FOUR AMERICAN CATHOLICS AND THEIR CHRONICLER

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When Dorothy Day decided to write a history of the Catholic Worker movement she drew for inspiration from the writings she knew and loved intimately: the novels of Charles Dickens; the radical reportage of activists like Carlo Levi (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), George Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), and Danilo Dolci (*Report from Palermo*). She also loved Ignazio Silone's antifascist novel *Bread and Wine.* Towering over all of these writers, however, were the Russians and more particularly the late Leo Tolstoy of *Resurrection* and the profound, fictive world of Fydor Dostoevski whose "fool for Christ" (Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot*) and the saintly Aloysha of the *Brothers Karamazov* were iconic. Day was a follower of the Gospel but her human horizon was nourished by her life long love for literature.

Who knows the mystery of God's attracting grace but if the old scholastics had it right in their axiom that grace builds on nature one would have to say that the four persons whom Paul Elie chronicles in his recent brilliant work on the American Catholic Church in the middle of the twentieth century[1] were attracted to a vigorous life in Catholicism on nature as made concrete in literature. What all four had in common was a profound love of literature and, more to the point, the fact that there was a common thread in their devotion to *The Brothers Karamazov* and other seminal works of literature. In fact, one can play a little mind game while reading this capacious study: what were they all reading as their adult lives matured?

The four persons at the heart of Elie's book were writers but of a decidedly different stripe. Flannery O'Connor, whose life was cut short by a debilitating case of lupus, wrote slowly and with an exactitude that demands an equally slow patient reading even when the stories are clear but the meaning allusive. I still remember looking at the sheaf of drafts she wrote and refined for the ending of her story "Revelation". Thomas Merton was an endless recycler of his own prodigious reading (in a spectrum of languages) and his disciplined attention to monastic formation. From his reading of Saint John of the Cross (about whom he

[1]Paul Elie, *The Life you Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003); hereafter: *The Life*.

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wrote a not great book, *The Ascent to Truth*) he learned the custom writing short sayings (Saint John's *dichos*) for meditation from which he wrote longer reflections which, in turn, would then become a book: *Thoughts in Solitude*. His output was prodigious and, at times, undisciplined. Walker Percy began his (middle aged) career by writing essays on philosophical topics only, after fits and starts, and a bad unpublished novel or two, producing a first novel (*The Moviegoer*) which won him a National Book Award- an auspicious beginning for one who in time would become a prolific novelist. Dorothy Day began her career as a journalist and never lost the touch of turning out sharp reports from the field (*On Pilgrimage*) as well as fiction, screen plays, essays, biographies, and at least one classic of "conversion" literature: *The Long Loneliness*.

If they had in common a public face as writers they did not belong to the same world beyond their shared Catholic faith. Dorothy Day was city born and despite her frequent retreats to the countryside her life was hammered out on the forge of urban slums. Percy had gone north to become a doctor but illness cut short that career in the middle of his residency. He lived his mature life in the suburbs of New Orleans whose environment he watched with more than an ironic eye. Merton, French born, educated in Cambridge and at Columbia University spent his entire adult life in a rural monastery in the whiskey making knob country south of Louisville, Kentucky. Flannery O'Connor was forced to return to her native Milledgeville, Georgia which in her day was best known as being the home of the largest state mental hospital in the nation. From their various outposts they kept in touch, as much as they were ever in touch, by reading each other's work, occasional letters, and through mutual friends.

All of them were in their own way loners; people at the margins of both the then booming confident American Church and the thumping boosterism of a flush post-war America. Not one of the quartet studied by Elie had anything in common with such prominent figures like Cardinal Francis Spellman or the faux-intellectual and media star, Fulton J. Sheen. Each viewed that post war Catholic confidence with a certain critical eye. It was O'Connor who once said that the besetting sin of Catholicism was smugness. Neither Day nor Merton felt at ease with Cold War rhetoric or Eisenhowerian prosperity; in fact, they were much vexed by it. Percy had read too much of the literature of the Existentialists to give into comfortable pieties. Like O'Connor he would be witheringly dismissive of the bland pieties of the likes of Norman Vincent Peale. In the late 1950s Merton would wonder aloud in his letters why the episcopal hierarchy could not get as exercised by the threat of atomic weapons with the same passion they showed in their

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fight against contraception. In fact, Percy's characters, well bred and comfortable all suffer from indefinable forms of anxiety and dis-ease in the midst of prosperity and creature comforts. All of them, in their own way, had a love for simple parish priests who frequently, in their writings, became unwitting instruments of grace but none of them spent much time exploring the clerical subculture—they left that to the perceptive J. F. Powers.

Their own deep religious faith (three of them were converts) might be explicable in terms of their own sense of the self. Elie quotes William James who, in the *Varieties of Religious Experience,* defined religion as the "feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude" (*The Life:* 6). Was it their solitary natures (Merton wrote capaciously on solitude) that helps us to understand the emergence of these writers at mid-century? Did they stand far enough from the crowd ("The Crowd is Untruth" according to Søren Kierkegaard) to see and feel and write in a different key? Each of them could wear the badge of Outsider albeit in different ways. Percy and O'Connor were Southerners and Catholics; Day was a Leftist who lived as a Catholic pacifist in Cardinal Spellman's archdiocese. Merton was a naturalized American who left the city for a Trappist monastery. Each attempted, in a phrase elie cites more than once from Faulkner, to make "oratory out of solitude."

