TWIN PEAKS AND *COLUMBO*

Imaginations in American Literature

By JOHN NEARY

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I was hooked on film director David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks*. I was fascinated by the show's twisting, twisted story, eccentric characters, and overall weirdness. But when I mentioned *Twin Peaks* to a good friend who is a Catholic theologian, he told me with some embarrassment that he found the show off-putting; it was 'too Protestant', he said.

When I asked my friend what he meant, he referred me to the theology of David Tracy and the sociological writing of Fr Andrew Greeley. Tracy and Greeley have described two religious imaginations, two ways of using images to suggest a transcendent reality: the 'dialectical' and the 'analogical' imaginations. In his book *The Catholic myth*, Greeley sums up the two kinds of imagination quite neatly; he claims (borrowing from David Tracy's ideas) that, within modern Christianity, Protestantism tends to nurture a dialectical imagination and Catholicism an analogical or sacramental imagination:

> The central symbol is God. One's 'picture' of God is in fact a metaphorical narrative of God's relationship with the world and the self as part of the world . . . [David Tracy] suggested that the Catholic imagination is 'analogical' and the Protestant imagination is 'dialectical'. The Catholic 'classics' assume a God who is present in the world, disclosing Himself in and through creation. The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be somewhat like God. The Protestant classics, on the other hand, assume a God who is radically absent from the world and who discloses Herself only on rare occasions (especially in Jesus Christ and Him crucified). The world and all its events, objects and people tend to be radically different from God.[1]

With its stress on the radical difference between the human world and the divine, the dialectical imagination explicitly drives a wedge between human images and the religious dimension; for this imagination, ultimate reality is what we do *not* possess, what our metaphors and

images can *not* express. But the analogical, sacramental imagination, although aware of the incomplete and hypothetical nature of spiritual images and metaphors, celebrates the metaphors, weaves them, asserting the *proportionate* (this is what '*ana-logos*' means) relationship between the human and the transcendent.

My Catholic theologian friend noted that David Lynch's dark, depraved town of Twin Peaks is a place that is radically divorced from the good. The hero, FBI agent Dale Cooper, comes from somewhere else, and until late in the series he stays pure, untouched by the depravity around him; impeccably well-groomed and wholesome, his worst vice is a passion for coffee and cherry pie. Cooper's access to truth is less through his interaction with the people of Twin Peaks than through insights and visions that transcend the mundane mess around him. My friend said that he preferred *Columbo*, a detective show in which everybody is partly good and partly bad. This show's grumpy, rumpled hero bumbles his way to the truth because truth is there, available within the imperfect but not hopelessly depraved world around him.

I start my discussion of spirituality in contemporary American literature with these two television shows because they – and the two kinds of imagination they exemplify – seem to me emblematic of American spirituality and of a healthy tension within it. If Tracy and Greeley are correct, the dialectical and analogical imaginations are balanced throughout all religious traditions, but I think the balancing act is particularly marked in the United States and its literature. It is overly simplistic but nonetheless useful to think of American culture as poised between its English colonial roots and its identity as a multicultural 'melting pot'. And that English root culture, the culture of the New England 'Puritans' (who were, of course, religious Dissenters, Protestants), left a strong mark on American literature, giving it a spiritually dialectical flavour. Most of the revered American writers of the nineteenth century – Bryant, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson – were New Englanders (Melville was from upstate New York, close enough), heavily influenced by a Puritan dialectical vision of human guilt, of humankind's alienation from or antagonistic relationship with the transcendent. But already in the nineteenth century, and certainly in the twentieth, there is a blossoming regional American literature from the Midwest, the West, and especially the South, rooted in a variety of cultures – African, Latino, Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish, Asian, Native American, and others – many of which share a more immanentist, sacramental, sometimes pantheistic spiritual flavour. It is, I think, from these various cultural sources, not just from Roman Catholicism, that America's pluralistic analogical imagination springs.

