

The anointed imagination: The character of Catholic literature in the twentieth century

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Christ transformed our imagination by making his dwelling in our memory, so that we could create a symbolic world of language, images, and actions that is harmonious with the world of creation and redemption.

"Turn your eyes on Jesus. Will you? Can you with your anointed imagination see? Jesus! Jesus! Holy Jesus! . . . Get ahold of God!"

These are the impassioned words of Brother Shad to his congregation during a Wednesday evening revival service at Rooftree Pentecostal Church in Durance, Texas, and the scene takes place in the novel *Ordinary Time*, by A. G. Mojtabai, published in September, 1989.¹ My theme is the Catholic Imagination, for which a more poetic name might indeed be Brother Shad's the "anointed imagination." Whatever *he* might have meant by it in the context of his ecstatic sermon, certainly we should not lightly dismiss the associations which the phrase

¹A.G. Mojtabai, *Ordinary Time* (New York, Doubleday, 1989), 90-1.

"the anointed imagination" ought to evoke in Catholic academics. One of the hazards of the academic profession of our time, I think, is that it is not very much given to the inebriation of the spirit, even when that spirit happens to be the Holy Spirit. And yet Catholic academics ought still to be moved by the proposition of a human imagination that does not generate ideas and images purely out of its own powers, as if by parthenogenesis, an imagination that has the humility, and, shall we say, the erotic openness and desire, to become fruitful by being touched and penetrated by an infinitely greater outside power, the readiness to be done healing violence to by a wiser force: in other words, a *marian* imagination that allows itself to become "anointed" by granting admission to the Messiah, the *Christus*. This, at least in theory, ought to be the etymological meaning of "Christian Imagination."

No matter how much Catholic intellectuals might try to refine the interaction between imagination and the faith they profess, I am afraid Brother Shad's formula must in the end remain normative: at base, the Catholic imagination cannot be defined other than by its "turning to see Jesus," that is, by the interior vision converting both from its instinctual manner of viewing the world and from its subjects of predilection, so that now the person of the Savior becomes the point of convergence around which all other realities are ordered. To what end? As Brother Shad says, to "get ahold of God," which in more formal though less picturesque language Catholic theology describes as the "possession of the beatific vision."

This "getting ahold of God" has a more privileged place in the Christian mystical tradition than we realize. Walker Percy, the Louisiana doctor-turned-novelist who died recently, was once trying to explain why, even in this day and age, he clung to belief in the "whole Jewish-Christian thing" as embodied in the dogma of the Catholic Church. In particular, he had to explain why even the "rational and honorable alternative of scientific humanism" is not good enough. Replied Percy:

This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then to be asked what you make of it and have to answer "scientific humanism." That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e. God. In fact I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don't see why anyone should settle for less than Jacob, who actually

grabbed ahold of God and wouldn't let go until God identified himself and blessed him.

Interviewer: "Grabbed ahold?"

Percy: "A Louisiana expression."²

II.

I would define the "Catholic Imagination" as that creative matrix from which all manner of inventions have been born to the world and to culture as a result of the natural fecundity of the human spirit having been brought to unique fruition by the advent of trinitarian grace.

Christian revelation, culminating particularly in the gospel, nowhere gives a precise blueprint for education, or for government, or for social reform, or for artistic creation, much less for technological progress or scientific experimentation. At times certain Christians have mistaken the silence of the Scriptures on such subjects as implying that these endeavors should not be of interest to the serious believer: that, as worldly activities, they lie beyond the pale of faith and salvation. To me it seems that the Catholic tradition has nearly always taken the precisely opposite view: namely, that Revelation provides only those things that we could not possibly have come by on our own: the knowledge and the reality of God's trinitarian nature, of his continual care for all of his children, of the Incarnation and the Redemption, of the Church and the sacraments as specific instruments of God's creative love. . . .

But, even as such revelation is working in the depths of our being to radically change us and our perceptions and actions, simultaneously we are being entrusted with our specifically human task. This means that we must go about devising means (such as education), creating institutions (the religious orders, hospitals, schools, missions, social programs) and works of art (the various styles of religious architecture, painting, and music); we must go about inventing language (the very literature that I am discussing here) and developing systems of thought (for instance, Thomistic philosophy), the collective goal of all of which shall be to express and to imple-

²"Questions They Never Asked Me," in *Humanities*, 10, 3 (May/June 1989): 12. Emphasis mine.

ment the dynamic content of Judeo-Christian Revelation in the world around us.