If each had a penchant for solitude it was a solitude seasoned by the communitarian seed bed of Catholicism. One needs to proceed cautiously down the path set out by William James whom elie cites at the beginning of his book. As Charles Taylor points out in a recent volume, James had a visceral distaste for institutional religion. Taylor argues that the Jamesian preference for the "truly committed" is an inheritance from the Reformation which values individual conversion, which in turn, with its emphasis on the individualism parallels the secularization of Western culture.[2] The Jamesian person of solitude turns out, in Taylor's telling of it, to be the Protestant individualist. The point about Elie's writers is that they were firmly, openly, and proudly identified with institutional religion, to wit, the Catholic Church even though each could skewer its foibles with a rapier thrust or two. Each also found American individualism a poison in need of an antidote. O'Connor's stories are peopled by folks who "know who they are" only to be rudely awakened sometimes at the cost of their lives Day proffered Personalism imported from the France of Emmanuel Mounier and *L'Esprit* as an alternative to individualism; Percy's character wander

[2]Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000); and see my review of Taylor in *The Review of Politics* 64/4 (Fall, 2002) 750-752.

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about in a haze of the privatized ego looking for a therapeutic way out; and Merton has written brilliant pages in the opening pages of *New Seeds of Contemplation* codifying the difference between individualism and the nature of the true self.

Elie returns again and again in his study of these four figures to the images of the wayfarer, the pilgrim, the seeker, and the searcher. Anyone familiar with the considerable corpus of their writings understands that these are characters evoked in all of their writings. Percy invokes that kind of language from his earliest novel to his last ones. Day reported her life under the rubric of "On Pilgrimage," and O'Connor peoples her stories with befuddled folks who are "on the road," which almost always leads to epiphany and horror. Merton, finally, writes his autobiography under the conceit of the purgatorial climb drawing on Dante's middle poem which reeks of monastic ascesis as the poet pilgrim passes through the seven terraces to reach the earthly paradise which, in the monastic view, is a foretaste of heaven: the *paradisus claustralis*.

These authors lived at an auspicious time in the modern life of the Church. The new thinking of the Catholic avant garde mainly coming from across the ocean was making its mark on Catholic life. Every one of these writers, Day possibly excepted, were deeply influenced by Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* which provided a theoretical construct for the making of art as a virtue of the practical intellect. Scholars like Daniélou, deLubac, Bouyer, Teilhard de Chardin, and Guardini turned up in the catalogue of forward thinking Catholic publishing houses. Each in his own provided a glimpse into a Catholicism that was more than what was the steady diet of a parochial education. Besides Maritain, others on both side of the Atlantic were attempting to articulate an aesthetics with roots in the Catholic tradition. One thinks of E.I. Watkin, Hubert Von Zeller, Walter Ong, and Etienne Gilson as some names that had an aesthetics to offer.

Reading Elie's graceful four fold portrait of these mid century American Catholics was for one like myself of a certain age a wonderful glance back writers who nourished me in my youth and nourish me today. Their own biographies reveal authentic humans who knew the sting of disappointment, each of whom possessed quite human failings: Percy struggled with alcohol; O'Connor was more than once disappointed in love; Day lamented her failings as a parent; and Merton wrestled with his own restless self and his penchant for self-dramatization. Elie makes it clear that they were not cut from the same cloth; they had single stories to tell. To say that there Catholicism was a common bond is not enough; it is, after all, at a certain level, a

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banality. After all, senators Joseph and Eugene McCarthy shared a common allegiance to Catholicism but what does that explain?

After reading this highly intelligent study I did come to a conclusion or, to say it better, an intuition and it is this: all four of these writers were wisdom seekers. They exhibited a surfeit of intelligence but what drove them was what stood behind the world as constructed by intelligence. Flannery O'Connor attempted to articulate that "something behind" in her highly charged use of sacramental language: blood drenched suns (and snuffling hogs) point to something beyond. Percy saw it as his characters went on their Kierkegaardian searches and got glimpses of it beyond the aesthetic. Dorothy Day saw it in her act of loving the poor (love, she quoted from the *Brothers K* is a "harsh and dreadful thing."). Merton got a glimpse of it at those moments when he experienced *le point vierge* in the world around him.

Those moments of contemplative insight never get frozen into some kind of stasis. They are recorded as having happened actually or recreated fictively. That they are only glimpses is part of the experience of being on the pilgrim way. In a spiritual tradition that goes back to as early as Origen, it has always been the conviction of Christian spirituality that beyond the response of grace that allows one to eschew vice in order to cultivate virtue there comes a new way of seeing (the so-called "illuminative way" or, in Origen's term, *theoria*) in which the creator/redeemer is glimpsed—new eyes are given. Flannery O'Connor understood that perfectly and frequently wrote about it in her nonfiction prose. Commenting on Sat. Augustine's notion that the world pours out in a double fashion (intellectually into angelic minds and physically into the world of things) she wrote: "When Conrad said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, he was speaking with the novelist's surest instinct. The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality."[3]

In their own fashion each of the writers Elie studies attempted the same thing: they wanted a new vision. Their works testified that they more often than not found it. That new vision, articulated in their writing and in their lives, gave pungency and life to the U. S. Catholic Church in the twentieth century and, as such, should be our common pride and joy.

[3]In *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings,* ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003) 68.

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