

MARY GORDON



GOOD

BOYS

AND

DEAD

GIRLS

AND OTHER ESSAYS

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VIKING

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Contents

I

ON WRITERS AND WRITING

Good Boys and Dead Girls	3
Edith Wharton: <i>Ethan Frome</i> and the Shorter Fiction	24
Flannery O'Connor: <i>The Habit of Being</i>	37
William Trevor's <i>Fools of Fortune</i>	45
Christa Wolf: <i>Accident/A Day's News</i>	52
Mary McCarthy: <i>Occasional Prose</i>	57
Mary McCarthy: <i>Cannibals and Missionaries</i>	61
Stevie Smith: <i>Novel on Yellow Paper</i>	67
Adam Hochschild: <i>Half the Way Home</i>	72
Virginia Woolf: <i>A Room of One's Own</i>	77
Edna O'Brien: <i>A Fanatic Heart</i>	84
The Priestly Comedy of J. F. Powers	89
Ingeborg Bachmann: Children Were Only Allowed to Whisper	103
David Plante: A World of Baffled Love	108

Ford Madox Ford: A Man Who Loved Women, a Womanly Man	112
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II

THE WORLD, THE CHURCH, THE LIVES OF WOMEN

More Than Just a Shrine: Paying Homage to the Ghosts of Ellis Island	123
Abortion: How Do We Think About It?	128
Abortion: How Do We Really Choose?	138
The Parable of the Cave; or, In Praise of Watercolors	148
Offenses of the Pope	153
Mary Cassatt	156
Getting Here from There: A Writer's Reflections on a Religious Past	160
More Catholic than the Pope	176
"I Can't Stand Your Books": A Writer Goes Home	199

III

PARTS OF A JOURNAL

Notes from California	211
Having a Baby, Finishing a Book	215
Some Things I Saw	222
The Gospel According to Saint Mark	240

I

ON WRITERS
AND WRITING

Good Boys and Dead Girls

I tell you they were not men after spoils and glory; they were boys riding the sheer, tremendous tidal wave of desperate living. Boys. Because this. This is beautiful. Listen. Try to see it. Here is that fine shape of eternal youth and virginal desire which makes heroes. That makes the doings of heroes border so close upon the unbelievable that it is no wonder that their doings must emerge now and then like gunflashes in the smoke, and that their very physical passing becomes rumor with a thousand faces before breath is out of them, lest paradoxical truth outrage itself.

Light in August

The truth, beauty, and heroism that Faulkner invokes in this description have inflamed the hearts of generations of male American writers. Faulkner is in fact describing the rash attempt of a group of boy soldiers to destroy Grant's stores in a small Southern town. The raid ends in a series of unnecessary and foolish deaths, whose effects reverberate through three generations. It is a member of a third wounded generation, Hightower, who calls up the image of the beautiful marauding boys as he broods on the castration of Joe Christmas by the fanatical frustrated soldier Grimm. The blood of one boy is on the hands of another, but the blood has been shed to avenge the honor of a murdered woman. Beauty. Truth. Heroism. Civilization is no place for a boy.

The image of the moving boy has been central in American writing. Motion is the boy's genius. He *must* be able to *move*. Move freely. Quickly. The boy on his strong legs cuts through the world, through time, constricting space, the accidents of birth, class, lim-

itation, law. He wriggles out from under the crushing burden of fate. And fate's agent, the embodiment of unmoving weight, is female. She who does not move, who will not move, who cannot move. Who won't allow the boy to move.

The innocent boy killers. Let us concentrate for the moment on the first word: innocent. In poetry, the word, or its nominal, made its mark indelibly twice. First in Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning": "Movement of earth brings harms and fears / Men reckon what it did and meant. / But trepidation of the spheres / Though Greater far, is innocent." And then there is Yeats's famous passage from "A Prayer for My Daughter": "How but in custom and ceremony can innocence and beauty be born?" Is innocence a passive state, as Donne's lines would suggest, a natural freedom from something, a marvelous lack, the adorable minus that makes possible the immaculate whole? Or is it, as Yeats would suggest, a product of a willed isolation, willed by someone (possibly not the innocent himself or herself), a conscious holding back or being held back from the world?