I would argue, then, that what is termed the "Catholic Imagination" is what, over the course of centuries and in response to particular historical circumstances, has given birth to a great creative spectrum of "works." In all justice I must here add that, when it has been unfaithful and dysfunctional, the Catholic Imagination has sadly produced some monstrous offspring as well, such as the Inquisition and many forms of anti-Semitism, which resulted from the frightful admixture of spiritual convictions with a hunger for temporal power. Yet the prophetic voice that denounces specifically Catholic perversions by condemning them on the basis of *Catholic* principles is far from being absent in our literary revival. Here I can only mention in passing the names of Léon Bloy, Georges Bernanos, Thomas Merton, and especially the post-war German Nobel laureate, Heinrich Böll. In the work of all of these a large role is played by their outrage at bourgeois bigotry, criminal smugness, and phariseism on the part of Catholics.

But why is "imagination" the appropriate term in this discussion? Because the cultural, intellectual, and charitable endeavors I have listed are not the mechanical application of some ready-made recipe, but rather, in each case, can be shown to have evolved gradually, painstakingly, as individuals within the Christian Church (the "assembly of those called and anointed," according to the earliest Fathers) have responded creatively with their own intuition, intelligence, and courageous deeds to that great Deed of God for mankind in Christ Jesus which we call the divine economy of redemption.

III.

I speak here, then, of that manifestation of the Catholic Imagination which falls within the area of my academic competence, literary studies. And I limit myself further by focusing on the phenomenon of Catholic literary creativity in our own century.

The term "Twentieth-Century Catholic Literary Revival" or "Renaissance" is an accepted category of modern literary history, and it refers to a very loose-knit group of writers who lived and worked from the end of the nineteenth century through at least the first three quarters of the twentieth. I

would like to think that such a rebirth has not and will not come to an end. Some of these writers, like Léon Bloy and Charles Péguy, died very early on, before 1920, while others have lived to an almost biblical age: Gertrud von le Fort died in 1971 at age 95, and Julien Green, the boy from a Savannah family who is now a member of the Académie Française, is still today, at age 89, producing his one novel and one volume of diary every year. Some of these writers had a direct and decisive influence on others (thus Léon Bloy on Georges Bernanos, and Bernanos himself on Flannery O'Connor), so that at times we can trace something like a family line among them. At other times the relationship is tenuous or non-existent, and in any event it is telling that none of these writers form anything like a "school." While the great majority of these Catholic writers obviously come from a European background, there are some significant exceptions: for one, the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo, who has a good claim to being the best Japanese writer alive; for another, the young Melkite-Catholic Palestinian novelist Anton Shammas, who created quite a stir in Israel and beyond last year by the publication of his novel *Arabesques*, written not in Arabic but in Hebrew!

I am constrained to be highly selective in surveying my topic. All sorts of important questions must be postponed. For example, what might be the difference, if any, between the *Catholic* and the *Christian* imagination? What is the difference between the Catholic imagination creating in the twentieth century and at any other time? What are the more difficult aspects of the relationship between the creative freedom that a Catholic artist, as any artist, must have, and the dogmas and magisterium of the Church, should the two come into conflict? And, obviously, I am taking for granted the very existence of such a thing as "the Catholic Imagination." No doubt some may object that, if anything, there are individual writers with an imagination who happen to call themselves Catholic, and that hence what we have at best are many "Catholic imaginations," in the plural and not modified by the definite article. I suppose that on this point I shall have to rely on something like the accumulated evidence of the examples I will propose. I trust that, despite all the uniqueness of a given author and perhaps the contradictions that arise among the several authors, these examples will illustrate or at least evoke the reality of something like the Catholic Imagination.

I do, however, want to suggest that there is not

only a theological basis to argue for the *possibility* of the Catholic Imagination, but in fact something like a theological *necessity* for it. In two New Testament texts of key importance for our concerns—passages that could be called the theoretical basis for a Christian aesthetics—I see St. Paul establishing the principle for what I am calling the Catholic Imagination. I speak of the spiritual law of the individual Christian's metamorphosis in conformity with the form and identity of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes: "All of us [the baptized], reflecting with unveiled face the glory of the Lord for us as in a mirror, are being transformed into the same likeness, from his glory into our glory, and this through the Spirit of the Lord." And in Galatians 4:19, he adds: "My little children, I am in travail over you anew, until I can see Christ's image fully formed in you." The inevitable result of such interior transformation is given by Saints Peter and John during their speech of self-defense before their jailers in the Acts of the Apostles: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:20).

