

Imagination and Catholicism: A Contradiction?

Review of

The Catholic Imagination in American Literature

By Ross Labrie

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Reviewed by Robert Hill

Ross Labrie, in his recent work *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, establishes a unifying thesis that “central to Catholic belief is the doctrine of the Incarnation wherein human experience and the natural world are perceived as both flawed and redeemed. The doctrine of the Incarnation can be seen as the axis on which Catholic American literature in general rests and from which variances between particular authors can be measured.” It is precisely these variances that are examined in a variety of writers from the seldom read Orestes Brownson to more contemporary and acclaimed writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Daniel Berrigan, and Thomas Merton to name a few.

Although the question of religion is not a new topic in American literary scholarship, the consideration of religious imagination (particularly Catholic imagination) is. As a teacher of American studies and literature I have persistently explored with my classes the American mind as it has been influenced by the Calvinistic ethic—an ethic which stressed the separation of the physical and spiritual nature of man, the concept of limited salvation, and a deep rooted suspicion of the imaginative and innovative in art as well as life. Granted that Catholicism has its own counterpart to Calvinism in Jansenism, nevertheless, Catholic writers have in general been willing to encompass a more holistic view of the relationship of God, humankind and nature. Without a rigid insistence upon certitude (as opposed to faith) the Catholic writer is able to focus on a trust and hope in the mystery of God’s presence in all. This is not to say, of course, that faith is a missing ingredient in the Protestant ethic. It does suggest that Calvinistic influence emphasizes separation rather than unity and the deviation of the human will from the will of God.

This focus on wholeness rather than separation is particularly apparent in the section concerning the writer Thomas Merton. Labrie describes the influences of the philosopher Henry Thoreau on Merton stating that it was this influence that, in large part, caused Merton to “redefine” the spiritual life to conform to the simplicity and natural spirituality of nature. This romantic proclivity is further

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enhanced by Merton's study of William Blake. It was this study that strengthened Merton's conviction of the need to recover a consciousness of unity which has been destroyed by ratiocinative inquiry. Contemplative spirituality was increasingly intuitive rather than intellectual for Merton. Even though influenced by elements of Thomistic thought, he leaned increasingly to the mystical rather than the rational and systematic. Labrie identifies this belief in the natural (even the primitive) which attracts Merton to writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Perhaps it is the naturalness of such characters as Faulkner's Snopeses or the primitives described by Flannery O'Connor (flawed as they may be) that causes him to see an honesty that is to be preferred to the "civilized" expectations of a regimented culture. I am thinking particularly of Flannery O'Connor's work "Greenleaf" in which she successfully contrasts two families, one aristocratic and the other "redneck." The result of the conflict is the death of "gentility" and the supremacy of an honest and virile primitivism. But it is here also, Labrie states, that Merton parts company from the mainstream of strict romanticism. He is "hybrid in his thought"—both Christian and Romantic. Merton sees himself as part of nature but a part that is conscious of God. It is this consciousness through Grace that enables humankind to transcend its own physicality. I wonder if it is this capability for transcendence which places Thomas Merton in a distinctive position as a romantic writer. He is more than a transcendentalist, moving beyond the pantheistic mind and naming God as the immanent source of being. It is an idea I would like to have seen pursued a bit more in this chapter.

The theme of transcendence is also pursued by Flannery O'Connor in much of her work. In her short story "Revelation" the protagonist Mrs. Turpin is shocked into awareness of her own culpability and her spiritual identity through a physical altercation with a young college student (Mary Grace). As she strikes Mrs. Turpin with her sociology book, Mary Grace shouts, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Through a long and painful response to this encounter, Mrs. Turpin becomes aware of her spiritual kinship with all humanity.

Flawed humanity. But a humanity of redemption *because* of its imperfections—and its possibilities. The physical world is not just important; it is necessary for the spiritual to emerge. It is this capacity to imagine such unity that distinguishes such writers as Merton and O'Connor.

If we really reflect upon this particular concept, Dr. Labrie's thesis makes a great deal of good sense. After all, creative imagination flourishes through tension not stasis. Certitude inhibits imaginative inquiry as well as hope. And it is this which places the Catholic writer in a distinctive position in the American literary world—the capacity to accept and explore the mystery of Incarnation: God in nature, God in humankind. In a word—unity not division.

And it is the essential acceptance of mystery, of darkness which gives rise to a faith in the possibility of that which lies beyond darkness. Dr. Labrie quotes the character Tom Moore of Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*: "Bad as things are still when all is said and done, one can sit on a doorstep in the winter sunlight and watch sparrows kick leaves." The Thomist view of evil as negation; parasitically feeding on good for its own identity does not prohibit transcendent consciousness in such writers as Merton, O'Connor, and Percy. Indeed the romanticism that is described linking these writers to their creative impulses is rooted in a realistic acceptance of things as they are. But this acceptance is not the fatalistic determinism of the literary naturalist. It is the natural acknowledgment of life as infinite possibility.

The regional ties of such writers as Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Walker Percy grounds them in the particular in which they are able to see the incarnation of wisdom. The capacity to search deeply within the nature of reality whether it is the Southern agrarianism of Allen Tate or the internationalism of Thomas Merton and express a vital and imaginative possibility is due to Catholic identity. It sets these writers apart from the Calvinistic bent of much American writing.

Well researched and documented (perhaps a bit too much so at times for the casual reader) *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* is a substantial and significant addition to the body of American literary criticism. This work will be important not only for the literary scholar but for the serious reader interested in the spiritual possibility of the artist/writer.