In the pages that follow, I will show how these two flavours of spiritual imagination (shall we call them the *Twin Peaks* and the *Columbo* flavours?) continue to tug against each other, and often to mix together, within the contemporary literature of the United States. I am limiting my discussion to fiction, but I think that the issues I am describing apply to current American poetry as well. The primary models I am using to demonstrate these two imaginations are John Updike, Andre Dubus, and John Irving – all generally thought of as New Englanders, though Updike is originally from Pennsylvania and Dubus from Louisiana. But I will also briefly show, by examining works by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and by quickly mentioning a number of other important US writers, how the imaginations have become varied and nuanced in contemporary American literature.

John Updike's dialectical imagination

John Updike, one of the major American novelists of the century, has always taken religious questions seriously. A devotee of Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian who stressed the unbreachable distance of God from the human, Updike usually envisions his characters' religious quests in what I am calling 'dialectical' terms: Updike's God is that which is beyond the human, and Updike's characters tend to imagine God not as sacramental presence but as transcendent absence. And nowhere is this more true than in *Roger's version*, a book that powerfully embodies the contemporary American dialectical imagination.

The book's protagonist and narrator, Roger Lambert, is a stern, sceptical Barthian theology professor at what appears to be Harvard Divinity School. The book's main plot deals with his opposition to Dale Kohler, a young scientist who is trying to prove God's existence using a computer. Dale believes in an immanent God, a God who can be experienced in the here and now. He is confident that this God is present within the very design of creation and that by deciphering this design his computer will allow God to stare 'right out at us'.[2] Roger deflects such an idea with a sarcastic analogy – an analogy which suggests that all analogies about God are ridiculously inadequate:

> 'Sounds rather grisly, frankly. Like a face through a frosted bathroom door. Or like . . . that poor young sailor from the Franklin expedition they found this past summer up in Canada, nicely preserved by the ice. He was staring right out at us, too.'[3]

For Roger, God is not a graceful presence experienced within nature, but is precisely that which we humans feel painfully cut off from.

Religion for this deeply dialectical theologian is an experience of depravity and deprivation rather than of fullness. Appropriately, then, Roger's most intensely religious experience in the novel is dark, morally disturbing – an act of sex with his niece, Verna. The situation could hardly be seamier: not only will sex with Verna be adulterous (Roger is married); not only will it be incest. Roger and Verna finally have an occasion to have sex because of an act of child abuse: Verna's illegitimate baby has to be hospitalized because Verna has struck her badly, and Roger and Verna will conveniently have Verna's apartment to themselves.

Roger is aware of the sordidness of the situation, but for him this very sordidness gives the experience a religious edge, and his description of the sexual act crisply sums up the dialectical imagination. He makes it clear that this is a religious experience – an experience of the sacred, but only through its absence, through a dialectical immersion in the profane:

> When I was spent and my niece released, we lay together on a hard floor of the spirit, partners in incest, adultery, and child abuse. We wanted to be rid of each other, to destroy the evidence, yet perversely clung, lovers, miles below the ceiling, our comfort being that we had no further to fall. Lying there with Verna, gazing upward, I saw how much majesty resides in our continuing to love and honor God even as He inflicts blows upon us – as much as resides in the silence He maintains so that we may enjoy and explore our human freedom. That was *my* proof of His existence, I saw – the distance to the impalpable ceiling, the immense distance measuring our abasement. So great a fall proves great heights. Sweet certainty invaded me. 'Bless you' was all I could say.[4]

Roger experiences God not as presence but as distance. The sacred is revealed only in its absence, only through a radical descent into the profane. The final 'Bless you' is a shock, an absurd and unexplainable grace.

I am not suggesting that Roger, a very dour character, is John Updike's stand-in. Actually, Updike's fiction, with its richly textured descriptions, usually celebrates rather than denigrates the ordinary world. But this passage exemplifies a dialectical strain in Updike's work; Updike upholds a tradition handed down by such earlier American writers as Hawthorne and Melville, writers who emerged from the Puritan culture of the American Northeast. Roger Lambert keeps alive the stern dialectical vision of these writers.