The ongoing *act* of Christian faith is a transformative experience of the whole person and not a mere mental process; it entails a new creation that radically modifies the subject's perception of the world and himself. Cultural Christian themes, references, and symbols, are not the essence of the Catholic literary imagination, since these things can equally be found in non-Christian literature. The real shaping principle of Catholic literature is the mystical transformation of the person who has freely asked for baptism and thereby has entered a lifetime of becoming conformed to the likeness of Christ and his mysteries.

Since the whole person is thus affected drastically by the experience of rebirth in Christ, so too necessarily is the person's creative intellect or imagination. What may be distinguished for the sake of description as the "creative" intellect and the "believing" intellect actually coexist in a tight unity in the concrete existing subject. Therefore, in the believer who also happens to be an artist, there is a strict *a priori* interdependence between the life of faith and the act of aesthetic creation, an interdependence which it would be foolish for either the artist himself or the critic to try to deny or abolish. The thoroughness of the believer's modification by faith is so radical that it has traditionally been described with the paschal language of "death and resurrection." And because of the basic unity of the creative and the believing intellect, the act of aesthetic creation will

inevitably confer on its product the plastic imprint of its creator's ontological reality *as modified by the act of faith*. This is the process which I have discussed more fully under the heading "the poetics of Incarnation" in my book on the Austrian Expressionist poet, Georg Trakl.³ The American Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick has suggested that the act of faith in the one God who is invisible and eternal and does not need creation is *at the same time* the highest act of the creative imagination: it goes against every reductive, anthropomorphic instinct of ours and makes itself at home in the invisible. And the Christian must complete this with just as unheard-of an imaginative vision: that of the eternal Word nestled in his Mother's arms and crowned with thorns in the arms of the Cross. In both cases, the deepest truth is what, naturally speaking, is most incredible and therefore requires the greatest *imagination*.

With his usual penetration, Jacques Maritain illuminates for us the issue of the specifically Christian act of aesthetic creation: "In the same way that God's trace and image appear in his creatures, the human mark is imprinted upon the work of art—the full mark, both sensual and spiritual, not only the mark of the hands, but that of the whole soul."⁴ Since the operation of art is a virtue or "habit" of the soul, the art of a Christian soul will be Christian art, not necessarily by intent, but unavoidably, following the principle of *operatio sequitur esse* (that is, that the nature of an act is determined by the nature of the being enacting it). And Maritain concludes: "Christian art is defined by the subject in whom it is found and by the spirit from which it proceeds. We say 'Christian art' . . . as we say 'art of the bee' or 'human art.' It is the art of redeemed mankind."⁵

Let us pause a moment to look at the crucial concept of "soul" as used here by Maritain. In the history of Christian rhetoric, the phrase "salvation of souls" eventually became such a rote formula for the work of redemption that it often came to connote little more than cute dove-like ghosts finally flitting up to heaven with relief, away from the disdained body. When Maritain says "soul" in the context of artistic creation,

³Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *The Blossoming Thorn: Georg Trakl's Poetry of Atonement* (Lewistown: Bucknell University Press, 1987), 23-44.

⁴Jacques Maritain, *Art et scolastique*, 4th ed. (Paris: Librairie de l'Art Catholique, 1947), 89.

⁵Ibid. 95.

however, he is restoring the soul to her full stature as the person's very source of life and action. The "salvation of the soul" here means the quickening of all the soul's faculties and her awakening to her proper life. This event is most germane to our theme of the Catholic Imagination, because the faculty of the imagination is not an isolated human agency used mostly by poets and a few others: the imagination—according to an uninterrupted tradition going at least from St. Augustine in the fifth century to St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth and to Jacques Maritain in our own time—is one of the functions of the memory, which, together with the intellect and the will, constitutes the full soul of man. St. Augustine, in fact, says that these three faculties of the soul, both distinct and inseparable, are the substantial created image in man of God's uncreated trinitarian nature.

