

American Catholic Arts and Fictions

Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics



PAUL GILES

*American Catholic
Arts and Fictions
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American Catholic Arts and Fictions

In *American Catholic Arts and Fictions*, Paul Giles describes how secular transformations of religious ideas have helped to shape the style and substance of works by American writers, filmmakers, and artists from a Catholic background, such as Orestes Brownson, Theodore Dreiser, Mary McCarthy, Robert Mapplethorpe, Alfred Hitchcock, and Robert Altman. The book also explores how Catholicism was represented and mythologized by other American writers. By highlighting the recurring themes and preoccupations of American Catholic fictions, Giles challenges many of the accepted ideas about the centrality of romanticism to the American literary canon. He reconstructs the different social, historical, and philosophical contexts from which aesthetics in the "Catholic" tradition has emerged, and he shows how these stand in an oblique relationship to the assumptions of the American Enlightenment.

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Preface

This book, like those other fictional texts I discuss here, is the product of specific times and places. The early reading was done in Oxford and London during the first half of the 1980s; the actual writing begun in Stafford, England, in January 1987; the final version completed in Portland, Oregon, in February 1991. My move to the United States occurred between the first drafts of chapters on Scott Fitzgerald and Allen Tate. Though the prefatory phrase about indispensable support has become something of a cliché, it has never been truer than in my indebtedness to Portland State University, which bailed me out of the unpropitious academic landscape of Britain in the late 1980s and furnished me with the circumstances in which I could complete this book. Peter Carafiol, who back in 1987 first disturbed my BBC television snooker with a phone call from six thousand miles away, now claims my stylistic circumlocutions derive all too clearly from the Old World rather than the New. If, therefore, the reader should experience any disjunction between American grammatical conventions and an English idiom, this transatlantic relocation in medias res may be part of the reason.

The passage of writing this book also encompassed the death of a number of authors discussed within its pages: Mary McCarthy, Donald Barthelme, Walker Percy. In each case, natural regret at their demise was tempered with a wry satisfaction at knowing they would not now be able to produce a later work that might undermine my carefully crafted arguments. In this respect, I have not been so fortunate in the case of some of the younger writers, and I realize that an even greater air of provisionality than usual necessarily hovers over any attempt critically to analyze contemporary authors. Conversely, I also regret certain omissions, such as Martin Scorsese's excellent film *Goodfellas* (1990), which appeared just too late for me properly to consider here, or the novels of Don DeLillo, or those of Frederick

Barthelme. I console myself with Valéry's perception that a text is never finished, only abandoned: "It is always an accident that terminates it, that is, gives it to the public." Still, my hope is that the ideas and styles outlined here will be clear enough for readers to be able to recognize them in various other works of American "Catholic" fiction, past, passing, and to come.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge again the valuable guidance provided by my friends at the Cambridge University Press: Andrew Brown in Cambridge, England, who first expressed interest in this work; Julie Greenblatt in New York, who put up with my frequent changes of mind about the title; Janis Bolster, who coordinated the production process; Patricia Woodruff, whose copyediting skills shifted all my British scepticisms into American skepticisms. Since this was one of the last books he oversaw as series editor of the Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, it may be appropriate to note a special debt of gratitude to Al Gelpi, whose generous encouragement all along has been more than any anxious author could hope for. I should like to acknowledge also the help of Peter Conn, who made many perspicacious suggestions about the manuscript, and of Robert S. Levine, who commented more specifically upon the Brownson chapter. Evelyn J. Hinz assisted me with stylistic details of the Fitzgerald section when that was first published in a shorter form in *Mosaic*, 22, No. 4 (Fall 1989), 1-12. An earlier version of the Ford and Altman chapter appeared in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, edited by Lester Friedman (University of Illinois Press, 1991); Les's astute editorial remarks on that occasion were especially valuable because they helped me develop a critical style for incorporating film into my larger projects. I do not, of course, mean to implicate any of the above in the idiosyncrasies of this particular end product.

In addition, I should like to thank the Robert Mapplethorpe Estate for allowing me to reproduce within the text four of Mapplethorpe's works, as well as the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich and the Estate and Foundation of Andy Warhol for permitting us to have Warhol's *Black-and-White Retrospective* on the jacket. Tim Hunt, who used to lean heavily upon my translations of the Anglo-Saxon poets in our undergraduate days, handsomely repaid that service by helping me obtain these permissions. Film stills were provided by Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store, New York, while important assistance with the index and proofs was given by my research assistant, Mark Lloyd, whose work was funded by a grant from Portland State University's Research and Publications Committee. I should mention also my wife, Nadine, who married me between the final drafts of Martin

Scorsese and Katherine Anne Porter, and who bore with me during our first year of marriage as I became more and more heavily pregnant with book. Through this cerebral offspring, we would both like to be remembered by our friends and relatives back in the old country, whom we in turn keep always in mind.

