'THE OPEN-ENDED MYSTERY OF MATTER'

The Allusive Presence of God in Catholic Fiction

By JOHN B. BRESLIN

BACK IN THE MID-1980S I WAS asked by a religion editor at a large New York publisher to put together a collection of short fiction by contemporary Catholic writers to replace one edited in the 1940s. The task turned out to be good fun, tracking down literary magazines, checking out annual collections of 'best stories', calling up authors to talk about their stories and get permissions at fees that would not bankrupt my meagre fund.

But the challenging part was deciding what makes a story 'Catholic' – author's religious profession? narrative content? use of symbols? theological slant? Usually it turned out to be a combination of these, with a slant toward stories that dealt explicitly with Catholic experience.

Since then I have been teaching courses and giving occasional lectures at my own university and elsewhere on 'Catholic fiction', expanding the range beyond the short-story anthology itself. What has emerged as an organizing principle is a series of interrelated theological themes that echo across several decades of writing as well as several continents. What makes the stories and novels fascinating, of course, is the way each author orchestrates the themes and variations.

First of all, however, a double caveat. I do not believe that fiction – or art of any sort, for that matter – will serve as a substitute for authentic religious experience. The Romantic belief in salvation through art has long since proved bankrupt, inflating the aesthetic currency beyond our means. The burden of having to reinvent Sacred Writ in each generation has done artists no favour; it has only created a proliferating tribe of ever more ingenious scribes to interpret, or deconstruct, their texts. But a literal-minded Christian attitude that denies any connection between literature and the Bible, between metaphor and revelation, has been no more helpful. It distorts the very message it claims to serve by severing the divine and the human, pretending that God's Word could come to us in any other way than through human words.

The sacramental imagination: Andre Dubus and Shusaku Endo

In so far as it is possible to speak of a 'Catholic sensibility', it means an attitude that avoids both of these extremes, instinctively preferring the conjunctive 'and' to the disjunctive 'or'. The American poet and fiction writer Josephine Jacobsen captures well an essential quality of that sensibility when she reflects in her story, 'Jack Frost', on the unspoken bond that unites Fr O'Rourke and the main character, the non-agenarian gardener Mrs Travis – 'a belief in the physical, a conviction of the open-ended mystery of matter'.[1] Since Mrs Travis 'had never been a Catholic', Fr O'Rourke is stymied in his desire to express that shared belief in a way that would make sense to her. If she were, he would probably invoke the 'sacramental principle' which is another way of insisting that the physical and the spiritual belong together, ought not to be separated. Put into a formula, this belief or conviction which I take as an originating principle of the Catholic sacramental imagination might read as follows: *the physical world in all its beauty and imperfection can be transformed by ritual into prayer.*

What that might mean for a writer who takes this tradition to heart can be found in the work of another American, a generation younger than Jacobsen, Andre Dubus. In 'A father's story', Dubus' narrator Luke Ripley reflects on his experience of attending daily mass celebrated by his friend Father Paul:

> Do not think of me as a spiritual man whose every thought during those twenty-five minutes is at one with the words of the Mass. Each morning I try, each morning I fail, and know that always I will be a creature who, looking at Father Paul and the altar, and uttering prayers, will be distracted by scrambled eggs, horses, the weather, and memories and daydreams that have nothing to do with the sacrament I am about to receive. I can receive, though: the Eucharist, and also, at Mass and at other times, moments and even minutes of contemplation. But I cannot achieve contemplation, as some can, and so, having to face and forgive my own failures, I have learned from them both the necessity and wonder of ritual. *For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.*[2]

In that final simile Dubus has added his own gloss to the sacramental principle, reinserting it into the 'secular' world and giving it a further resonance. Two pages later, in reflecting on the breakup of his marriage, Luke Ripley returns to the notion of ritual in a personal context that allusively echoes the simile:

> Twelve years later I believe ritual would have healed us more quickly than the repetitious talks we had, perhaps even kept us healed. Marriages have lost that, and I wish I had known then what I know now, and we had performed certain acts together every day, no matter how we felt, and perhaps then we could have subordinated feeling to action, for surely that is the essence of love.[3]

In both cases Dubus explicitly links the erotic and the spiritual through his understanding of ritual, a conjunction certainly in keeping with the liturgy of the Easter Vigil where the presider ritually inserts the Paschal Candle into the basin containing the baptismal waters to make them spiritually fecund.