Thus it has concrete implications for the very fiber of our soul to say that "Christ redeemed man." It means that Christ liberated our intellect so that we could perceive the fullness of truth, that he liberated our will so that we could choose and love the good both in desire and in fact, and also that he transformed our imagination by making his dwelling in our memory, so that we could create a symbolic world of language, images, and actions that is harmonious with the world of creation and redemption which God, as absolute Creator and Redeemer, has brought into existence from nothingness. St. Bernard has a beautiful text on this subject:

The Word became flesh and now dwells among us. He dwells in our hearts through faith, he dwells in our memory and thoughts, he penetrates even to our *imagination*. For what could a man conceive of God unless he first made an image of him in his heart? He was above our understanding, unapproachable; he was completely invisible and beyond our intellect; but now he wished to be comprehended, to be seen, to be pondered.⁶

There then follows a listing of the various mysteries of the incarnate Word, from "resting in a virgin's bosom" to

⁶*Sermo de Aqueductu*, in: *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Leclercq (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1968) 5:282-3. The text is used in the Office of Readings for October 7, Feast of the Holy Rosary. Emphasis mine.

"hanging on the cross, the pallor of death on his face, like one forsaken among the dead, overruling the powers of hell." The contemplation of these mysteries with the energized eyes of faith, far from simply being an exercise of private Christian piety, is in fact the realistic spiritual training that communicates to one the vision of the eternal God in the flesh and makes it possible for one to radically reorganize the disparate images of the world around Christ the incarnate Word as the Image of Images.

In passing I would like merely to anticipate a final objection—to give it a full answer would require much more space than is available here. Is Catholic literature produced only by Catholics? My emphatic reply must be no. It is persons who are baptized, not works of art, and the creative imagination is such a versatile and dynamic faculty that an author may *poetically participate* in the world of the Catholic imagination without necessarily subscribing to it privately and existentially, just as Mary Renault, for instance, can write marvelous historical novels entering into the mentality of an ancient Greek character without, presumably, herself worshipping Zeus or Artemis! Examples at once come to mind regarding so-called Catholic works by non-Catholic persons: Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, in which the protagonist's specifically Catholic drama of faith and martyrdom becomes a metaphor for the human drama as such, or *The Song of Bernadette*, by the Jewish novelist Franz Werfel. Yet another is the very novel with which I began this essay, Mojtabai's *Ordinary Time*: I have not checked whether the author is a Catholic, although I suspect she is not. In each case, the author enters with great empathy into the religious psychology, the faith, the whole "mythology," if you will, of his characters and their world of meanings, serving his characters rather than manipulating them. This results in certain works being inconceivable without the existence of the Catholic imagination, and a privileged relationship is established between the non-believing author of a "Catholic" work and the world of meaning and life without which the work is not possible and in which the author participates, at least aesthetically. The spiritual coordinates of the work, we might say, the whole field of references within which it can exist, must finally be traced to something the author himself did not create. Here the distinction between subjective faith-convictions and the objective work of art is essential.

IV.

But I do not wish only to theorize. I would now like to offer a reading of actual texts, aiming for as much variety as possible in cultural roots, theme, style, and outlook. My interpretation will accompany these texts.

In almost every case, I have deliberately chosen passages from authors who are probably not very familiar to the American public, which means I will not deal with writers like G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, and Flannery O'Connor, who need no promotion, or even with a major foreign figure like Georges Bernanos, no doubt the best of French Catholic novelists. But everywhere I attempt to let the fundamental criterion of religious-imaginative literature be my guide: that great religious literature first has to be great literature and only afterwards religious; in other words, that a religious subject-matter all by itself usually leads to an atrocious travesty of a work of art.⁷

The first text I have chosen is a poem which brings together a number of elements which will occupy us for the remainder of this article. I first present it without any introduction:

You alone have sought my soul!
Who shall belittle the right of your fidelity?
My soul was like a child

⁷Around the middle of the century, the German critic Walter Muschg made the following appraisal of the earlier members of the Catholic Literary Revival, and this tribute is all the more precious since Muschg was not himself a Catholic and was known for his meticulously high standards for literary quality. It was, then, not about mediocrities, either literary or spiritual, that he wrote: "These heretical figures [because revolting against the dogmas of the modernist establishment], committed as they are to the suffering of their epoch and to spiritual action, are today the ones that are saving the honor of European literature. They are moral forces, witnesses to the truth and fighters for God in a world where the forces of evil themselves have at their command whole arrays of writers. As such, these figures have begun to eclipse the glory of the morbid enchanters who have too long been the luminaries of European culture. . . . Like all martyrs, they are not a pretty sight. Their pain is what legitimizes them spiritually, and their human nobility consists in their being fearless and ready to die for their faith. This is what twentieth century writers must look like if there are going to be any writers at all." *Tragische Literaturgeschichte*, 5th ed. (Munich: Francke Verlag, 1983), 156-7. Translation mine.