The ambiguities involved in the idea of innocence create problems when we try to define the word. The OED defines it as "doing no evil; free from moral sin or guilt, pure, unpolluted, usually (in modern use always) implying unacquainted with evil, sinless, holy." These definitions skirt, of course, the difficulties about innocence, the problem of consciousness or volition. The OED allows the possibility that innocence is almost a physical state: pure, unpolluted, a state almost like virginity, a state whose terms are bodily. A passive state. But if we define innocence using words like "doing no evil" and include the terms "moral" and "sin," consciousness and volition are implied; the body and the mind are in some communion.

In the depiction of innocence in fiction, there seems to be a real split between Americans and Europeans. For English and European writers, the emphasis is placed on the innocent as "doing no evil"; as "free from moral sin." For Americans—and this is not surprising given our Puritan past—innocence seems to be a state of nonpollution, which can endure even through behavior that ought, in ordinary contexts, to be polluting.

I am thinking of four European innocents: Félicie in Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*, Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot*, the Country Priest in Bernanos's *Diary*, and Portia in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death*

of the Heart. Two of these characters are women and two are saints, so it should not be surprising that they are removed from the center of power. All of these characters lack ambition—that so American virtue—which may be a way of saying that they lack the belief in change. And all of them suffer more than they cause suffering. They keep trying to do good in the world; their sorrow is disproportionate, unearned, and unjust.

Writers of American fiction have a habit of describing innocence as if it were a state of election removed from behavior, impervious to the state of defilement resulting from bad acts. When the American innocent is punished for what he has done, the punishment is seen as metaphysically incorrect, the inevitable result of the pressures of civilization. This kind of American innocent, typically a young boy, first appeared in Melville's *Billy Budd*.

Billy Budd, the handsome sailor, epitomizes life, youth, health, and unselfconscious, broad, instinctual behavior. His world is the world of free movement, skilled, deft action; he is at home with the elemental, the natural. In the world of language, however, he is clumsy and mute: he is entrapped by words, the coin of civilized and settled life. Melville says of him: "to deal in double meaning and insinuations was quite foreign to his nature." Double meanings and insinuations are intrusions by language into the world of action. Billy is the victim of language. Claggart's accusation, that Billy tried to mutiny, has no basis in the actual world, in the world of action: it is simply a fabric of language. At the moment of his accusation, Billy both realizes the inadequacy of language and is paralyzed by it. His tongue stops and will not serve him. But his arm is ready. His arm can *move*. He strikes and kills Claggart. The movement of his arm is the medium of justice. He is destroyed by law, a product of language. The law requires that Billy be punished for the murder of the one who plotted against him. But the plot was motivated by the frustration of instinct, the stoppage of male physical desire. (The homosexuality at the center of *Billy Budd* makes Billy a complicated figure in terms of gender relations. Desire is all male in *Billy Budd*, and in this way it serves as only a partial paradigm for later American fiction, which is, of course, primarily heterosexual.) Billy is hanged because of the civilized notion that the good of the individual cannot take precedence over the good of the group.

In his book *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis talks about the

distance between the innocent hero and the world he must cope with, a strategic gap he cannot bridge. Billy Budd bridges the gap by an act of irrational, heroic forgiveness. He forgives his accusers, particularly the reluctant, Pilate-like captain, and in his utter submission to his own death, he rises above fate. But Billy lives in the nineteenth century; his twentieth-century brothers will not be, as Melville says of Billy, "like the animals, without knowing it, practically a fatalist."

The story of America is the story of the escape from fate. Europeans crossed the ocean in order to be free of it; the movement from the small town to the city is a move out of the grip of fate. The freedom and autonomy that America is meant to stand for is the attempt to define the self outside of the bruising authority of fate. In the language of American mythology, fate is that over which the self has no control; the ultimate limiter of individual freedom. It is the villain in the American dream. This dream is overwhelmingly male in its tone, and romantic—as Leslie Fiedler noted thirty years ago—about the pure relation between males in contrast to the muddled, corrupt relation between males and females. The female is the counterpart of fate in that her condition is fatalistic in the natural weakness that makes her susceptible to rape and vulnerable to death in childbirth. This natural weakness means that she requires protection, shelter, assistance. The boy on the run cannot stop to shelter a woman from violation or to assist her in the pangs of childbirth. In speaking of Cooper, Leslie Fiedler said that, in American literature, the only good woman is a dead woman. The habit didn't end with the *Leather Stocking Tales*.

