Carlos Villalobos Padilla

THE ART OF SHORT FICTION IN JAMES FARL POWERS

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THE ART OF SHORT FICTION
IN
JAMES FARL POWERS

To my former teachers

at St. Ann's Hermitage, Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

at St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas.

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C. V. P.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER ONE: CHARACTERIZATION	13
1.— "The Trouble"	13
2.— "The Devil Was the Joker"	18
3.— "Prince of Darkness"	28
4.— General View of Other Stories	34
CHAPTER TWO: TECHNIQUE	47
A.— Plot	47
B.— Structural Unity	53
C.— Other Aspects of Technique	59
1.— Exposition and Composition	59
2.— Setting	62
3.— Atmosphere	63
4.— Point of View	64
5.— Harmony and Balance: Full-length Analysis of "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does"	69
CHAPTER THREE: ARTISTIC VISION	83
1.— Stress of Meaning Over Fact	83
2.— Tension Between the Flesh and the Spirit	84
3.— The Priest: Key Character	88
4.— Moral View	91
5.— Humor: The Key Note	97
CONCLUSIONS	109
APPENDIX	113
Letter from J. F. Powers to the writer of the present thesis in gracious answer to a request for suggestions about use of bibliographical material.	
Published Collections of J. F. Powers with the listing of the stories contained in each.	113
Short Stories of J. F. Powers in Magazines and Anthologies.	114
Bibliography.	117

INTRODUCTION

WHY POWERS Catholic writers of contemporary fiction are not a novelty among European men of letters. Outstanding writers of the fiction which evolves about life as vivified by Catholicism are, of course, Mauriac, Bernanos, Claudel, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, among others. Catholic writers in America, for reasons that are beyond the present study, are generally conceded not yet to have equaled their European confreres in the scope and art of their fiction. This lack of adequate representation in English letters has in recent years been gnawing the conscience of literary-minded American Catholics.

The appearance of J. F. Powers' "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" two decades ago, therefore, marks a new turn in American fiction. Harry Sylvester, Jr., enthusiastically emphasized the importance of the story in the following terms:

> "It is the first profound and distinguished short story written by an American Catholic. It might even be a great story. In it for the first time in this country, we find a profound love and knowledge of God and the Church married in a distinguished prose to a profound love and knowledge of the human beings."[1]

"Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" was first published in the magazine *Accent* in the winter of 1943 when Powers had just begun to be published. The expectations of his early admirers turned out to be well founded. He did not disappoint Sylvester and many other critics who began to take heart in the fact that American Catholics had at last one "commesurate spokesman" in the art of fiction.

Upon the publication, in 1947, of *Prince of Darkness,* Powers' first collection of stories, numerous commentators bestowed high critical praise to the "unusual collection." It would be expected that acclaim would appear in Catholic magazines, but similar recognition appeared in the widely read secular periodicals as well: *The Saturday Review of Literature, New York Times Book Review,* and *The New Yorker.* In England, Evelyn Waugh reviewed the collection and confirmed Sylvester's admiration, rejoicing in the fact that American Catholics at last were becoming of age in the literary field. In America Sister Mariella Gable may be said to have echoed this general chorus in her article, "Catholic Fiction Arrives in America," a highly commendable review of *Prince of Darkness.*[2]

(1) Vol. 44, November 10, 1944, p. 101.

(2) See BIBLIGRAPHY at the end of thesis for exact reference of writers and magazines mentioned.

An author with such a quick and wide literary recognition could hardly have passed unnoticed by Ray West in his critical work, *The Short Story in America, 1900-1950.* In the fifth chapter, "The Short Story in the 1940's," West includes Powers with such names as Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Walter Van Tilburg, writers, all of them, "carrying on in the tradition of those authors whose achievement we rate highest in the history of the American Short Story."[3] Among "those authors" of tradition West names Katherine Ann Porter, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner.

In 1956 when Mr. Powers' second collection, *The Presence of Grace,* made its appearance, favorable and laudable critical reviews followed with astonishing profusion. Frank O'Connor, a noted Irish short-story writer and critic, reviewed the book in *Saturday Review of Literature,* where he makes the assertion: "Powers is among the greatest of living story-tellers."[4] In *The Listener,* a noted English magazine, Sean O'Faolain specified *The Presence of Grace* as "a one-man show at the top-level of short-story writing"; the book's stories, he felt, were "of a rare perfection among the short stories of this half century."[5] Alfred Kazin in *New Republic,* Evelyn Waugh in *Catholic World,* and William Peden in *Virginia Quarterly Review* equally give almost unrestrained praise in their respective reviews of Powers' second volume of collected stories. Practically every major Catholic magazine, such as *America, Catholic World,* and *Commonweal,* carried favorable reviews.