Portland, Oregon

February 1992

The man who believes that his truth on religious matters is so absolutely the truth, that say it when, and where, and to whom he will, he cannot but do good with it, is in our day almost always a man whose truth is half blunder, and wholly useless.

Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, 1873

The task of these principles was to derive the necessity of a philosophy of man, that is, of anthropology, from the philosophy of the absolute, that is, theology, and to establish the critique of human philosophy through the critique of divine philosophy.

Ludwig Feuerbach, Preface to *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 1843

One does not begin with the part in order to reach the whole: one begins by infinitizing the totality in order to reach, only later, the finite meaning of each part.

Julia Kristeva, "The Novel as Polylogue," 1974

The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together.

Henry James, *Notebooks*, 1881

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Methodological Introduction: Tracing the Transformation of Religion

The purpose of this book is to examine the continuing significance of religion, and specifically Roman Catholicism, as an ideological force within modern American literature, film, and photography. My aim is not to consider Catholicism as a theological entity – except incidentally, insofar as that impinges upon my main theme – but as a residual cultural determinant and one aspect of the social context within which various American artists of this century have been working. Because Catholicism so clearly defines itself within a metaphysical context, we should not make the mistake of ignoring the fact that it functions within particular social contexts as well, contexts that consist of more than simple historical facts about immigration from Europe, or the war between the United States and Mexico, or whatever. The point is that this social and historical framework of Catholicism cannot be apprehended in isolation from the mythology of the supposedly “metaphysical” sphere, because the power of this mythology actually affects action and reaction within the secular world.

The way in which religious ideas can help to determine patterns of thought is clear enough to contemporary students of ancient civilization. It is of no consequence that we no longer believe in the literal “truth” of these old religious mythologies: few classical scholars today believe the pagan deities ever enjoyed a literal existence, throned resplendently on Mount Olympus, but equally few scholars would deny the historical significance and pertinence of religious ideas to ancient Greek tragedy or politics. Much recent literary criticism has sought to recover a cultural matrix for any given writer – assessing James Joyce and W. B. Yeats in the light of Irish political history, for instance, rather than viewing them in the old romantic way as isolated geniuses – and this book is working toward something similar, except that it offers religion rather than politics as the milieu within which modern American authors can be seen to be operating. Sometimes this ideology of Catholicism is explicit, as in the

poems of Allen Tate and Robert Lowell, the novels of Walker Percy and J. F. Powers, the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese. At other times this ideology is concealed and implicit, though still a determining factor, as in the poetry of John Berryman and Frank O'Hara, the novels of Mary McCarthy and Jack Kerouac, the films of John Ford and Robert Altman.

By drawing a parallel with the study of religious conceptions in Greek tragedy, it is not my intention to propose the starkest kind of structuralist approach whereby American works of fiction are seen simply as anthropological rituals sanctifying an archaic central myth. I use the term "fictions" to hold in suspension any putative equation between this cultural Catholicism and a "transcendental signified" or ultimate truth. But I believe the purely naturalistic accounts of religion as false consciousness outlined in various forms by Marx, Freud, Durkheim, and others can also be misleading, insofar as they tend often to underestimate the lingering force of religious ideas, the (often insidious) ways in which religion can affect textual production in some circuitous or unconscious fashion long after the forces of rationality have deconstructed and rejected such an idiom as anachronistic. Before discussing these various theories of religion further, it is worth making clear at the outset that this book is not designed to be a Marxist satire on ignorant irrationality any more than it follows the example of Jesuit intellectuals like Walter J. Ong by heralding the presence of a triumphal Catholic spirit within the lapsed modern world.