that has been secretly exposed and left to die.
She was an orphan at all the banquets of life
and a widow in the arms of her lover.
My brothers have despised her
and my sisters have treated her as a stranger.
Those whom the world held wise have betrayed her.
When she thirsted they told her: "All things are passing!"
And when she was in anguish they said: "But you are nothing!"
They sent her to my heart
as though she were a drop of its blood.
They sent her to my intellect
as though she were but a thought.
She was like a wild beast in forests of dark drives
and like a frightened bird in a dead universe.
She was like a woman who spends her life dying.
But you prayed for her and this was her salvation.
You have sacrificed for her and this has been her food.
You have mourned for her as for a lost jewel,
and for this she shouts out your name with joy.
You have raised her up as a queen
and for this she lies at your feet.
Who shall belittle the right of your fidelity?⁸

I consider this poem, written about 1924, as very representative of the kind of revolutionary change and challenge that Catholic literature was introducing into European literature toward the beginning of the century. Even in the original German there is no rhyme, only a solemn rhythm. Traditional division into stanzas has been replaced by a versification which in fact is a vibrant revival of Hebrew poetics: we have here strong parallel sentences with a declarative main verse whose thought is completed in the subordinate verse, with a few single-line verses for variety. Such a drastic break with the inherited forms of European poetry is striking already in Gerard Manley Hopkins, and is taken up with many innovations by Christian poets as different as Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, and T. S. Eliot. I suggest that this aesthetic iconoclasm intends to abolish poetry as the purely formal virtuosity of *l'art pour l'art* and replace it with poetry as the vehicle of essential spiritual search and expression. This is why frequently, as with the present poem, the greatest poetry by Catholics exhibits the

⁸"Du allein suchtest meine Seele . . ." Gertrud von le Fort, *Hymnen an die Kirche* (Munich: Franz Ehrenwirth Verlag, 1961), 22. English translation by Margaret Chanler, in: *Hymns to the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), 20, slightly amended by myself.

laconic style of stark biblical prayer and meditation in the manner of the psalms, whose chief feature often is a cry of the heart from the depths of painful human experience. But out of the cry and the pain, which have now assumed the form of a hymn of praise, comes the experience of liberation and transformation.

The confident strength and triumph of the poem derive primarily from the fact that a "you" (the singular *du*) can be addressed as an unshakable and reliable connection between the poet and the world outside her. The poet appears to come fresh from the experience of having been seen and touched for the first time by a "thou," touched at the very center of her identity and being: "You alone have sought my soul!" It is this sense of having been sought out by the other person at the deepest personal level that also constitutes the poet herself as a person in the full sense—a being who begins to be at home in herself and can therefore now respond with the full energy of everything that she is.

The poem was written by Gertrud von le Fort just a couple of years before she entered the Catholic Church in 1927. As with many others, the word "conversion" in her case is not strictly speaking correct. Already a believing Christian, she viewed her becoming a Catholic as a logical consequence of her Protestant faith. The poem is part of a long cycle entitled *Hymns to the Church*. The "thou" addressed with such powerful gratitude in the poem is, in fact, not God or Christ or any ordinary human person, but, surprisingly, the Church, *die Kirche*, recognized in her essence as mystical feminine person carrying out the divine mission entrusted to her. In spite of such a churchly setting and reference, I would argue strongly that the poem is much more than merely devotional poetry recording a pious conversion. I would argue that first and foremost the poem belongs in the realm of universal, authentic human experience, specifically the experience of a despairing and betrayed individual being saved by the faithful love of another. But this is not a usual love; it is a love that awakens the *memory* of an amnesiac patient, as it were, to the deepest awareness of her own identity. In this regard the total anonymity of the Church in the poem is most significant. It isn't even immediately evident that what we have here is a "religious poem." The couple of explicitly religious terms, like "salvation" and "sacrifice," could equally be read in either their secular or their theological sense. Thus, what is foremost in the poet's imagination is the nature of the concrete action of the Church's per-

sona in the poem and the effects of this intervention on the poet, with the poem as grateful record and response. We are in no sense dealing here with apologetical, much less propagandist, religious literature, but with an existential poem of the first order.