LIMITATIONS' AIM, AND PLAN OF WORK

Time will ultimately determine James Farl Powers' literary worth, particularly since, apparently, he has many years ahead to beckon him to greater success.[6] The recently pubished *Morte d'Urban*—his first full-lenght novelis a further proof of his continued progress in fiction. The novel was selected by *Time* among the best ten published in 1962.[7]

The present study, however, will be limited to the twenty short stories that are found in Mr. Powers' two published collections. The stories in these two books have been chosen because they have won the approval of acknowledged American, Irish, and English short-story critics.[8] One exception has been made to this restriction for the story, "Look How the Fish Live," because it has been considered highly corroborative of Powers' artistic vision. The story appeared in *The Reporter* a year after the publication of Powers' second anthology. The purpose of this thesis is, therefore, an attempt to evaluate J. F. Powers' literary artistry in the restricted and highly esteemed area of short fiction through a thorough and critical examination of those of his stories that have appeared in book form.

(3) West, *op. cit.,* p. 106.

(4) "Reflections of a Petty World," March 24, 1956, p. 22.

(5) Vol. 56. September 27, 1956, p. 479.

(6) See Appendix at the end: "Short Stories of J. F. Powers in magazines and other anthologies," for various selections in prize collections.

(7) January 4, 1963, p. 2.

(8) See Appendix, "Published Collections of J. F. Powers," for complete listing of stories.

In order to evaluate adequately the short fiction of this now-living author, purposeful investigation has been made into contemporary criticism found mostly in book reviews and some rare essays scattered throughout the present-day periodical literature. But, above all, this study calls for a careful analysis and a detailed criticism of the author's individual stories themselves. Such analysis requires both familiarity with general aesthetic principles and a deep understanding and heart-felt appreciation of the modern short story as art of high literary merit.

Critical principles and sympathetic appreciation will here be applied to the picked, chosen selections needed in order to explore the various aspects of Mr. Powers' stories and to determine their artistic value. Having in mind the contemporary literary atmosphere of artistic competition and patient dedication to short-story writing, this thesis then will examine the evidence, by analysis and critical comment, for considering James Farl Powers as a master of the short story.

A glance at the table of contents reveals the general plan of the present thesis. There is a chapter for each of the main topics, namely: Characterization, Technique, and Artistic Vision. At the end, the Conclusions single out in summary fashion the outstanding characteristics that may be considered as making Powers a full-fledged, literary artist.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA *As a boy, James Farl Powers lived in Illinois: in Jacksonville where he was born in 1917, then in Rockford to which his family moved, and later still in Quincy where he attained a high school education in Quincy College Academy under the direction of the Franciscan Fathers. After graduation in 1935, he went to Chicago to try his luck at securing a job. He worked first in a department store, then in insurance, selling policies from door to door. Before he was twenty years old, the writer in him had spurred him to buy a typewriter and a copy of James Joyce's ULYSSES.*

Recalling those days when jobs were hard to get, Powers writes: "I traveled through the South and Southwest working as a chauffeur, and I took the type with me. I had some idea I needed it in my business, the only catch being: what was my business? I know now that I was a writer then for better or for worse. It was the only thing I cared about being."[9] *He also worked as an editor on the Historical Records Survey—a WPA project—in Chicago and, at the same time, attended Northwestern University, where he took courses in English under the now famous Bergen Evans.*

In 1946 he married Betty Wahl, a writer herself, whose stories have appeared, like many of her husband's, in THE NEW YORKER. He has since taught creative writing at the Universities of St. John's (Collegeville, Minnesota), Marquette, and Michigan. He has received a KENYON REVIEW fellowship and a grant from the National Institute of American Academy of Letters. He has lived in Ireland on two occasions, one for a year and the other some six or seven weeks. Besides his stories and the recent novel he has also written numerous articles and reviews for different magazines. He lives now in St. Cloud, Minnesota, with his wife and their five children, three girls and two boys.

(9) *Catholic Authors.* Vol. 2, ed. Matthew Hoehn O. S. B., New Jersey, 1952, p. 455.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTERIZATION

One of the essential elements in the art of fiction lies in the power of characterization through action. Therefore, a study that undertakes the evaluation of the art of any fiction writer demands, above all, full consideration of the manner in which he develops character. For this reason, any attempt to evaluate the art of James F. Powers must necessarily include a detailed discussion of the manner in which Mr. Powers develops character as a product of his artistic creation. Powers' ability in "creating characters with more than superficial reality"[1] is evidenced throughout his short stories. In the study under consideration three of these stories have been selected as most representative of Mr. Powers' art. These have been analized thoroughly as an illustration of the author's artistic talent in character creation. What follows as "General View of Other Stories" is made up of short analyses that stress the same talent of the author.