We run immediately, of course, into problems of definition. In her 1971 Ewing lectures, *Religion and Literature*, the critic Helen Gardner declared her intention to concentrate on writing with a manifest and overtly religious content. The term "religious sensibility," said Gardner, is "so wide as to be meaningless" and "does not provide a sufficiently firm delimitation of the subject-matter of the poems assembled for comparison."¹ Here Gardner was taking issue with T. S. Eliot's 1935 essay "Religion and Literature," where Eliot had suggested a much broader approach to the problem. Eliot dismissed minor "devotional" poets as being of limited interest and he aspired instead toward a redefinition of the relationship between religion and "major" literature. "I am not concerned here with religious literature," concluded Eliot, "but with the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature." Eliot asserted that François Villon and Charles Baudelaire, "with all their imperfections and delinquencies," are greater Christian poets than Henry Vaughan or George Herbert because the works of Villon and Baudelaire introduce

1 Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 133-4.

more complex issues and interrogate the uneasy juxtaposition of spiritual and material inclinations within the context of a fragmented modernist environment.²

Eliot's approach undoubtedly carries more risks, but it is ultimately more satisfactory than Gardner's. Whereas Gardner saw religion as functioning within a highly limited and demarcated area, Eliot viewed the concept of religion as more widely pervasive, part of the consciousness of some writers who had rejected its more explicit premises. Indeed, in his 1939 treatise, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot expanded on this notion of religion as an unconscious habit to posit the idea of a "community of Christians" whose allegiance to that system of religious belief would depend upon routine and instinctive patterns of behavior rather than any conscious act of will. Although their political positions could hardly be more distinct, Eliot's nostalgia for a spontaneous, unreflective allegiance to Christendom has something in common with that of more recent social theorists like the French Marxist Louis Althusser, who insisted upon the material nature of ideology, the ways in which ideology is not merely a specific category or false chimera, but instead functions as a latent force which radically affects human perceptions and operations within a social environment. Rather than seeing power as residing in the more overt manifestations of political control – the church, the family, the law, and so on – Althusser declared that the more profound implications of ideological control were to be found in a person's unconscious activities, his or her mode of implicit thought and behavior within everyday life. For Althusser, more could be inferred about the sinister ubiquity of ideology from shopping expeditions than from government elections: "Ideology never says, 'I am ideological,'" asserted Althusser, instead it "hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects," ordaining their ways of life by its overarching, all-encompassing, but intangible structure.³ Through this process of interpellation, said Althusser, the human subject is necessarily constituted as a "subject" of the larger ideological matrix. Althusser played with this double meaning of "subject" so as to imply the symbiotic quality of such cultural operations, the way a relatively autonomous human subject is at the same time interpellated within (under the "subjection" of) a dominant ideology.

The Marxist Althusser was of course antipathetic toward these dominant social categories while Eliot was friendly toward the Christian religion, but both men postulated an intimate and labyrinthine relation-

2 T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1951), pp. 389, 391.

3 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 162–4.

ship between the individual human person and the cultural system he or she was necessarily part of. It is, though, significant that Althusser was himself an ideological product of Catholic France: indeed, Althusser stated that he saw the church as a "duplicate mirror-structure of ideology," the paradigm whose form was being imitated by the modern secular state. As Althusser pointed out, the crucifix was a ubiquitous image in eighteenth-century France, even for those who did not meditate consciously upon its meaning.⁴ Significant also is the fact that the English historian E. P. Thompson, in his savage attack on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory*, ridiculed Althusser's notions of the interpellation of individuals within corporate systems as an idealistic "theology" which takes no account of "humanism" or "empiricism." Thompson's view was that Althusser was too easily inclined to incorporate human beings within facile "systems and subsystems," viewing them as "*träger* or vectors of ulterior structural determinations" rather than as actual people engaged in the process of making their own history.⁵ Like Helen Gardner, the humanistic Thompson preferred to stress the free will and rational consciousness of individual people; like T. S. Eliot, the structuralist Althusser preferred to stress unconscious allegiance to a predetermined group.

The relative merits of these two positions are no concern of ours here. This kind of argument has been going on for many centuries and is in many ways a reconstruction of that eternal argument between Aquinas and Luther, Catholicism and Nonconformism, the organization and the individual. When he was appointed to a chair of history at Oxford in 1984, Norman Stone was asked which topics he would choose if he could give only three lectures in his field, and Stone's second choice was: "the history of religion – the fantastic tenacity of religious attitudes, the way in which what purport, nowadays, to be straightforward political or social or even technological responses often go back to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation."⁶ Still, to recognize the historical specificity of Althusser's discourse, the way it is located within a particular social context, is not to annul its significance. Instead it renders that discourse provisional, valid within its own cultural terms, but not adequate as an ultimate solution to the problem of history or ideology. In the same way, to relocate "Catholic" discourses within specific cultural frameworks will be one of the aims of this book: deprived of their idealist and universalist inclinations, Catholic fictions will nevertheless be

4 Althusser, "Ideology," p. 168.

5 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 267, 194–6.