It is more likely that a woman, at least a lady, can be kept healthy and alive in civilization than in nature. She is safest in the center of the world. But if we agree with R. W. B. Lewis that the "American hero must take his stand outside the world, remote or on the verges," the woman is the centripetal force pulling him not only from natural happiness but from heroism as well.

In earlier American literature, where the alternatives are a constricting civilization presided over by the schoolmarm or a limitless frontier graced by the noble savage, the pull of the woman is always decidedly weaker than the call of the wild. But as the frontier becomes a less real possibility—both in reality and in the imagination of writers—the pull of the woman, the woman pulling the

man into the world, becomes a much more difficult force for the hero to resist.

Clyde Griffiths of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is a boy who cannot master his fate. He is never on top of the rules of the world's game; his heroism is in longing, his inchoate desire for movement in a life where there is none. Dreiser describes Clyde's character as "fluid and unstable as water." He is tender; he can be impressed. In contrast to the cold, rocklike religiosity of his parents' life, his very motility is a kind of life force—they are living death. One of the terrific achievements of this novel consists in Dreiser's ability to convey the small dreariness of Clyde's childhood—he is the son of itinerant evangelists of the least flamboyant sort—and to contrast it with the bustle and shine of prosperous life. The *things* that money can buy—cigars, garters, furs, dresses that swish and glitter—are conveyed by Dreiser with a voluptuous excitement to which the reader is as susceptible as Clyde. The "good things in life"—as defined by upper-class American businessmen—take on a sexual charge in this novel, and sex for Clyde is never unconnected with class and social mobility.

Clyde is an attractive boy, but the first girl he desires uses him, manipulates her sexuality, doling it out in small pieces in return for presents of jewelry, perfume, and clothes. Clyde is so overmastered by this girl, however, that he refuses to help his desperate pregnant sister because he has promised Hortense a fur coat. At this point in the novel, Dreiser's moral position in relation to Clyde is masterful and subtle. He in no way softens his description of the sister's wretchedness to let Clyde off the hook; at the same time we are carried up by the sexual fever Clyde seems to have caught. The moral position is not rejected, it is merely seen to be out of the question, weak and tepid compared to the tremendous, vital allure of the world of things, movement, and sex that Hortense represents.

One night, while Clyde is still working as a bellboy at the "good" hotel where he learned about the "good" things in life, one of his friends steals his employer's car. In the course of this joyride, Clyde and his friends run over and kill a little (and, it might be noted, upper-class) girl. The first of the book's female corpses! Clyde and most of his friends run away. In starting a new life in Kansas City,

Clyde meets up with his wealthy uncle, who offers him a job in his collar factory. The factory is located in a prosperous little town in western New York, with a cohort of "good" families in large houses, families whose wealth is earned by the workers of whom Clyde is both one and not one. This placement locates him exactly at the painful center of the unstable plane that is American social reality in the early twentieth century. Clyde becomes foreman in the factory—he oversees girls stamping collars—but he cannot mix socially with any of the girls he oversees, because he is his uncle's nephew. At the same time, he isn't supposed even to dream of mixing with his cousins and their friends. His anomalousness would immobilize him if he obeyed its dictates, but he doesn't. He rebels both up and down. He has a love affair with Roberta, one of the girls who works for him, and in the midst of this he is taken up by Sondra Finchley, a shining dream girl of his cousins' social set.

Dreiser makes both Roberta's attractiveness and her virtue real. She is a genuinely loving young woman who is sexually awakened by her feelings for Clyde. Hollywood's casting Shelley Winters, the perennial slut, to play her in the second movie version of this novel, *A Place in the Sun*, was a serious violation of the spirit of Dreiser's book. The confusion is an important indication of our culture's difficulty in embodying female sexuality as it connects to male violence. Dreiser's Roberta is a genuine innocent, forced by poverty to leave the "reduced grimness" of her decaying farm (in the marvelously named town of Biltz) in order to take up factory work, which is really beneath her. Dreiser makes the point that, like Clyde, she has an innate finesse, which makes mixing with rougher (read immigrant) girls in the factory difficult for her. Hollywood couldn't have Montgomery Clift kill a nice girl, but Dreiser faces the problem: in order to achieve his dream of social mobility with Sondra, Clyde must murder Roberta, who is morally and emotionally Sondra's superior. We can think of Shelley Winters as one of those girls who "asked for it," since we all understand that any woman who consents to sex and enjoys it is automatically deserving of murder or rape.