1.— "THE TROUBLE"

The first of the stories selected is "The Trouble." In it the character developed is that of a small boy, and the development itself shows him moving from complete lack of emotional states, to deep-rooted, manly sorrow. Objectively and apparently without feeling in the beginning, the story presents the sufferings of the Negroes in the Unted States through the eyes of a Negro boy not long after his mother's death as a consequence of a race riot. On a second reading, moreover, one may discern a very distinctive purpose on the part of Mr. Powers in choosing the small boy to be the narrator. The story records the precocious growth into maturity of the boy's emotional life. Characterization stands out the more effectively because of the contrast it evinces through the boyish, unsophisticated style of the narrative.

The first scene of the story presents the boy's character in his eagerness to peek at the world through a shaded window. He fully shares with his twin sister an almost excessive curiosity which leads them to conceal their disregard of "Old Gramma's "warning to move away from the window. The warning is intended to prevent them from witnessing the violence of an imminent street race-riot. With vivid imagination he pictures himself hunting rats with a .22-caliber rifle at the moment people are being killed in the riot. So far there is complete lack of feeling in the narrative.

(1) *The New Yorker*, book review of *Prince of Darkness*, May 10, 1947, p. 104.

The boy's first reaction, as far as feeling is concerned, comes when he vaguely senses some personal danger and shares completely his twin sister's fright at the thought that whites might be coming up the stairway. He reacts promptly and judges properly from the noise and commotion, that it is members of his own race who are calling at the door even before his grandmother realizes it.

His instinct for observation is intensified; his memory is enlivened: his grandmother had hidden the key that locked the door "down her neck somewhere," and she must reach "down her neck" to retrieve it. "Mama" is brought in seriously injured. Still there is no sense of pity or of personal sadness on the part of the small boy. He records faithfully what he had heard, "Put her here, put her there" but the sight of his mother's suffering does not register any pain in his own sensibility. The bone that showed through the flesh of Mama's arm forces him to report its nauseating effect; he records only: "A bone—God, it made me sick." In the meantime "Old Gramma" has fainted. She had been somewhat forgotten or lost sight of, but the little faithful reporter quickly fills in the gap and describes how she is revived with a wet handkerchief.

The doctor arrives "with a little black bag." The boy's comment is that he "looked tired" after seeing Mama's condition. From the commentaries of the men and women that brought her in, the boy gathers what happened. The doctor apparently knew some details. Mama, coming home in a streetcar, had been the victim of a race riot. Here a personal note, as if it were incidentally, is added by the young narrator, all the more poignant because of the unfeeling manner in which it is presented, between dashes, buried in a paragraph of details: "—Mama works now and we are saving for a cranberry farm—."

It is at this moment that Powers introduces, through the boy reporter, the commentary of the "man with glasses on" who quotes from a Negro poet calling the members of his race to organize and fight to the finish: "If we must die let it not be like hogs hunted and penned in an inglorious spot." With that sentence a young hero is born. Naturally, everybody is listening intently. For the boy, however, this is the first real experience of noble emotions. In a matter-of-fact way the author has him state simply: "I was glad because I was listening to him too." This is the first time in the narrative that the boy is made to express personal feelings. He feels glad to hear the man. Now for the first time he takes part in the conversation. When he hears that the man is speaking poetry, his natural curiosity for things exterior to himself turns intellectual, and he is eager to find out about poetry: "I thought if that is what it is, I know what I want to be now—a poetryman." The boy is thinking and feeling deeply; he is growing fast into the emotional life of manhood. When he asks "the man with glasses on" whether that is his poetry or somebody else's, the men and women from the group are all surprised "to see me there like I ought not to hear such things."

Up to this time the boy had been a passive observer, even if a keen one. From now on he is member of the adult world, whose attention he has attracted by active participation in the conversation through a casual question, but more so by the thinking process that is seen gradually to unfold within him. After all the strangers have left, the reader hears him answering with

a proud "yes I can" (work the can opener) to the old lady friend that remained to prepare a meal for "Old Gramma"—still lying on the cot after the fainting spell—and for the four children, one of them Carrie, his twin sister; the other two, still younger. He revolts at the idea that his mother might die. He thinks that the kind old lady is "crazy" for suggesting it. He even yells violently at her, denying the possibility.