After reading the poem at this primary level of experience, we may go on to see in it a sort of coded autobiography of its author, and also a rapid sketch of what she considers the spiritual maladies of a whole epoch: the plight of her soul now stands for that of many others. Here it appears that, although these two things don't at all exclude one another, von le Fort entered the Catholic Church not so much because of a rational assent to Catholic dogmas, but rather because the living person of the Church has been alone in addressing the poet at the core of her being and recognizing her full dignity and vocation as human being. Only the Church is found to know the secrets of the soul in all their variety and unity, because only she is the total confidante of the Creator of the soul.

We read with emotion the biting catalogue of all the familial, social, and intellectual forces which have victimized the soul of the poet by feeding her hunger for fullness of life with conventional answers, theories, generalizations, reductions, or outright lies. Particularly instructive are the clear references to several of the literary, scientific, and philosophical dogmas or "-isms" most in vogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: fatalism ("All things are passing!"), materialism ("But you are nothing!"), romanticism ("They sent her to my heart . . ."), rationalism ("They sent her to my intellect . . ."), psychologism ("She was like a wild beast in forests of dark drives . . ."). In denouncing the way arbitrary human theories usurp the place of the living God, Gertrud von le Fort is a good example of the dissenting, countercultural nature of most Catholic literature in our century, the viewpoint of what misleadingly has been called "the conservative revolution." The murderous betrayal of the soul involved in each of these theories does not, of course, reside in the fact that each is wholly false, but rather in that the truth that each of them contains is imperialistically elevated to the level of the *only* absolute. But in a world of violently clashing absolutes which are all viewed on an equal footing, there can be no real Absolute, no God, and therefore no soul. No hierarchical harmonization of human thought and experience is possible, and the only result is a badly mangled and starving soul, whose health and beauty

consist by rights in the wise integration of all its faculties, which makes possible the soul's apprehension ("grabbing ahold," if you will) of the supreme Good. No one but the Church has said "thou" to the whole soul as inviolate unity; no one but the Church has taken her in, fed her, and restored her to her proper royal status. No one but the Church has proven faithful. Von le Fort did not convert to *Catholicism* as such (which is just one more -ism in a big grab bag of ideologies), but to the Church as *Mater et Magistra*, living Mother and Teacher.

Such a definition of the Church's identity is in itself a major rehabilitation of the historical Catholic institution within the domain of cultural and literary history. We know that the Catholic Church had been perceived at large by the liberal establishment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as being nothing but retrograde, repressive, static, and the supreme enemy of that vague entity, the self-evident dogma of "human progress." This is not the place to discuss the phenomenon of conversion to the Catholic Church on the part of so many critical and creative spirits during the first half of our century. But certainly Gertrud von le Fort is a good case in point. Not only was she a good poet and novelist, but even apart from this she exhibited a high degree of intellectual achievement. Among other things, she had been the prize student and posthumous editor of the Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch, much as Edith Stein was later to be the collaborator of the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Whatever else might be said, it seems, to use the beautiful image of Charles Péguy, that the ancient gnarled and impenetrable bark of the uninterrupted community of faith still contained a living sap which, and against all expectations, has never ceased giving birth to the little green shoots of hope.⁹

The Church's tested vision and old-fashioned remedies were in fact found by many of the best talents of the young generation in the first quarter of our century to be more thoroughly therapeutic than all the new-fangled theories, which in fact only succeeded in atomizing the soul. This is the condition which Walker Percy, in his celebrated 1987 novel of the same title, calls *The Thanatos Syndrome*. With the humor characteristic of many of Percy's characters—a humor which he

says is part and parcel of the Christian imagination—Dr. Tom More describes himself and his situation in this novel in a manner which is a sort of American update of von le Fort's diagnosis. Remember the images: "She was like a frightened bird in a dead universe./ She was like a woman who spends her life dying." This could, in fact, be the description of one of Tom More's own patients, for whom he tries to be "a psychiatrist, an old-fashioned physician of the soul, one of the last survivors in a horde of Texas brain mechanics, M.I.T. neurone circuitrists."¹⁰

