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Three Contemporary American Women Writers

For several reasons it seems appropriate to discuss the three contemporary American writers—Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, and Sylvia Plath—who will be the subject of the following essay. First, and most obviously, all three are women, a suitable topic, since this is International Women's Year. Second, these three writers are representative in a number of ways. Flannery O'Connor is a southern writer; Joyce Carol Oates grew up in the mid-west and her stories and novels are set there; Sylvia Plath is a product of New England. Between them they have written works in almost every genre (except the drama): that is, the traditional novel, the experimental, so-called non-fictional novel, the short story, and poetry. Third, some of the works of each have been recently translated or are in the process of being translated into Polish. It is my hope that the following remarks will indicate the worth and importance of these writers with sufficient vividness so that you will want to read their works for yourselves. Finally, for all their differences of background and geographical location, the themes of their work are remarkably similar. Strangely, all three deal with the theme of violence in their novels, short stories, and poems, a preoccupation they return to again and again. I hope at the conclusion of my essay to try to account for this theme of violence in the works of these three contemporary American women writers.

1

Flannery O'Connor was born in the southern state of Georgia where her parents, both Roman Catholic, lived on a diary farm. She received her education and attended university in Georgia. As a result of working on her university newspaper and literary magazine, she discovered that she wanted to be a

writer. She went north to study writing at the University of Iowa, spent a short time in New York City before her health began to fail, forcing her to return to her mother's dairy farm in Georgia where she remained for the rest of her short life suffering from a crippling blood disease. When she died in 1964 at the age of 39, she had published two novels and two collections of short stories.

The plots of Flannery O'Connor's novels and short stories are remarkably similar. Let me describe the basic model of her plots and then I will give a few examples. One of her favorite characters is a middle-aged or slightly older middle-class woman who prides herself on her neat and regular ways, who has spent her life working hard and continuously, and who (so far as she can tell) has led a decent Christian and moral life, the kind of woman, a bit self-righteous perhaps, whom we could meet almost anywhere and who (we must frankly confess) we depend upon to keep the world orderly and functioning smoothly. In story after story, this woman is made the object of some act of violence which frequently, though not always, results in her death. In the process of this confrontation with violence, the protagonist is shocked out of her secular ways and values and is moved into what can best be regarded as a Christian view of the universe.

This, then, is her basic plot. Let me quickly discuss two stories. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is probably the most widely read of Flannery O'Connor's short stories (It is the story she herself chose most often to read before university audiences,) and in its extraordinary use of violence it is typical of much of her work. The plot of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" involves a family of six, on vacation, who have an automobile accident, fall into the hands of escaped convicts, and are murdered one by one. On the surface, the motivation for these killings is slight: the grandmother, who is the protagonist of the story, has identified the leader of the gang—the self-proclaimed Misfit. At the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the Misfit sets forth in blunt terms his metaphysical dilemma, a dilemma which we perhaps all share. If Jesus truly performed miracles, if He raised the dead and was Himself resurrected, then there is nothing to do but believe in Christ and follow His teachings. But the Misfit does not know that this has happened. He was not there. Consequently, he cannot

believe and he has decided to live his own life as best he can, as in fact we all do. In the real world, most of us respond to this dilemma by living quiet lives of decency and work. This is not the normal pattern in Flannery O'Connor's fictional world. It is a world where, if you are confronted with a moral choice, a decision is usually made in the direction of violence. Thus, the Misfit has decided to live his life "by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness."

As so often happens in Flannery O'Connor's stories, it is during the moment of death that her protagonists are allowed a glimpse of the truth. "Why you're one of my babies," the grandmother declares just before the Misfit kills her. "You are one of my own children." The old lady, as Miss O'Connor has herself remarked about her protagonist, "realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been prattling about so far." That is, like the rest of her family, the grandmother is shallow, vulgar, selfish, and generally unattractive. They are a family of the damned, not because they are evil, but because they have never seen deeply enough into experience to be aware that evil and damnation are very real possibilities of life. The story, however, is not the family's but the grandmother's. Having spent her life mouthing clichés such as that of the story's title, she is brought dramatically to a recognition of the superficiality of her former beliefs. But only at the moment of death. It takes the fact of death to shock her into an awareness of the evil inherent in all human beings, herself included.