At this moment in the story one is completely aware that the boy is wrong in his judgment, contrary to what might be expected from his keen sensory perception but if one has followed the boy's emotional growth, one also is obliged to conclude that quite naturally the boy's judgment is blurred by the strong experience he is undergoing. He says: "Mama was just sleeping and the doctor was there in case she needed him and everything." The last word here reveals the effect of emotion in a boy who had so far consistently been describing every detail of the scene; his power of description simply suffered a momentary shock.

He has refused to take any food; so has Carrie. His yell of protest to the woman he has judged as "crazy" has aroused Old Gramma, who asks directly of the boy if it was he who made the noise. The former pride of the "yes-I-can" answer to the old woman friend is changed now to a humble frankness with "Yes, it was." The reversal of attitude may be interpreted as showing the integrity of a boy grown to the moral stature of a man ready to admit his own faults.

As at the beginning of the story, the keen observer continues with a series of astonishing details. Old Gramma goes out to the grocery store; the confused, clattering noise of a newly formed riot is heard together with the bleating of a bugle, "tan tivvy tan tivvy tan tivvy." With exuberant imagination the sensitive youngster proffers the simile of white folks' fox hunting. Old Gramma coming back from the store appears to him radiantly young in the evening sun; naturally, he thinks of his mother also, "both of them beautiful New Orleans ladies." The poet in him already shows with a bright promise, even while he is unconscious of it. He has again forgotten his objective reporting to reveal what goes on within him.

The story then stages a race riot in the street before the window; a white man "without a Chinaman's chance" is followed by a horde of "coloreds" into their dead-end street. The little observer at the window writes feelingly: "I hoped the coloreds do the job up right." He has been very sparing of descriptive adjectives or epithets, so that when he says "that fool whiteman," the word *fool* reveals a very distinctive feeling of contempt. Soon he finds himself in a maze of mixed feelings. He prays for the white man. He admires him, in a way; in a last effort to escape his captors, the white man uses his bugle to knock down the colored boy closest to him. The reporter states: "He did a smart thing." Again the adjective is very meaningful here. "Then Gramma opened the door and saved him."

Here the story has reached a high point in the unfolding of the boy's emotional life. "I was very glad for the white man," the author makes him say, "until I remembered poor Mama all broken to pieces on the bed and then I was sorry Old Gramma did it." *I was very glad, I was sorry, poor Mama*: here are significant phrases in the unfolding of the boy's character. This is the first time in the story that the boy makes a statement of feeling towards his mother. According to his first impulse, he had felt like a man

in the human brotherhood irrespective of race. This feeling, however, had quickened his compassion toward his mother and, ironically, given rise to the feeling of vengeance. The boy's reflective mood is apparent now; he realizes that, irrespective of what happens to the white man, no good can come to his mother. Therefore, the boy's changing feelings shift into indifference toward him.

It is significant to note that the first high feelings recorded by the boy were couched in the words, "I was glad" while hearing part of a Negro poem. The second time he experiences gladness comes at this moment, and he repeats the words with the adverb "very" inserted. He is now involved in his own inward struggle, but it is under these flashes of gladness that he visualizes great truths. He is *glad* with the "poetryman" when he contemplates the salvation of the Negro race. He is *very glad* when he sees life saved irrespective of race. It is now that he tells us in his own naive way of his "funny idea":

> I told myself the trouble is somebody gets cheated or insulted or killed and everybody else tries to make it come out even by cheating and insulting and killing the cheaters and insulters and killers. Only they never do.

Here the tiny reporter has turned into a big philosopher. He has made great progress intellectually; the keen sense of observation and strong emotions awakened by the "poetryman" have aroused him. The example of Old Gramma saving the white man has had its point; so has the attitude of the doctor who, standing by the window, has seen it all and tacitly approves Old Gramma's magnanimous deed.

Quite different has been the attitude of Carrie, the twin sister. Seated in the "good chair," her eyes closed, she turns inwardly to herself in self-destroying pity. She does not have the courage to see the world outside, through the window, any more.

The withe man meanwhile is brought into the living-room; he is told that he may leave whenever he wants, but he is also advised to wait.

At this point in the story Daddy arrives and rushes to the bed where his wife lies dying. Now the reporter turns lyric poet again; he sees the "strongest man in the world crying." There is admiration in the use of the adjective in the superlative degree, and there is subdued restraint combined with vividness in the use of the word "crying" that describes a sad situation through an unadorned action word. Here again the author displays a careful balance that prevents sentimentality from destroying the total impact of the story.