Andre Dubus' sacramental imagination

Andre Dubus now lives in Massachusetts, but he comes from Louisiana, culturally French-Catholic. His prose exemplifies the linguistic

spareness of much American writing (think of Ernest Hemingway – or, more recently, the great short-story writer Raymond Carver), and as such it does have a severe, New England Puritan texture. But the devoutly Catholic Dubus embeds a sacramental spirituality in his fiction that makes it a fine model of the alternate American 'analogical' imagination, a use of worldly images as epiphanies of an immanent spiritual presence. Dubus' best known work is probably his novella *Voices from the moon*, which ends with a scene that gracefully embodies this analogical, sacramental imagination.

Dubus' novella is, in many ways, similar to rather than different from John Updike's *Roger's version*. Both works have a realistic narrative texture and are set in middle-class, suburban New England; both deal with troubled families who engage in rather seedy (even incestuous) sexual activities; both explicitly grapple with religious issues. But where *Roger's version*, as we have seen, tends to wrench apart the sordid human from the transcendent divine, the movement of *Voices from the moon* is toward an integration of these realities: the novel depicts a young protagonist, Richie Stowe, who is learning to join together God, self and world. It is this ultimate *joining together* that makes the book's vision essentially analogical. What Richie learns is how God and God's love are *like* worldly realities and human love.

Richie Stowe, the central character, is a twelve-year-old Catholic boy who intends to become a priest. He feels that this will be difficult, though, because his family is hardly supportive. They are entangled in all sorts of familial and sexual problems: Richie's father is sleeping with Brenda, the ex-wife of his son Larry, Richie's older brother, and before their divorce Larry and Brenda had kinky liaisons with people they picked up together in bars. Richie fears that he himself has inherited the twisted Stowe *eros* – a 'feeling that usually he associated with temptation, with sin, with turning away from Christ'.[5] Trying to guard his own chastity, Richie attempts to stay away from Melissa, a rather tough, slightly older, cigarette-smoking girl whom he finds very attractive. He thinks, rather prudishly, that he should love others only coolly, from a distance, 'and he could do that only with Christ, and to receive Christ he could not love Melissa. He knew that from her scents this morning, and her voice, and her kiss.'[6]

The book ends, however, with a gently erotic scene between Richie and Melissa. Through this innocent encounter with Melissa, Richie experiences God – not as a fierce, distant judge (as Roger does with Verna) but as something close, analogous to Melissa herself.

The scene is tender, with a touch of comically melodramatic amorousness: 'He was watching her mouth, and he swallowed, and knew he

was lost. If only he could be lost without fear.'[7] Richie, very aware of the way his feelings are tugging him, looks to the transcendent stars, hoping they will dialectically negate this fleshly experience – though he already suspects that the stars may *side with* this experience: 'If only he could look to the stars – and he did: abruptly lifted his face to the sky – and find in them release from what he felt now, or release to feel it'.[8]

All that actually happens between Richie and Melissa is that they hold hands and have a conversation: 'He watched the stars, and talked'.[9] But Richie discovers that there is no gap between the mundane and the cosmic. Talking and watching the stars are not in opposition. The entire ambience is one in which everything is linked – Richie, Melissa, the night air, the grass, the stars, God; human love, divine love. This may mark the beginning of the end of Richie's journey toward the seminary, but it is not an unreligious moment:

> What he felt was the night air starting to cool, and the dew on the grass under his hand holding Melissa's, and under his arms and head and shirt, and only its coolness touching his thick jeans, and the heels of his shoes. He felt Melissa's hand in his, and the beating of his heart she both quickened and soothed, and he smelled the length of her beside him, and heard in the trees the song of cicadas like the distant ringing of a thousand tambourines. He saw in the stars the eyes of God too, and was grateful for them, as he was for the night and the girl he loved. He lay on the grass and the soft summer earth, holding Melissa's hand, and talking to the stars.[10]

Dubus does not achieve this analogical connectedness in an easy, sentimental way. The two kinds of imagination are not mutually exclusive, and Dubus' story contains an awareness of the dialectical, the fallenness of human nature. The Stowe family *eros*, of which Richie is awakening to traces, is very dark indeed; there is a shadowy side to the human (and erotic) nature that Richie is being initiated into, one that is profoundly separate from – and self-consciously aware of its absence from – the ordered and the decent. But in the face of this dark side Richie does find, and the book as a whole affirms, that *eros* is more like *agape* than it sometimes seems to be, and that talking to a girlfriend is like talking to the stars.