In the second of Flannery O'Connor's stories that I wish to discuss, the violence does not result in murder, but the violence has a devestating effect nonetheless. The plot of "Revelation" involves a woman not unlike the protagonist of "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Mrs. Turpin is sitting quietly in a doctor's waiting room, exchanging platitudes with the other patients while waiting for the doctor to attend to her husband. Also in the waiting room is a fat, ugly college girl, whose name is Mary Grace, reading a psychology text-book. Midway through the story comes the moment of violence, as the college girl hurls her book at Mrs. Turpin and loses control completely. As she is tied down and carried off to an ambu-

lance, Mary Grace utters the words which will haunt Mrs. Turpin always: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Mrs. Turpin, in "Revelation," is not an evil woman; she is good and hard-working. Although Mary Grace's characterization (an "old wart hog from hell") may be extreme, Mrs. Turpin is nevertheless guilty of appalling satisfaction with herself. In thanking God that she is who she is rather than black or poor or ugly and fat like Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin mistakenly attributes her expected salvation to her personal identity and good works. The function of the act of violence here is to shock Mrs. Turpin out of this complacent attitude. After an entire day of puzzling over the meaning of the attack upon her in the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin is enlightened by a vision which comes, ironically, as she is cleaning out the pig pen on her farm and looking toward the sunset:

> Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to the hogs as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immoble.

Mrs. Turpin sees that she and her husband Claud are there among the saved only because their virtues, and thus their pride, are being burned away. They are saved, that is, not because they are who they are or do what they do. Their salvation has nothing to do with "good order and common sense and respectable behavior." They are saved because God in his inscrutable way wills it. Presumably, we are left to understand that Mrs.

Turpin learns humility as a result of her violent confrontation in the doctor's office with Mary Grace, the college girl, just as we are urged to hope that the act of recognition by the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" will begin the transformation of the Misfit.

Quite frankly, critics are beginning to be troubled by the scale and degree of violence in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. They recognize, of course, her basic Christian intention: to label as intrinsically evil any impulse toward secular autonomy and self-complacency. She sets out to destroy the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless, a passive victim of a superior power. Again and again, she creates a fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to the recognition of helplessness and the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ. At the same time, critics have located a disparity between her religious intent and the scale and degree of violence that accompany her characters' moments of grace. O'Connor seems to be suggesting that certain spiritual attainments are impossible without insanity and crime. What all this suggests is that at the heart of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is a preoccupation with violence which threatens to overshadow her religious intent.

2

There is very little to say about the details of Joyce Carol Oates' biography. She was born in 1937 in New York State. Like Flannery O'Connor, she studied writing and literature at a number of universities. In a remarkably short time, she has published an impressive number of novels, short stories, and critical works. In addition to her creative writing, she has held several regular academic positions. At the present time, she is a professor of English at the University of Windsor in Onterio, Canada.

I would like to say right at the outset that Joyce Carol Oates' novel *them* is one of the most depressing and pessimistic books that I have ever read. It is an almost unbelievable description of life in Detroit, one of America's largest and grimest mid-western cities, a way of life that involves murder,

police corruption, adultery, and prostitution all played out against a general background of violence and viciousness. As if this is not enough, the novel ends with the eruption of Detroit's Black population during the riots that took place there in 1967. Seen in these terms, Joyce Carol Oates stands heir to the great novelists of American literary naturalism: Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck. But there are some significant differences. Them is not fiction in the traditional sense of the term. Rather it belongs to that newest sub-genre of American prose fiction: the non-fiction novel, a genre in which the techniques of fiction are used to present factual material. Let me give you Miss Oates' own account of how she wrote them:

> In the years 1962-1967 I taught English at the University of Detroit, which is a school run by Jesuits and attended by several thousand students...It was during this period that I met the "Maureen Wendall" of this narrative. She had been a student of mine in a night course, and a few years later she wrote to me and we became acquainted. Her various problems and complexities overwhelmed me, and I became aware of her life story, her life as the possibility for a story, perhaps drawn to her by certain similarities between her and me--as she remarks in one of her letters. My initial feeling about her life was, "This must be fiction, this can't all be real!" My more permanent feeling was, "This is the only kind of fiction that is real." And so the novel them, which is truly about a specific "them" and not just a literary technique of pointing to us all, is based mainly upon Maureen's numerous recollections. Her remarks, where possible, have been encorporated into the narrative verbatim, and it is her terrible obsession with her personal history that I owe the voluminous details of this novel. For Maureen, this "confession" had the effect of a kind of psychological therapy, of probably temporary benefit; for me, as a witness, so much material had the effect of temporarily blocking out my own reality, my personal life, and substituting for it the various nightmare adventures of the Wendalls. Their lives pressed upon mine errily, so that I began to dream about them instead of about myself, dreaming and redreaming their lives. Because their world was so remote from me it entered me with tremendous power, and in a sense the novel wrote itself. Certain episodes, however, have been revised after careful research indicated that their context was confused. Nothing in the novel has been exaggerated in order to increase the possibility of drama--indeed, the various sordid and shocking events of slum life, detailed in other naturalistic works, have been understated here, mainly because of my fear that too much reality would become unbearable.