Daddy rises, sees the white man in the room, and demands an explanation "with thunder in his throat." Here the little reporter feels big with the bigness of the idea that has been troubling him all the while. With a sense of magnanimous forgiveness, he makes himself equal to Old Gramma and the doctor. With understandable manly pride, he states simply: "None of us that knew would tell." The suspense that follows is caused by Daddy's threat to the white "visitor" should Mama die.

Meanwhile another and rather unexpected complication in the story presents three different attitudes towards the priest Old Gramma had called

from the grocery store. Daddy does not expect the priest to come; Old Gramma is sure he will; the boy is doubtful: a former assistant priest, rumor had it, had gone away because "he could not stand to save black souls." But the priest comes, "by God, while the riot was going on." This is the young reporter, again echoing surprise and admiration. Meticulously, he then chronicles a host of successive or simultaneous details: the black bag that Father Crowe brings, Daddy "mad as a bull" threatening the white man again, Old Gramma quieting Daddy, priest and white man in pointed conversation, recitation of the rosary, Carrie's unthinking but passionate pouting and crying, Latin prayers, the doctor's slow motions in a last check on Mama's condition, Daddy rushing to the bed and shaking all over. At long last the young reporter brings in his own refections on Daddy's behavior regarding the action as it has now progressed: "I believe he must have been crying although I thought he never would again."

To the boy, Daddy's tears are a disappointment, but a disappointment that reveals the boy's pity towards weakness. But then—the irony of it—when this mature little man feels the strongest, he is forced to admit: "I began to get an awful pain in my stomach." Daddy rises and suddently calls back the white man ready to leave, only to dismiss him with a whisper that could have a variety of meanings: utter indifference, utter contempt, or mangnanimous forgiveness. The precise significance of Daddy's whisper "I would not touch you" is not revealed.

Only now is the boy's final stage in the boy's character development presented, and this is done emphatically. He sees Daddy walking back to Mama's bed with "his big shoulders" sagging "like I never saw them before," he hears Old Gramma's ejaculation, he realizes his mother is dead. Then development reaches full cycle in spite of himself and in an explosion of feeling. His tears now are a man's tears, not like Baby's, or George's innocent, unfeeling tears; not like his twin sister's—selfish, unreasoned tears; but a man's tears like his Daddy's—deeply and strongly felt tears.

J. F. Powers' disciplined hand marvelously maintains the story in a careful balance, and thus he adroitly avoids the sentimentality that would wreck it as a work of art. "The Trouble" is a sad story intended to record the awakening of a human being into the world of emotions. The boy in the story moves from one stage in life where he is little more than a photographic, unfeeling recording device, into another in which he experiences successively and gradually a wide range of feelings. In the course of this transformation he experiences animal fear at the thought of being attacked by whites; nausea and physical aversion to horror scenes, as at the sight of the bone piercing Mama's arm; admiration for a leader when the poem was recited; pride and self respect when he took part in the conversation and opened the vegetable soup can; a sense of integrity and responsibility when he admitted his fault in yelling at the old lady; the joy of beauty when he beheld Old Gramma radiant in the evening sun; filial piety as he associated his mother with beauty. All these emotions successively bring the young narrator into the middle of the story. At that point he begins to display sympathy towards his mother with the common phrase, "poor Mama." The author then quickly and skillfully by passes sentimentality by bringing conflicting emotions into play. There is gladness, there is vengeance, there is indifference, all conflicting emotions that come successively and

almost simultaneously to drown out what might have become a maudling sense of pity. In this way Powers brilliantly succeeds in his characterization: through conflicting action he leaves as climactic emotion, the boy's profound sorrow at the full realization of the loss of his mother.

2.— "THE DEVIL WAS THE JOKER"

In "The Devil Was the Joker," Powers undertakes the characterization of a young man, an ex-seminarian, idealistic, diffident, easily-confiding, guileless, who gradually develops into a man of decision, courageous and wise, but for all that compassionate and generous. Actually the protagonist, Myles Flynn, is artistically set off against his false friend, Mr. McMaster, a fraudulent salesman of church goods, who, through his own drinking, eventually betrays himself. In the story, search into the character of one is found inextricably involved with the search into the personality of the other, and it is from the interaction of the two, that the characters of both are revealed in a humorous yet, masterly fashion, by the author.

The story opens as McMaster, during his last day at a hospital, sets about winning the services of a meek orderly named Myles. He criticizes "That other son of a bitch" —another orderly— and praises Myles: "You, though, you're different." Myles is easily won over and begins to confide in Mac: he has been four years in the seminary "until something happened;" he is sad about his failure, but generously thinks of making himself useful to society. Contrastingly, the convalescent man grins at Myles in an obsequious manner, and, pressing for more confidence, asks of him: "Are you cradle Catholic?"