I am the only poor physician in town, the only one who doesn't drive a Mercedes or a BMW. I still drive the Chevrolet Caprice I owned before I went away. It is a bad time for psychiatrists. Old-fashioned shrinks are out of style and generally out of work. We, who like our mentor Dr. Freud believe there is a psyche [*Seele*, or 'soul,' in the personalized feminine, as in our poem], that it is born to trouble as the sparks fly up, that one gets at it, the root of trouble, the soul's own secret, by venturing into the heart of darkness, which is to say, by talking and listening, mostly listening, to another troubled human for months, years—we have been mostly superseded by brain engineers, neuropharmacologists, chemists of the synapses. And why not? If one can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret of one's very self?¹¹

The greatness of the soul lies precisely in not being reduced to one of her constituent faculties, but in being unified so that she can perform an act that carries her beyond herself, an act which can indeed be performed only with the whole soul: the act of faith.

It may surprise students of French literature to find such an act of faith in an author long lauded as fashionably "absurd." The most recent production of Eugène Ionesco, the Rumanian-French playwright born in 1912, is the libretto for an opera on the captivity and death at Auschwitz of the Polish martyr. St. Maximilian Kolbe. For some forty years now Ionesco, in spite of himself, has enjoyed wide renown as high priest of the so-called "Theater of the Absurd," a title he rejects as invented by bad critics with only literary sensationalism (but

⁹Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1975), 681.

¹⁰Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 16.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 13.

not too much understanding) in mind. In a recent interview he declared that his plays have always intended to dramatize, not at all the absurdity of human existence, but the ways in which modern society has turned itself into a living "Theater of the Absence of God." And he adds that only one sin is unpardonable: not to believe, not to have faith, because this is the sin that kills the soul by making each human faculty an illusion-factory and a god unto itself.¹² The predictable results? The many works of the Satanic imagination in which our century abounds, not only Auschwitz, the Gulag Archipelago, and Hiroshima, but also the most cowardly of all genocides, that of little people placidly growing in what ought to be the safest place in the universe.

We used to call the naturally virtuous soul in search for God, truth, and beauty, the *anima naturaliter christiana*—the soul as somehow already Christian in its natural dispositions. But for the modern soul suffering from the condition variously described by von le Fort, Percy, and Ionesco, Hans Urs von Balthasar has had to coin a brand-new and truly funereal expression: the *anima technica vacua*—the soul as scoured void of any intimate content and desire by the tyranny of technology. Technological man, by definition, is incapable of faith. For him, *God cannot exist*. And "if God does not exist," as Ivan Karamazov affirmed long ago, "then everything is possible."

V.

It should be obvious that we have been using the word "soul" here to mean the total source of life in the person. But, even at that, if we talk of "soul" too exclusively, this could easily confirm the suspicions of some that the Catholic Imagination, if not wholly spiritualistic, is nonetheless mostly concerned with the spiritual dimension to the detriment of immediate, sensual realities. It is true that every author stakes out a special area of competence and a special vocabulary, and some Catholic authors do seem austere to the point of evading, if not rejecting, the dimension of the sensual. But this is far from being true of all or even typical of most. In this connection, I offer a poem by Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet who died

¹²Eugène Ionesco, "Me, Absurd? What an Absurdity!" Interview with Stefano Paci, in: *Thirty Days*, 5 (September 1988), 68.

in 1957 and who was the first Latin American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1945):

Prayer

Oh, no! How could God let the bud of my breasts go dry
when He Himself so swelled my girth?
I feel my breasts growing,
rising like water in a wide pool, noiselessly.
And their great sponginess casts a shadow
like a promise across my belly.
Who in all the valley could be poorer than I
if my breasts never grew moist?

Like those jars that women put out to catch the dew of night,
I place my breasts before God.
I give Him a new name,
I call Him the Filler,
and I beg of Him the abundant liquid of life.
Thirstily looking for it, will come
my son.¹³

This text is notable for what could almost be called a lyrical "physiology of faith," and Gabriela Mistral's intensely sensual religious style is reminiscent of a strain of Catholic literature also represented by the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset, best known for her novel of medieval Norway, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Like Mistral, Undset received the Nobel Prize, in 1928.