Sondra, on the other hand, is a dreadful girl who happens to be irresistibly beautiful and marvelously rich. Her clothes, her cars, her sports equipment, at least as much as her body, are the locus of her sexual allure. In a superb scene in Sondra's kitchen, Dreiser

brings before our eyes all that Sondra represents for Clyde. Sondra has brought Clyde home after a dance, to make some cocoa. She is playing cook in her palace kitchen, and when Clyde admires the room she says, "Oh, I don't know. Aren't all kitchens as big as this?"—a thrillingly arrogant thrust of top-down sadism.

Clyde, thinking of the poverty he knew, and assuming from this that she was scarcely aware of anything less than this, was all the more overawed by the plethora of the world to which she belonged. What means! Only to think of being married to such a girl, when all such as this would become an everyday state. One would have a cook and servants, a great house and car, no one to work for, and only orders to give. . . . It made her various self-conscious gestures and posings all the more entrancing. . . .

Having prepared the chocolate in a commonplace aluminum pan, to further impress him she sought out a heavily chased silver service which was in another room. She poured the chocolate into a highly ornamented urn and then carried it to the table and put it down before him. Then swinging herself up beside him, she said, "Now isn't this chummy? I just love to get out in the kitchen like this, but I can only do it when the cook's out. He won't let anyone near the place when he's here."

At the sight of her in her white satin and crystal evening gown, her slippered feet swinging so intimately near, a faint perfume radiating to his nostrils, he was stirred. In fact, his imagination in regard to her was really inflamed. Youth, beauty, wealth, such as this—what could it not mean?

Clearly, Dreiser wants us at once to realize Sondra's ridiculousness and the allure of all she has. Nothing about her is still; even her clothes glimmer and catch light. She is a moving girl. She is not slowed down by either poverty or desire. Power and freedom create motion, and in having more money than Clyde, being in charge of the sexual vector, and being far from any suggestion of maternity, she takes on the properties of mobility usually reserved for boys. Compare her kitchen to Roberta's house in Biltz:

So lonely and bare, even in the bright spring weather! The decayed and sagging roof. The broken chimney to the north—rough lumps of cemented field stones lying at its base; the sagging and semi-toppling chimney to the south, sustained in place by a log chain. The unkempt path from the road below . . . the broken and displaced stones which served as steps before the front door. And the unpainted, dilapidated out-buildings, all the more dreary because of these others.

Just as we begin to believe that Clyde has a chance with the glittering Sondra, we learn that Roberta is pregnant. If Clyde marries her, he will lose everything: his job in his uncle's factory, and, most important, his trip upward on the social ladder atop which Sondra sits, swinging her tiny, satin-shod foot. Astonishingly, we are on Clyde's side in his conviction that marrying Roberta, with whom he was quite happy until Sondra appeared, is impossible. We hope that something will happen: an abortion, an accident. We hope that Roberta will be a good sport and go away—or die. We are at one with Clyde in his plans to murder this encumbered woman, this encumbrance, heavy with child and the limitations of her poverty, as heavy as the uneven stones in her dull, unpainted house. We follow Clyde through detailed plans to kill Roberta at a deserted lake. But in the end, Dreiser doesn't have the toughness to follow through with the moral vision he has so skillfully created. He doesn't allow Clyde to be the cold-blooded murderer he had planned to be. Having described Clyde's life before the scene of the murder in perfectly realistic terms, Dreiser suddenly goes limp and expressionist.

This still dark water seems to grip Clyde as nothing here or anywhere before this ever had. For once here he seemed to be fairly pulled or lured along into it, and having encircled its quiet banks to be drifting, drifting—in endless space where there was no end of anything. The insidious beauty of this place! Truly, it seemed to mock him—this strangeness—this dark pool, surrounded on all sides by those wonderful soft fir trees. And the water itself looking like a huge, black pearl cast by some mighty hand, in anger possibly, in sport, or phantasy maybe, into this bosom of its valley of dark green

plush, and which seemed bottomless as he gazed into it. And yet what did it all suggest so strongly? Death! Death!