Already in the early developments, the ex-seminarian is made to show little knowledge of the people in the world; he thinks all Irish names, for instance, must necessarily belong to Catholics. Craftily and self-confidently, Mr. McMaster proceeds to enlighten his protégé-to-be and to accustom him to confront the modern world. He tells him that he has just met a Jew, Buckingham by name, but withholds his own identiy as a non-Catholic although his name is more blatantly Irish than that of Buckingham. In a similar vein he welcomes intimacy—"Call me Mac," and he reciprocates Myles' trust by confiding that his own work is with the Clementine Fathers.

When friendly conversation within the sacrosanct enclosure provided by the screen of the hospital ward has been established, Mac casually obtains the information he most desires at the moment: "Drive a car?" Mac asks. Myles does. Pretending to procure Myles a better job, Mac is in reality providently planning for his own future. Meanwhile the guileless ex-seminarian listens patiently. He scents liquor, but thinks no evil and interprets it as intended for a "good night's rest." Myles, on the one hand devoted to his work and on the other weak and unsure of himself, contemplates Mac's offer. Wishing to be re-admitted in a seminary, Myles has been corresponding with bishops and waiting for a favorable answer which never comes; Mac's offer, he decides, would be a way to approach his goal with more positive action. Mac speaks in familiar terms of relations with priests and bishops; the proffered job might lead up to "the vital connection."

Already, at the beginning of the story, the author had consciously stressed Myles guilelessness as vital to the coherence of later developments. The

ingenuous hospital orderly "considered part of his job" to be listening kindly to the convalescent man, but seeing the latter with a bottle "tucked under the sheets" does not bring to Myles' mind the urgency of doing anything about hospital rules against liquor. There is a long conversation between the scenting of the liquor and the discovery of the bottle; Myles at this moment has had sufficient time to reflect upon a course of action; nevertheless, he remains blessedly unconcerned and even unconsciously encourages Mac's vice with the secrecy provided by the screen. Two facts about his nature are thus made clear: he is slow-minded and unsuspectingly artless.

Mac succeeds rather easily in making Myles willing to apply for a job with the Clementine Fathers. In order to contribute to Myles' luck with the Fathers, Mac not only accompanies the new recruit, but endeavors to teach him his own ways of concealment and disguise. At the elevator, before confronting the Clementines, he advises the young man to withhold from them the compromising information of a past life in the seminary; he also camouflages his future helper with the "Spirit of Sience and Industry" by the simple device of exchanging neckties. He, moreover, exaggerates with misleading statements. Mac informs the Fathers without qualms that Myles "had gone to the University of Illinois." The truth is that as a boy scout "He had spent the afternoon walking under the campus elms."

It is evident that the author has firmly established with abundant and relevant details the comical disparity between Myles and Mac: one is as guileless as the other is cunning; the first is as frank and straightfoward as the second is evasive and deceiving. With the sense of an accomplished craftsman, the author moves on to reveal the further evolution of the main characters.

At this stage of development, Myles begins to show reluctance toward Mac's equivocation; the switching of ties was done "morosely," but, still he feels that he must acquiesce in the overstatements. He cannot argue and "explain everything" to Mac before the Fathers. He is still shortsighted, not perceptive enough, to sec the whole extent of Mac's stratagem with the Clementines, yet, he suspects that the pep talk Mac delivers to him before them is really meant for them. Seemingly, Mac encourages Myles to give himself whole-heartedly to the apostolic work of the Fathers, but the young man feels that the recruiter may be asking for a raise in salary.

Mac, then, becomes apparently over-solicitous towards Myles. When the question of Myles' draft into the Army is brought up, it is Mac who, for his future subordinate, answers: "All clear." In the matter of salary, which to Myles seems "decidedly pre-war," Mac's circumvention conjures up all sorts of warnings against supposed spendrift habits in order to draw attention away from the meanness of the sum Myles is to receive.

Here Myles is completely unable to penetrate the smokescreen intentions of Mac, his pseudo-benefactor. As a matter of fact the ex-seminarian is not seeking to ameliorate his position economically: the nuns misunderstood him when they congratulated him on leaving the hospital job. His preference is for the hospital work, so as "to make himself useful to society;" his talk with the Fathers reveals him as having a marked interest in the work they do with the delinquents in trade schools. His true motive in seeking the new job as assistant to a salesman is clear to himself, but in his simplicity, he does not feel the need to explain that he takes the job only because

he considers it "a stepping stone" towards making the "vital connection" back to the seminary.