John Irving's dialectical/sacramental imagination

With Andre Dubus we are confronted with an American version of the sacramental imagination: Dubus' imagery and prose are plain and unembellished, but they suggest a God-presence that is not harshly

transcendent (like Melville's white whale or Roger Lambert's Barthian deity) but is immanent, self-manifesting. These are the kinds of spiritual manifestations that are prominent in Southern Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor's fiction, but they are cropping up in many other places as well. The most recent novel by New England writer John Irving, most famous for *The world according to Garp*, is an overtly religious reflection called *A prayer for Owen Meany*. This book precisely and explicitly straddles the fence between the two American religious imaginations, the dialectical and the analogical. The narrator, John Wheelwright, is a cool, old-family New Hampshire Protestant; the Wheelwrights politely attend church, but they do not expect immediate revelations from God. But John's best friend, Owen Meany, comes from a scruffy, Irish, blue-collar, formerly Roman Catholic family, and Owen imagines the world rather differently.

Owen, it turns out, is a kind of latter-day angel. He is a strangely colourful character who never grows, whose voice never deepens and is stuck in a permanent scream, who is obsessed with armless figures, who is compelled to practise a basketball play in which John lifts him high so he can 'slam dunk'. Owen is certain that he is God's tool and it turns out he is: the ultimate twist of the novel is that all of Owen's quirks are 'caused' not by things from his past (genetics, environment, eccentricity) but by his future destiny. He needs to be exactly as he is so he can perform an act of heroism at the end of his life.

This novel unites the two imaginations – and it demonstrates that Fr Greeley's claim that one is Protestant and the other Catholic is a bit too facile. On the one hand Irving's vision of the relation between the human and the divine is very dialectical: the novel is a rather stark Calvinist parable about predestination, and it portrays Owen as a revelation of God precisely in that he is very *different from* ordinary humans. And yet the book is drenched in sacramental ritual. The story is a series of set pieces – a baseball game, a Christmas pageant, a performance of *A Christmas carol*, a pair of high-school practical jokes, a grisly surgical procedure, a final act of heroism – that all have a distinctly liturgical flavour. The novel is also filled with sacramental symbols, little objects that point beyond themselves: a stuffed armadillo, a dressmaker's dummy, a red dress, various carved granite blocks. This is ordinary middle-class reality re-imagined as miraculous, oozing with mystery, an Americanized version of Gerard Manley Hopkins' natural world, which spills out 'the grandeur of God . . . like the ooze of oil / Crushed'.[11]

This is how the sacramental imagination tends to see the world: oozing with a spiritual wonder. In the paragraphs that remain, I will

briefly mention a few other American writers who have come to imagine the world in this way – a way of imagining which differs from that of the earlier New England tradition.

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and others

Arguably the best current US writer is Nobel-prize winner Toni Morrison, an African American whose fiction profoundly captures the pain of the black experience. Her most famous novel, *Beloved*, deals with the after-effects of slavery in post-Civil War Ohio. The protagonist, Sethe, killed her child rather than allow her to be taken by a cruel slaveholder, and years later Sethe is still literally haunted by her earlier act (the baby's ghost pervades Sethe's house). Rather than conveying a dialectical vision of desolate humans cut off from any redeeming spirit, however, Morrison's prose fairly seethes with an immanent spiritual energy, an analogical imagination with a distinctly African cultural flavour. In this novel, the immanent and transcendent realms are not separate at all; they interpenetrate in a wondrously mythic way. *Beloved* is a work of 'magic realism', and it has the dead daughter, called only 'Beloved', rising, reborn, from a stream and returning to live with her mother and sister. Her return creates havoc, as well it might, but it also allows her mother and the novel's other characters to achieve a kind of redemption: to remember the past fully, emotionally, with living images, rather than bury it. The book's spiritual vision is perhaps best captured by the teachings of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother, who years earlier served as a self-ordained religious minister. People, we are told, used to come to her outdoor ceremonies not to hear her preach lessons about some transcendent Other, but just to feel 'her great heart beat'.[12] And Baby Suggs' message – the message of *Beloved* as a whole – succinctly sums up the sacramental power of imagining for the analogical imagination: 'She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.'[13]