Even more remarkable is the attitude Joyce Carol Oates takes toward the vicious world she describes. Here there is no sentimental moralizing, no suggestion of moral improvement

by her characters: to do that would be to violate the truth and complexity of the events being narrated and the people described. Rather she neither satirizes nor moralizes about the events and people she describes. She seems to be suggesting that in a world where there is so much violence, one more act of violence does not count for much. If we are shocked by the seemingly amoral attitude the narrator takes toward her subject, we should remember that her theme appears to be the prevalence of violence in contemporary life. The violence is so pervasive and widespread that its mere presence need not call forth any special attention or comment. That is to say, as a writer Joyce Carol Oates does not take a superior or more knowing attitude toward her material than either we or her characters would naturally take. Her narrative manner implies that not only her characters and perhaps her readers as well but she, too, are all pretty much confronted by the same situation and respond to it in much the same way. Her theme is simple but rather disturbing in its simplicity: the central fact of our existence is violence, both the violence we carry around inside us and the violence that confronts us outside ourselves. But they and we live through this violence without either seeing it as a reality, or understanding it. Thus, the tone of cold detachment with which all her violence is presented. We see it but do not really respond to it. Or our understanding extends only to disturbing paranoid fantasies in which society becomes nothing more than a "them." Such fantasies are an indication of our detachment, our failure to understand this violence as our central social reality. Joyce Carol Oates' novel, then, presents us with a final paradox: on the one hand, she is particularly good at rendering her feeling of the pressure, mass, and density of violence in American experience; on the other, she presents this violence with such cold detachment that it does not seem real. It is a combination of violence and detachment that makes this work so disturbing.

3

Sylvia Plath, the last writer whom I wish to discuss, is different from Flannery O'Connor and Joyce Carol Oates only in turning the violence which is her central subject and preoccupation against herself. It is the manifestation of violence in

herself and directed against herself in repeated (and finally successful) attempts at suicide that become the subject of her fiction and poetry. Nothing in Sylvia Plath's biography, however, prepares us for the extremes of pain and suffering she records in her fiction and poetry. One critic has described her life as "sheer banality": university education in Massachusetts, a nervous breakdown, brilliant academic success, a fellowship to Cambridge University in England, marriage to an English poet, the birth of two children, and suicide at the age of 30.

Sylvia Plath's only hovel, The Bell Jar, is perhaps one of the most compelling accounts of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction. The heroine, Ester Greenwood, feels nothing but detachment and estrangement from reality which make her a representative contemporary character. The protagonist has won a fashion magazine contest and visits New York as part of the prize. The things and events of New York press upon her but without significance. She finds it difficult to perceive any meaningful patterns in reality. It is as if she were sitting under a bell jar—to explain both the central metaphor of the novel as well as its title—through whose glass she perceives sights and sounds of the world but without meaning, and Plath's own style records the strangeness of the world outside the glass with clear yet remote documentation. After her breakdown and suicide attempt, her mind continues to disengage itself from the things of this world. But the suicide attempt is the prelude to a rediscovery of self. And that rediscovery consists in getting out of the prison of her own detachment, a process descrcibed in some detail in the closing chapters of the novel.

But what this detachment of self really represents is a kind of death wish and it is Sylvia Plath's identification of death with a kind of rebirth that I wish to draw attention to because it forms a connection between her novel and her poetry. In one poem, "Tulips," the speaker is lying in a hospital bed (we are never told exactly why she is there) watching the activities of the nurses with a good deal of detachment until her attention is focused on a dozen red tulips which have been sent to her. What this poem gives testimony to is the almost unbearable intensity of pain that the responsibilities of love and life impose upon her. The smiles of her husband and child

in a family photograph "catch onto my skin" like fish hooks —a truly horrifying image. The flowers sent to her remind her of all the physical functions of life and, because they do, appear to her as "A dozen red lead sinkers around my neck." The peacefulness that comforts her so completely in her hospital room is a kind of death-in-life. Clearly she imagines her situation as being as close to death as possible while still remaining physically alive. In this poem, she is evidently well along the way to accepting death itself as the most satisfying state. The poem ends, I believe, with a wish not to return to the world of health because that would imply a return to the world of life with all its awful claims of love and responsibility.