Across the world and across the sexual spectrum, Shusaku Endo's thinly disguised first-person narrator in 'Mothers' shares Luke Ripley's interest in ritual but with a difference. A respected Catholic novelist, he finds his fascination with a fringe group of schismatic Japanese Christians (*kakure*), descendants of seventeenth-century apostates, curiously intersecting with his unresolved guilt feelings toward his own devoutly Catholic mother. In his adolescence he had rebelled against her piety, lied to her about going to school and church and finally was absent playing hooky when she died. Through dreams and memories the outer and the inner searches become one, so that when he is finally allowed to visit a *kakure* shrine, the sight of the crude painting of the Madonna and Child strikes a deep chord of recognition:

> These people had joined their gnarled hands together and offered up supplications for forgiveness to this portrait of a mother. Within me there welled up the feeling that their intent had been identical with mine.[4]

Thus does a traditional characteristic of Catholic ritual, devotion to the Mother of God, take on a sharper edge, honed by both personal and cultural grieving. The sophisticated intellectual leaves the shrine humming the dissonant melody of the *kakures'* endless prayer for mercy, to the consternation of his scandalized orthodox companions.

Paradox, irony and the Christian struggle: Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy

A certain fascination with *dinglichkeit*, the sheer stuff of the world – for example, in Ignatius Loyola's 'application of the senses' to gospel narratives – elucidates one aspect of the incarnational principle. The ritual impulse serves to order that fascination and give it a social dimension by turning things into signs without evacuating their phy-

sicality. But there is another side to incarnation, as well, the strain put on the human reason to conceive a union of the divine and human so complete that the one person Jesus Christ can be acknowledged as fully human and fully divine without confusion or contradiction of either identity. The early christological debates with their careful Greek distinctions 'solved' the problem in one sense but left the mystery untouched and therefore endlessly available for artists and writers to explore within the verbal barriers erected by theologians.

Out of this imaginative tension arise a fondness for paradox and an attention to irony which are hardly unique to writers within the Christian tradition (witness Socrates and Sophocles, not to mention the masters of Zen), but which acquire a certain urgency and achieve a definite prominence in their writing. That the infinite might choose to become finite, the creator a creature, is a theme sounded as early as St Paul's letters, especially in the even more ancient paschal hymn he quotes in Philippians 2:5–11, where the emphasis is on the emptying out (*kenosis*) of God in Christ, followed by glorification. With the inclusion of the nativity accounts in the gospel narrative, the way was opened for a more tender play of paradox on infinity in bonds, as well as a set of reflections on the 'scandal of the particular'.

Both of these 'spinoffs' of incarnation are important for they reflect two rather different effects of this doctrine: first, an often sentimental embrace of the infant Jesus as the image of a God who cancels out human suffering in the interests of universal good feeling; and, conversely, Christ's appearance among us seen as an arbitrary intervention of God into human experience that upsets all our categories and challenges with his suffering and death our secular certainties about progress and the good life.

Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy are two American twentieth-century writers who have wrestled with this incarnational dilemma and opted for a non-sentimental Christian vision in their fiction. What distinguishes Percy and O'Connor is that they reflected at some length on their writing in essays and letters, not so much interpreting their fictions as giving them a broader philosophical and theological context. Thus they offer us a way of approaching not only their own work but that of many other authors whose Catholic instincts have shaped their attempts to diagnose the ills of the age. What tools are available to the writer of fiction for this task of discernment? Faced with a complacent Christendom (of whatever stripe) and a revived paganism, Percy recommends that the writer must be:

> as cunning and devious as Joyce advised – more cunning even than Joyce, for he is working with a prostituted vocabulary which must be

> either discarded or somehow miraculously rejuvenated. The stance which comes most naturally to him is not that of edification but rather that of challenge, offense, shock, attack, subversion. With the best of intentions, he subverts both the Christendom and the paganism of his culture and he does so cheerfully and in good heart, because as a creature of the culture he is subverting himself, first, last, and always.[5]

Irony and paradox thus become basic tools of the demolition process, much as they often are in the parables of Jesus, for in both cases the storyteller is confronting a complacent audience, secure in its prejudices, which seem the only defence against a hostile world and a meddlesome divinity. But there is a deeper theological reason for their importance, as suggested above: they take a divine stamp from the central Christian mysteries of incarnation and redemption: incarnation, whereby the Creator becomes a part of creation and the Almighty can be found in a human infant, the weakest of creatures; redemption, whereby the absoluteness of death is only overcome by entering into it in its most brutal form.

Flannery O'Connor

Based on its brutality, the misunderstandings of the title story of her first collection, 'A good man is hard to find', particularly vexed Flannery O'Connor because they revealed a failure to see that the violence of the ending was neither the point of the story nor merely gratuitous. For all the self-deceit and banality that the grandmother reveals in the first half of the story as she ungraciously sets off with her family for their trek to Florida, she reacts as most of us would in the face of catastrophe and terror. When their car overturns in an accident for which she is largely responsible and they are suddenly confronted by the escaped convicts led by the Misfit, she tries to placate him by offering unfelt sympathy and understanding: ' "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common." '[6] But the Misfit knows better; his problem cuts deeper than the social niceties. For him the only issue is whether Jesus raised the dead; believe that and you have no choice but to

> '. . . throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then 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. No pleasure but meanness.'[7]

One could hardly put the alternatives of belief more starkly; both secular humanism and conventional church-going piety are simply

burned away in the heat of the Misfit's passion. And what happens next only heightens the paradox, for in a moment of recognition that both redeems and kills her, the grandmother reaches out to the Misfit in his anguish at not knowing Jesus' power over death: ' "Why, you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" ' That moment of grace is balanced by the Misfit's benediction over her dead body: ' "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" '.[8]

Speaking at Georgetown University in 1963, O'Connor complained, 'The reader wants his grace warm and binding, not dark and disruptive'. She clearly chose the latter pair in response to a superficial and sceptical society that could not appreciate goodness because it refused to acknowledge evil. 'Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to *achieve* one by being a counterweight to the prevailing heresy.'[9] And that heresy for both O'Connor and Percy is precisely what the Misfit points to: forgetting what Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined out of his own extremity as 'the cost of discipleship', or in O'Connor's words, 'the *price* of restoration . . . the cost of truth, even in fiction'.[10]

How high does that 'cost', that 'price' come? In O'Connor's fictional world it often requires losing life in order to save it. The grandmother and her family are only the first of a series of corpses that punctuate the ends of her stories. In one of her last, 'The lame shall enter first', the victim is a young child named Norton, who takes religious metaphors quite literally in a world where they have been drained of any meaning whatsoever. Norton's widowed father, Sheppard, is hell-bent on doing good in the best social-activist fashion – counselling at a reformatory, coaching Little League, attending city council meetings.

Rather than grieve his wife's loss and console his son, Sheppard has focused his energies on Rufus, a satanically clever delinquent who scorns his reforming efforts and who discovers a willing disciple for his literalist doctrines of heaven and hell in the vulnerable Norton. Sheppard buys the boys – really Rufus – a telescope to instruct them in the promise of science and space exploration, but Rufus uses it to convince Norton that his mother is in the heavens, 'but you got to be dead to get there. You can't go in no space ship'.[11] Only at the end of the story when he finally realizes how Rufus has consistently played him for a chump does Sheppard begin to understand the enormity of his crime against Norton:

> He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of [Rufus] Johnson.