6 Miriam Gross, "A New Turning for Mr. Stone," *Times* (London), 6 Oct. 1984, p. 8.

granted a particular and historical existence as one form of discourse as valid, within its own terms, as any other. To deconstruct the signs of the cross is not to destroy them, but to hold in doubt the pertinence of their claim to a conclusive "reality" of the signified. While not claiming Catholic ideas are "true" in either a theological or a sociological sense, we can nevertheless analyze the internal consistency of Catholic culture and its power to shape thought in the world.

The ways in which religion continues to be a powerful ideological force are often especially evident to minority groups within any given society. In France, it is no coincidence that two of the great postwar protesters against mythology and icon were raised as part of the small Protestant minority of that country. The films of Jean-Luc Godard, born in Paris into a French-Swiss Protestant family, insist upon the arbitrary and artificially constructed nature of visual signs: the relevance of Godard's maxim "Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image" (it's not a just image, it's just an image) should be seen as not confined merely to the cinema world, for it is also an implicit comment upon the wider realms of "official" French culture, toward whose institutionalized tableaux the film director takes an iconoclastic attitude. Godard himself lived in Switzerland as a youth and, according to John Kriedl, his films retain a "Genevan" style of "austere protest," a "puritanic" idiom that is "at once envious of the moral license and theatrical excesses of its loosely Catholic neighbor, France, and distrustful of it."⁷ The other famous Protestant demystifier was Roland Barthes, who again took an ironic stance toward dominant French mythologies and who in his last work, *Camera Lucida*, directly associated his own attitude toward photography with a specific religious heritage: "Although growing up in a religion-without-images where the Mother is not worshipped (Protestantism) but doubtless formed culturally by Catholic art, when I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph [of my mother] I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire."⁸ Being caught between two religious cultures, Barthes is able to gain some critical perspective upon the idiosyncrasies he perceives within each of them. American Catholic writers and artists find themselves, of course, in a similar minority position within the United States.

Despite all this, it is still not easy to discuss religion within a contemporary cultural context. Few readers would fail to recognize how the rituals of Catholicism influence not only the works of "believers" like

7 Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: British Film Institute-Macmillan, 1980), p. 111; John Kriedl, *Jean-Luc Godard* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 25.

8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 75.

François Mauriac or Graham Greene but also those of declared nonbelievers, as they do the poems of Baudelaire, the plays of Genet, the novels of James Joyce, the films of Luis Buñuel. But these traces of Catholicism are often thought of as a regressive and relatively uninteresting phenomenon by comparison with the more avant-garde elements in these texts: Joyce's linguistic experiments, Buñuel's black satire, and so on. George A. Panichan has written of how the attempt to speak about literature within a framework of religion has customarily been unwelcome within the modern academic world because it is to reveal a "metaphysical . . . predisposition that, in a strictly intellectual sense, was completely unacceptable." The idea here is that academic study of literature and culture is, per se, a rationalistic enterprise, with no room for the mumbo jumbo of spiritual belief. It was in this rationalist light that F. R. Leavis, in *The Common Pursuit*, declared literary criticism and Christian ideologies should henceforth be seen as mutually incompatible. William Empson, in *Milton's God*, similarly abhorred the attempts of amateur theologians like C. S. Lewis to circumscribe Milton's artistic genius by rebuking the epic poet when he erred on a point of Christian dogma. The dichotomy here is between rationalism on the one hand and religious sensibility on the other, a dichotomy Panichan in fact perpetuates by his final invective against "the deconstructionist invaders" and his proposition instead of the need for some "transfiguring visionary power . . . the moral and spiritual acceptance that must ultimately govern a 'theory of literature.'"⁹

However, such a dichotomy is, I believe, unwelcome and in the end false. If Norman Stone is correct in his assertion that contemporary political arguments can be traced back to religious traditions implicit within societies for hundreds of years, then it follows that a recognition of the ways in which this residual religious force operates is crucial for an understanding of the complexity of modern literature and indeed the modern world. It is not my intention to denigrate Panichan's "transfiguring visionary power"; indeed, it is not my intention to denigrate any particular ideological position. But the most significant aspect of religion in terms of contemporary cultural studies lies in its continuing influence, often unconscious, upon the secular and material world. This unsatisfactory binary opposition between intellectual skepticism on the one hand and nonintellectual belief on the other fails to comprehend the motives and actions of vast numbers of people, including writers and artists, who are not "believers" in any orthodox theological sense. The fact that analysis of any religious sensibility must involve a study of nonbelief as well as of belief has too often been overlooked; as Clifford Geertz put

9 George A. Panichan, "Literature and Religion: A Revelatory Critical Confluence," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 18, no. 1 (1985), 3, 9–10.