Therefore, it is only superficially that Mac and Myles will "make a great team," ready to complement each other: one, full of initiative, the other, pliant and subservient; one, timid and unarmored against the harsh realities of life; the other, bold and ready to provide protection. That selling subscriptions to the *Clementine* (the "family-type magazine") and building "good will" for the Fathers and their work could give rise to a partnership that would develop into a deep and lasting friendship is only the pretension of Mac.

Myles, however, is not so supine as it might at first appear; he is definitely generous and charitable; he may not be a man of great ability, but he is certainly set on his goal, although still doubtful as to the means he ought to take to attain it. In another respect, he curiously appears secretive in withholding from Mac his innermost desire to return to the seminary. In this aspect Mac has met his equal. Each has his end clearly in view, and both (even if from different motives) keep the view secret from each other.

As soon as they take to the road in Mac's black Cadillac on a building-good-will-for-the-Fathers tour, the traveling agent and his newly acquired "good listener" find it hard to establish common ground for pleasurable conversation. Characteristically, the author describes the situation and its fatality by comparing the pair to "two men in a mine, working at different levels . . . lost to each other." On the topic of hospital nurses, Myles views them only in respect to their value in the corporal works of mercy; Mac, the mercenary, remarks that "a lot of them . . . marry money." Myles thinks of medieval burial confraternities when Mac asks information about "the stiffs." Mac replies to such naiveté with sarcasm: "All free huh . . . the undertakers would love that!" In response Myles strives to make his view-point clear and urges an understanding of higher ideals. Mac reverts to his money-conscious view praising the economic benefits of socialized medecine, of "teamwork." A period of obliged silence follows, after which he misinterprets another of Myles' unselfish views as a "cover-up for his failure to get into anything better."

It is now evident that Myles, the good listener of the beginning of the story, has become self-assertive to the point of maintaining a self-held view in conversation. He already refuses to be moved from an idealistic position, and in so doing, first he puzzles his astute partner in such a way as to force from him a sarcastic comment, then he makes him ponder in silence for a while, and finally, he unconsciously leads him to erroneous interpretations and judgments.

Mac's ascendency over Myles is therefore already on the decline. He has succeeded in luring the ex-seminarian out of the hospital rather easily; he has made him exchange ties and acquiesce to his directions before meeting the Clementines without outward protest. Now the situation begins to show some changes. Mac resorts to unctious ways: "with noticeable patience," he pleads with the imperturbable Myles not to "be too critical of the modern world." The author's point that "pleasurable conversation" is not for his two odd partners is established when the older man, having exhausted all his arguments, is willing to call their talk a draw with: "Let us give it a rest,

huh? You wanna take it awhile?" The long argumentative exchange, therefore, is made to terminate with Myles at the wheel and Mac sleeping on the back seat.

In the next incident of the story —that of the bartender and the "matchboxes with nudes on the cover"— shows Mac neither the protector of virtue on the one side nor the promoter of vice on the other. He tells his young companion: "Avert your eyes, son." With the adolescent bartender he is about to strike a bargain, but from the context all Mac is after is that dollar he would get from the boy "to speed delivery" of matchboxes. On leaving the bar together with Myles, Mac throws the slip of paper with the bartender's name and address into the windy street. The incident perfectly reflects Mac's ambiguous and egotistic attitude.

It is with this episode, even if Myles is not aware of it, that Mac's fraudulent ways are fully realized by the reader. Mac had obtained his driver with the help of a salesman talk of somewhat understandable exaggeration. But now he makes a promise to the bartender without intention to keep it and makes it, moreover, with the sole purpose of deriving an economic benefit at the expense of the boy. The whole incident points directly to fraud.

In an unexpected way the author now presents Myles musing as his false companion might be expected to have mused. Left in the car outside while Mac confers with the bishop in the chancery office, young Myles is presented as calculating and scheming. Had he been allowed to see the bishop he would have tried first "to uncover his weakness and then call back . . . later and play upon it." Close association with Mac has already unconsciously suggested a procedure which Myles disapproves of as soon as he realizes it; moreover, he "rather doubted he could carry out such a scheme." This incident serves also to suggest that Myles has begun to reflect upon Mac's devious ways and found them wanting; a defense reaction has begun.