Mistral's and Undset's insistence that the body plays a crucial role in the fullness of Christian life naturally evokes the conclusion of the chapter in Mojtabai's novel mentioned at the beginning. It is the moment when Brother Shad is ready to wrap up his revival. (I think it is no coincidence that all three of these writers are women.) Henrietta, one of the novel's two protagonists, has somehow been more passive than usual all through the rousing service, and has not budged from her seat when most around her have gone up to the altar to, as the phrase goes, "surrender themselves." She notices that one of

¹³Lucila Godoy Alcayaga (pseud. Gabriela Mistral), *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral*, trans. by Langston Hughes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957).

the "sisters," whom she had seen earlier with her newborn baby, has in the meantime slipped out unseen and

. . . she hopes Marcy's going to get a little time with the new baby here in Durance before they both get glorified bodies and go sailing off. But—why would they want glorified bodies now? When even Henrietta—tired, sweaty, itchy with the heat, with bunions on her toes, wattled, addled, sagged and saddlebagged—doesn't really want one. This body is all right, fits like an old boot. She'll take what she knows. . . .¹⁴

It seems to me that here Henrietta, far from rejecting her faith in the resurrection of the body, is rather affirming the rootedness of such resurrection in the real body in its present state, which is supposedly what the dogma of the Incarnation is all about. In his ecstatic though ill-advised enthusiasm, Brother Shad is attempting to catapult himself and his whole congregation—by sheer force of rhetoric—out of the whole created order to achieve here and now some sort of timeless angelic existence. By contrast, Henrietta has grown to love the whole of her often difficult daily round by making an effort to live each moment of it with patience and fidelity. Like the Church in von le Fort's poem, who "sacrificed for [the soul] and this has been her food," Henrietta finds happiness in continuing to run her restaurant, the Three Square Meals, located across the street from the cemetery. At the same time, Father Gilvary, her co-protagonist, who himself occasionally sits in one of her booths, continues to run St. Jude's Church despite his growing blindness and a declining congregation. In expectation of Christ's Second Coming, Henrietta offers people hot coffee, bearclaws, and conversation; Father Gilvary offers them the bread of his presence and of the daily Eucharist, both at his church and at the hospital. Both of them, unlike Brother Shad, do it by cultivating the Mystery of Christ unobtrusively and, by this very fact, all the more profoundly and genuinely. Henrietta and Father Gilvary do not dictate to Christ how and when he should come. This subterranean and almost wholly anonymous approach to Christian living gives the novel its title, *Ordinary Time*. In an unusual epigraph that quotes the *Motu Proprio* of Paul VI instituting the Revised Roman Rite,

¹⁴*Ordinary Time*, 97-8.

the author says she has borrowed her title from the name of the major portion of the Catholic liturgical cycle, the season that culminates with the Feast of Christ the King, which is also the terminus of the novel.

One of the meanings of the rich word "Catholic," then, when applied to the imagination, is that this creative faculty must be universal in the sense of "comprehensive." It must realize in its creations the law of the Incarnation by bringing into harmony, rather than violently separating, the world of eternity and the world of time, the realm of the spirit and the realm of the flesh: all of desirable reality. As Percy said, the Catholic Imagination should not settle for less. It is the final test of the Catholic Imagination whether it remains symphonic, fully conscious of the versatility and universality of the awesome Mystery it bears, or whether it will allow itself to become corrupted by the logic of worldly ideologies, which seek to harden, manipulate, and politicize both the mystic fervor of the believer and the creative freedom of the artist.

But the last word should be had here by a representative of the Catholic Imagination, and not a mere interpreter. It is writers such as those I have presented who, in a real eucharistic sense, nourish our own imagination with the bread of their presence in the works they have offered us. Should the symphonic beauty of the following poem find a lasting echo in each of our academic souls, then there is hope that all our scholarly striving promises lasting fruit. The poem is rooted in a deeply religious vision of the underlying goodness of creation as imagined, executed, and sustained by God, the original Artist. The result is the deep peace and thrill of a world at home with itself, the slow and quiet but irrepressible cosmic dance of all creatures as they "grab aholt" of one another around their common Source and Center, the Creator, more inwardly present to them than they are to themselves. The Creator, I suspect, has been hidden by the poet within the poem's final image in the manner of a Hasidic parable. The poem was written in 1944 in Warsaw by the Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, and it holds out to us the best possible antidote to the ravages of war, injustice, and despair as it portrays the true Christian apocalypse:

A Song on the End of the World

On the day the world ends
A bee circles the clover,

A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumpets
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man (who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy)
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.¹⁵



¹⁵Czesław Miłosz, *The Collected Poems*, trans. by Anthony Milosz (New York: The Ecco Press, 1988), 56-7.