Morrison's prose is richer and tougher than that of another well-known African American woman, Alice Walker, but Walker's spiritual vision – more unambiguously positive than Morrison's – is at least as sacramental. Walker's *The color purple* is about Celie, a young Southern black woman who transcends a life of degrading abuse largely by moving from a dialectical to an analogical religious imagination. At first Celie tells her friend Shug that her image of God is of a distant, judgemental white man – the very image of her oppressors. But Shug, by awakening Celie to an enjoyment of the world (including an enjoyment of sex), coaxes her to imagine a different kind of God – a God who,

rather than being radically removed from human (even erotic) feelings, rejoices in such things:

> 'God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.'[14]

It is this very active, involved God who supplies Walker with her novel's title: 'I think,' Shug says, 'it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it'.[15] Walker, Morrison and others, while still angrily acknowledging the black American experience of what poet Langston Hughes called a 'dream deferred',[16] have begun to retrieve the rich African vision of natural spirituality.

In this act of spiritual retrieval they are joined by many other non-white writers (Louise Erdrich, for instance, a Native American, and Amy Tan, Chinese American), by such Jewish writers as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, and by others as various as Midwestern Catholic Jon Hassler, New York Catholic Mary Gordon, Anne Tyler (whose latest novel, *Saint Maybe*, makes explicit a religious, even mystical, strain that has been in her fiction all along) and naturalist Annie Dillard. These writers and many more whom I cannot discuss in one short essay have helped to stretch the literature of the United States far past the geographical and spiritual confines of its root Puritan tradition.

Conclusion

I hope I have not sided too heavy-handedly with the analogical imagination and against the dialectical. The fact is, I find *Twin Peaks* much more stimulating than *Columbo*, and I believe that the two imaginations need each other to create a vision that is sharp, rich and whole. And luckily I can report that the *Twin Peaks* imagination is still very much alive in US literature. The great avant-garde writer Thomas Pynchon (author of the difficult, brilliant *Gravity's rainbow*, of the more accessible *Crying of lot 49* and of other works), who strips away image and metaphor to expose underlying absence, is in the American dialectical tradition, as are such fine writers as Joseph Heller, William Styron and John Updike, as well as young chroniclers of urban and suburban *angst* such as Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*). But surprisingly, just when American literary theory seems to have embraced absence, a deconstructionist rejection of any real presence or centre or ground, the literature of the United States seems to be discovering sacramental spiritual presence. Perhaps, though, this is not really surprising; as my

theologian friend might point out, *Columbo* may lack the fierce intensity of *Twin Peaks*, but it has lasted on television a lot longer.

NOTES

[1] Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic myth* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), p 45. See also David Tracy, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
[2] John Updike, *Roger's version* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1987), p 20.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*, p 302.
[5] Andre Dubus, *Selected stories* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p 291.
[6] *Ibid.*, p 338.
[7] *Ibid.*, p 357.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*, p 358.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's grandeur' in W. H. Gardner (ed), *Poems and prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin, 1953), p 27.
[12] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1988), p 87.
[13] *Ibid.*, p 88.
[14] Alice Walker, *The color purple* (New York: Washington Square, 1983), p 178.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] 'Montage of a dream deferred' in Langston Hughes, *The Langston Hughes reader* (New York: George Braziller, 1958), pp 89–126.