But the revelation comes too late to save Norton who has taken Rufus' directions quite literally and, with the aid of a rope, has 'launched his flight into space' from the attic beam in a desperate attempt to reach his mother.

O'Connor expressed reservations about the story because she felt little sympathy with Sheppard, and there is perhaps a whiff of caricature about him. But the clear link between Sheppard's blind sentimentality about Rufus and his wilful cruelty toward Norton reminds us of Percy's remark that these fatal twins have presided over the worst evils of our century, from world wars to genocide. And for his part, Rufus knows enough to reject Sheppard's messianic pretensions ('that big tin Jesus'); Rufus may be going to hell, but it won't be for any sin of idolatry ('When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me, not that lying stinking atheist . . .'). As in 'A good man', O'Connor insists on the reality of evil and the dangers of denying its existence; in her view Rufus and the Misfit are closer to the kingdom of God than Sheppard, though at the end his posture of despair, like the grandmother's maternal gesture, may signal a possible redemption: 'His image of himself shrivelled until everything was black before him. He sat there paralyzed, aghast.'[12] For O'Connor this is where Sheppard – and the reader – touch on the true 'horror' of the story; the image of Norton hanging in the attic is shocking but anticlimactic.

In another story from her final collection, Flannery O'Connor took a more 'comic' but no less astringent viewpoint on the blindness of the age. Ruby Turpin, the 'heroine' of 'Revelation' has no doubts about the existence of God and few about her own place in the divine scheme of things; she sees herself and her husband Claude securely situated in a social hierarchy that runs from 'no account niggers' at the bottom to rich white folk with lots of land and money at the top. But when she tries to align this socio-economic scale with a moral one ('common' rich folks), she finds 'all of the classes . . . moiling and rolling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven'.[13] An unsettling image, to say the least, but one Ruby can live with. What finally unsettles her is a direct attack from a plain-looking young college student named Mary Grace who gets so infuriated with Ruby's garrulous self-satisfaction that in a fit of apoplexy she hurls a textbook (titled *Human development*) at her head. But more searing than the injury is Mary Grace's 'message' for Ruby: 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'.[14] It is a message Ruby cannot ignore for it bears all the marks of direct prophecy. Indeed, the rest of the story is Ruby's attempt to square her

own sense of being 'saved' with this divine admonition; and in true Old Testament fashion she presents her complaint to God in no uncertain terms: 'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?' And in a final paroxysm of anger, like an unquiet Job, she roars out the ultimate challenge, 'Who do you think you are?'[15]

The words trigger a vision in the twilight sky, and caught up in an ecstasy, Ruby beholds the company of the saved marching into Jerusalem led by

> whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself, and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behaviour. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.[16]

What will come of this 'revelation'? All we are told is that, when it ends, Ruby's 'eyes [are] small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead'. The process of burning away her virtues has already begun, and with them her blindness. Like Asbury Fox with his vision of the Holy Ghost descending upon him in ice at the end of another 'comic' story, 'The enduring chill', the price they both must pay for vision is the stripping away of all self-delusion, that is, a radical honesty which translates into humility, what Jesus called allowing the seed to fall into the ground, pruning the vine – to produce a richer harvest. Another kind of death.

Walker Percy

In Walker Percy's last novel *The thanatos syndrome*, set in the bayous of Louisiana in the late 1990s, the cost of truth involves the risky business of fighting the deadly consequences of this seemingly bland utilitarian proposition espoused by one of the 'liberal' characters near the end of the book: 'We were after the same thing, the greatest good, the highest quality of life, for the greatest number'. A few lines later Dr Comeaux spells out the social engineering corollaries:

> '. . . in the end there is no reason to allow a single child to suffer needlessly, a single old person to linger in pain, a single retard to soil himself for fifty years, suffer humiliation, and wreck his family'.[17]

Tom More, the narrator and beleaguered psychiatrist from *Love in the ruins*, can only manage monosyllabic responses to his colleague's entirely confident assertions, but by this time the action of the novel has revealed how fatally slippery such linguistic signs can be in the discourse of money, power and pride.