Her relations to life in "Tulips" though extreme are relatively calm and deliberately understated. But in "Daddy," perhaps her most famous as well as most shocking poem, she describes her relationship to others, in this particular case to her father, in the most horrifying public images drawn from modern political experience. Her only way of giving expression to her sense of outrage with which she feels her father has treated her is draw upon the language and imagery of Nazism: she describes herself as a Jew at the hands of her Nazi father:

DADDY

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two

So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of <u>you</u>,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always <u>knew</u> it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

It strikes me that this poem represents some kind of an extreme in my tracing of the theme of violence in these three contemporary American women writers. Sylvia Plath has drawn upon one of the most horrifying and vivid examples of historical violence to express her sense of the reality of the violence which she feels (rightly or wrongly) is confronting her. In this poem, we have reached the limits of the literary representation of violence in America. After all, what would constitute a more horrifying vision of violence than the historical experience of Nazism?

4

I would like to conclude by pointing out some similarities between the lives and themes of these three contemporary American women writers. What is remarkable about the lives of these three writers is the businesslike regularity of their middle-class lives: three hard working, ordinary women pursuing their careers as writers with admirable determination and professionalism. What is remarkable is that, in contradistinction to these middle-class lives, these writers should produce some of the most compelling literary versions of violence in contemporary American literature. There is nothing (apart from Sylvia Plath's suicide attempts and even suicide seems to have reached the status of a fairly normal occurrence in life these days) to account for this preoccupation with violence. In the case of Flannery O'Connor and Joyce Carol Oates the motive does not appear to be directly autobiograhical. How, then, do we explain their preoccupation with violence? Very tentatively, we can offer several explanations. Is it possible to make something of the fact that the authors of these literary versions of violence are all women? Perhaps. It is fashionable these days to explain such manifestations of violence as an indica-

tion of the frustration women feel in trying to live their lives in what is still essentially a male dominated world. But I suspect that this is too parochial a view of the situation.

For whatever reason, violence has become the primary reality of the twentieth century. It is an age in which people feel that life is too complicated, too dense, too other for the more human and humane kinds of response. In a world of incredible and undeniable complication, a world so complicated that it appears to be nothing more than an elaborate series of interconnecting plots, one's only response is some kind of violence. These three writers have more or less successfully contained their violence by giving it literary expression. The subsequent suicide of Sylvia Plath after containing some of her irrational energies in her novel and poems suggests all too vividly the fragility of this literary resolution. Critics have said of one or another of these writers that their violence is in their own heads. I am not exactly sure what these critics mean. It appears to represent some attempt to discredit their literary versions of modern experience. They may have violence on their minds, but then again so do we all. This may be a disturbing fact, but then again so is life.

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Tomasz Jurczyński

Ivy Compton-Burnett.

Ivy Compton-Burnett began to publish in 1911 with "Dolores",which is regarded as her juvenile work since the technique found here /the novel contains more narrative than dialogue/ differs considerably from that of the later books.

With "Pastors and Masters/1925/ her mature style is already formed and remains unchanged in its essentials in the seventeen dialogue novels that have followed .[1]

Everything in her novels is said to take place between 1888- 190[illegible].[2] The critics`opinion is in most cases based only on Ivy Compton-Burnett`s statement that she has no real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910.[3] The social relationships in her novels,however, tend to reveal the late Victorian epoch.

A basic pattern of her novels is easily detectible,since it is repeated in each of them with slight variations.Ivy Compton-Burnett`s novels are concerned with relationships between individuals in English middle class families.In most of them there is usually a tyrant, either male or female,upon whom the other members of the family depend."The desire for domination,which in a dictator can plunge the world into misery,can here be studied in a limited sphere.The family tyrant is as evil as the dictator and ethically far less easily defensible."[4] The tension leads inevitably to a violent climax which is often a murder committed with the object of changing a situation intolerable to the murderer.[5] There are not only tyrants and victims in Compton-Burnett`s novels but also witnesses /These are most often the servants or the relatives of the families / who provide chorus-like comments on what is going on within the family circles.Parricide, matricide,incest,forgery,mental cruelty - the worst of which human