Something—the craftsman, perhaps—in Dreiser is uncomfortable with the psychological falseness of the situation: his lapse into melodrama betrays him.

For this melodrama, he uses imagery that is unmistakably female. The lake itself, a great vagina, hypnotizes Clyde so that he can't feel responsible for his conduct. The wet, dark circle surrounded by firs suggests nothing but death to him. Hypnotized by the weirdness of the lake, Clyde experiences something strange. At the moment he is about to kill Roberta, he is "struck by a sudden palsy of the will." Roberta approaches him, thinking he is in some sort of dangerous trance and attempting to save him from falling into the water. "Instantly yielding to a tide of submerged hate, not only for himself, but Roberta—her power, or that of life to restrain him in this way," Clyde strikes her with his camera, in a simple gesture of self-preserving recoil. It is important that the murder weapon is a camera. Walter Benjamin has noted that the camera diminishes the notion of the authenticity of any particular object by rendering it infinitely reproducible. Because of this, it is the ultimate agent of the modern, the ultimate distancer of the human being from the unique act. For Dreiser, as for many writers, women represent, alternately and interchangeably, the encumbering aspects of both nature and culture; in Clyde's murdering Roberta with a camera, modern culture is striking out against nature, to the destruction of both.

In the end, Dreiser wants us to believe that Clyde didn't mean to kill Roberta. His pupils dilated, hypnotized by the dark lake, he only meant to push her away. So that he could get on with life. The trouble is that Dreiser has just spent a hundred pages showing Clyde plotting the perfect murder. Clyde goes to his death believing himself innocent, and we are sympathetic to him because in the context of the corruption around him everywhere, he is the most pure. The D.A. wants to make political hay out of the case; Clyde's lawyer wants to block the D.A.'s ambitions; the newspapermen suck Clyde's blood to get their daily bread. His fellow prisoners are horrifyingly brutal compared to him. Even his mother succumbs to the pressures of modern corruption; to earn money

for Clyde's appeal, she agrees to write up her experiences as the mother of a condemned man; she goes on the church lecture circuit to raise money for her son. She is the first media disaster-mom. Clyde is appalled even as he is touched by her mixing in the company of his tormentors, by her going public with a lack of dignity of which he would never be capable. In the end, we see Clyde as simpler than the environment in which he has been put, clearer than the events by which he is entrapped; we mourn his death as we don't mourn Roberta's. She was the heavy, dull, clinging object. He might have moved, hitching his wagon to Sondra's shooting star.

Like *An American Tragedy*, *Jude the Obscure* is about an ambitious young man in sexual thralldom to women. Both young men have plans and dreams that we know will never be realized. Both are the victims of what their authors perceive as monstrous systems—cruel amalgams created by the distorting pressures of nature and society—which must blight the flowering of the imaginative young. Yet Jude suffers and is touched by suffering, and perhaps more important, he loses his youth. At the novel's end, Jude is in no way a boy. Clyde dies one, complaining that after all this time his mother still doesn't understand him. The maturing process is not one that deeply interests a certain kind of American writer. Sherwood Anderson, for example, always ends his tales before the boy has to be tested. This kind of writer tells us we have to love the boy, not because he is good, or talented, or perceptive, but simply because he is full of life.

Hardy, being English, allows Jude to mature. But who is to say that Jude's maturity does anyone around him any good? Jude's wanderings around Wessex with Sue and their tribe of children, his hopeless search for work and prosperity, is a protracted living death that ends only with the horror of the oldest child, little Father Time, hanging himself and his siblings in the closet, leaving the note "Done because we are too menny." By comparison, the quick, modern deaths of Roberta and Clyde—both induced by mechanical agents (the camera, the electric chair)—are a blessing and a mercy. Hardy's is a tragic vision, and the problem of the sexes may be a tragic one; perhaps we are doomed to want different and opposing things from life. But it is tempting to guess that had Hardy been American, Jude would have been unable to say no to the