Several pages later we get another character's summation which, for all the admitted dottiness of its speaker is much closer to where More's (and Percy's) own sympathies lie. Father Simon Smith's impassioned plea counters precisely the kind of 'beneficent' medical attention Comeaux had been advocating:

> 'If you have a patient, young or old, suffering, dying, afflicted, useless, born or unborn, whom you for the best of reasons wish to put out of his misery – I beg only one thing of you, dear doctors! Please send them to us. Don't kill them! We'll take them – all of them! Please send them to us! I swear to you you won't be sorry. We will all be happy about it!'[18]

Between that *cri de coeur* and the doctor's self-evident propositions lies the basic struggle of the novel, with the philosophically minded More caught dangerously in the middle.

Having been sent to prison before the novel opens for illegally dispensing drugs to keep truck drivers alert on their long hauls across decaying interstates, More returns two years later to his parish of Feliciana to find the typical symptoms of anxiety and depression replaced by 'a mild fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits', and a mind with the accuracy of a computer and its chilling lack of self-possession.

Something is definitely up. More's earlier research on the effect of radioactive isotopes on neurons leads him and Lucy Lipscomb, his cousin and fellow doctor, on the trail of heavy sodium. What they find is Blue Boy, a pilot project to turn murderers, rapists, the unemployed and other social misfits into model burghers and peasants who are also – a serendipitous side benefit – remarkably uninhibited sexually. For someone like More who considers rendering the unspeakable speakable as 'the best thing we shrinks do', such a programme has little appeal. When he discovers that his children are being boarded at a school whose owner has a special interest in the sexual bonus of Blue Boy, he is propelled from philosophical dismay to drastic action, bringing the novel to its dramatic – and comic – climax.

In between his knight-errant forays at foiling Blue Boy and resolving his marital problems, Tom More spends a good amount of time with Father Simon Smith who has chosen to reject the world and its works

and pomps in the most literal sense by taking up residence in a fire tower, a modern version of his sainted namesake's pillar. A sojourn (like Percy's own) in Germany as a young man in the 1930s has seared into his consciousness the perils of eugenics: noble-minded, tenderhearted scientists who end up years later doing frightful experiments on children in Hitler's camps. He sees the pattern being repeated in Feliciana with its federally funded Qualitarian Center for ridding society of the unwanted, whether unborn or grown old. More is his natural ally, but a wary one, for Father Smith is as unpredictable as the crotchety Jeremiah and as talkative as the Ancient Mariner. In his presence More finds himself instinctively checking the exits.

When the room is six feet square and a hundred feet up a tower, such an impulse yields plenty of comic possibilities, and Percy fully exploits them. For all its deadly seriousness of theme and purpose, *The thanatos syndrome* is quite a funny book. And much of the humour is slyly satirical and ironic and arises from Percy's finely tuned ear for the corruptions of language that reveal a wayward head and heart. Here is the end of a conversation in which the wily Dr Comeaux is trying to enlist More to work on Blue Boy:

> 'I want you to meet my colleagues in Blue Boy. Tom, they're good guys. They're the best of two worlds.'
>
> 'What two worlds?'
>
> 'Try to imagine a Harvard and M.I.T. brain who is not an asshole and try to imagine a Texas-Humana surgeon who is not an airhead.'
>
> 'I'll try.'[19]

Percy's unsympathetic view of the academy, clearly evident in *Lost in the cosmos*, breaks through here in those descriptions, but it is the laconic rejoinder of Tom More that gives the *coup de grâce*. Such exchanges occur frequently in the novel with More playing straight man to the idea men, or, in the following case, to his black, 80-year-old housekeeper Hudeen and her granddaughter Chandra who has a degree in broadcasting and an eye on the local news anchor slot:

> [More] 'How've you been, Chandra?'
>
> Chandra, frowning as she lands on Park Place with her little token, a flat iron: 'Nothing wrong with me! Anything wrong with you?'
>
> Shocked murmurings from Hudeen, who overhears this – not real shock but conventional, socially obligatory shock: 'Law-lawainiwaytawpeepuh', eyes not leaving the TV.
>
> Translation: Lord, Lord, that ain't no way to talk to people, that is, white people.[20]

If the abuse of language can lead eventually to the abuse of children, its purging flows from sources like youthful sass, middle-aged irony and the mumbled conventions of secure old age. At the end of this novel, as much an exercise in analysing language as in skewering social engineers, it is the unlikely team of plain speakers (Tom and Lucy) that triumphs. More's patients, weaned from heavy sodium, return to Freud's world of ordinary unhappiness, and More takes up again the task of making the unspeakable speakable. Not, thank God, Dr Comeaux's 'new heaven, new earth', but 'paradise enow' in Feliciana – or anywhere else for that matter.

Conclusion: 'The still, sad music of humanity'

For all the intensity of religious experience in Luke Ripley's sacramental life the rest of it mirrors the confusion and uncertainty of the modern age inhabited by Percy's and O'Connor's troubled characters. Indeed, the plot of 'A father's story' turns on his daughter's fatal hit-and-run car accident which Luke manages to cover up for her. In a daring dialogue with God that ends the story, Luke justifies his protective action on the basis that 'You never had a daughter and, if You had, You could not have borne her passion'.[21] In one sense it is an outrageous attempt to justify concealing manslaughter by a stunning appeal to anthropomorphism, but from another point of view it is incarnational piety carried to its paradoxical extreme in the 'scandal of the particular' – the maleness of Jesus the victim. In either case, by attempting to preserve intact a primordial innocence already lost, Luke Ripley testifies to the brokenness of the human condition while trusting boldly in a redemption wrought only through weakness. (To God's accusation that in loving his daughter more than he loves truth, Luke 'love(s) in weakness', Luke simply responds, 'As You love me' and ends the dialogue.)

In this we find the aesthetic link that joins sacrament and irony, as in the tuneless hymn of the *kakure* that strangely consoles Endo's narrator. These epiphanies, like those we find in O'Connor and Percy, are no less charged with divine revelation and human meaning for being chastening rather than ecstatic. Like the mystery of incarnation they echo, these contemporary Catholic authors sound the depths of human experience and find as much to mourn as to celebrate, but they leave us finally hopeful because they believe with Hopkins that 'the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings'.[22]

NOTES

[1] Josephine Jacobsen, 'Jack Frost' in John B. Breslin SJ (ed), *The substance of things hoped for* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p 302.
[2] Andre Dubus, 'A father's story' in Breslin, p 152. Italics mine.
[3] Dubus, p 154.
[4] Shusaku Endo, 'Mothers' in Breslin, pp 195–96.
[5] Walker Percy, ed Patrick Samway SJ, *Signposts in a strange land* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1991), p 181.
[6] Flannery O'Connor, 'A good man is hard to find' in *Collected works of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Library of America, 1988), p 148. Hereafter cited as *CW*.
[7] *CW*, p 152.
[8] *CW*, p 153.
[9] *CW*, p 862.
[10] *CW*, p 863.
[11] *CW*, p 612.
[12] *CW*, pp 630–32.
[13] *CW*, p 636.
[14] *CW*, p 646.
[15] *CW*, pp 652–53.
[16] *CW*, p 654.
[17] Walker Percy, *The thanatos syndrome* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1987), p 346.
[18] Percy, p 361.
[19] Percy, p 202.
[20] Percy, p 40.
[21] Dubus, p 167.
[22] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*, fourth edition, eds W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p 66.