal structure that is

classical in its confinement. Likewise, in matters of the spirit, Catholicism presents a compromise between unbridled religious emotion and an orderly religious system. "Had O'Connor not been born a Catholic, this combination of passion and order would surely have appealed to her, for this 'rage for order' is evident in each of her works. "

In Powers too, Christian perspectives elevate his stories from brilliantly ironic sociological reportage to expressions of a powerful, universal moral vision:

Because he has seen the timeless in the topical, the universal in the parochial, the extraordinary in the ordinary, and because he has had the wisdom to draw on the greatest comic tradition in the Western world, he has given us a classical body of satirical comedy, a comedy growing immediately from the incongruity Powers sees at the heart of American Catholicism, but a comedy with much deeper roots: a comedy that grows ultimately from the incongruity in the heart of man, a comedy not merely of Catholics but a truly catholic comedy.18

17 Smith, Thought, 545.
18 Duggan, Midwest Quarterly, 333.
Corollary paradoxes of Christian orthodoxy are basic to the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and J.P. Powers. The role of violence in redemption, inherent in the most crucial event of Christianity, moves forward from the first Good Friday, into contemporary reality. The transforming power of grace in gruesome, shocking, apparently negative aspects of the Crucifixion find expression in these writers, in modes of art that arrest contemporary attention. The paradoxical pattern of grace, working in the lives of men, expressed in Pauline terms underlies the spiritual values of O'Connor and Powers. Their weakest, most ignorant, and fallible believers have, through grace, an irrefutable relationship with the divine. The foolish are chosen to confound the wise; the weak and the despised, to confound the mighty. The wisdom of the wise is set at nought, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.  

19 First Epistle to the Corinthians, 1:25-27.