Similarly, Mac's treatment of Myles indicates certain ingenuousness on the part of Mac, for he is shown completely unaware of any possible reaction in his younger companion. When about to interview the bishop, Mac had feigned to be worried about the battery and had kept Myles running the engine, thus preventing him from seeing the bishop. The very next day, under the same conditions, Mac, unconcerned about the battery, decides that both meet the pastors and leaves the car outside to freeze. In proceeding to instruct Myles before facing the pastors on the details of the "Work," Mac's advice is: "Promise them the moon." Many a pastor would believe, according to him, that a change would be felt in his parish if it "were exposed to the pamphlets and the *Clementine* if these hadn't been tried before." All this procedure follows naively Mac's assunption that Myles is unreservedly dedicated to the Work.

Myles' interest, however, has quite a different origin than that supposed by Mac; it has a different intention. Consequently, on meeting the "incorrigible pastor," Myles feels "offended," while Mac cheerfully takes the "beating" from a knowing priest who refuses to deal with them and dubs both as a "breed apart." The innocent one, of course, feels the injustice of the insult; the fraudulent merchant simply feigns innocence in a softening-up process and is willing to endure anything while there is yet hope of striking a bargain.

Before long Myles discovers: that Mac is not interested in house-to-house canvassing, he "just didn't care that much about people;" that the "sliding scale" Mac uses in dealing with the wealthy and large parishes is "slippery." Myles' reflection is clear, he begins to know Mac as a possible fraud. Mac, ironically, while trying to hide his true motive, keeps on revealing his true nature step by step: his actions and words in unguarded moments betray him. His interest in people is that they do the "donkey work" for him: the pastor making the propaganda from the pulpit, the ushers distributing subscription blanks. Mac just sits in the vestibule, awaiting "a production" for the Clementines. If a production is not feasible, the "package deal" would bring Mac afloat; that means downright business selling church goods or goods which may not have anything to do with the church directly, like bingo cards and lawn mowers. The beautiful pep talk at the beginning about the Work is reduced now to a plain business proposition.

The next step in Mac's degrading self-revelations is provoked by an awakened interest in Myles, who blandly wants to know about Mac's friends. For the super-egotistic merchant, friends happen to be all those from whom he can derive some personal benefit. Mac's instictive behavior, therefore, is to cover up and to deny the fact with rhetorical questions: "Friends? Who said I had any?" These questions, in another sense, imply a truth of fact. Mac has no true friends in the proper meaning of the word, but then, this truth becomes very annoying to Mac when he realizes that he is caught in a lie about the very thing he brags, his "friends." To extricate himself from such a position he sinks deeper, as in a bog, explaining, after a period of reflective silence: "I am a man of many friends — and I don't make a dime on them." The assertion implies that he is defending himself against an accusation that has been suggested by no other but himself, his own guilty conscience.

Without analyzing Mac's tricky mind, Myles simply doubts the explantion as given: "It was hard to believe that everyone was breaking even." He realizes the possibility that Mac is primarily concerned with himself, being "his own representative." With expressions like, "Without knowing it at the time, Myles saw . . . " the author clearly indicates the slow, reflective process in Myles' mind, while Mac, inadvertently and under the influence of drink, keeps on giving up secrets that involve the manifestation of his own fraudulence. Thus he shows how he had cajoled one of those he calls "incorrigibles" into a "production" deal. In the evening of a "most successful day," Mac "relaxing in the cocktail lounge of their hotel" reveals to his disapproving companion how he has softened the intransigent priest through the expedient of the "pledge." What Myles now "saw" is Mac losing his self-respect.

More and more, from now on, Mac has to react defensively to some of Myles' attitudes or feelings. An insult from a priest means nothing to him, but if Myles complains about the expensive hotels, Mac immediately appears hurt and feels obliged to add explanations which result, comically, in further compromising evidence. He admits to his complaining helper that he "got by . . . by attributing part of his living expenses to the car." To placate his helper's worries on that score, Mac suggests "more reasonable hotels" for a time. He also feigns friendliness if the indispensable driver just drives and listens. It is then that he strives for further intimacy coaxing

Myles to stay in the same hotel and seeming to defray the expense from Mac's own account. This feigned friendliness is part of softening-up tactics which in Myles begin to produce a contrary effect.

Mac's frank talk about his ex-friends, all of them "double-crossers," and Myles' moralizing dissertation on the Mystical Body of Christ are presented by the author as ironic examples of a closer association between the two. The incidents may be intended to give rise to the discussion of Mac's dream of a turkey-ranch and a church-goods store with Myles as a lifelong partner in the business. The closer association, the reader is made to feel, lies in Mac's wishful thinking — the product of his drinking.

But the closer they get in this strange pattern, the further apart they tend to be later. They are as close in a discussion as they are apart in their views. The point is illustrated with the discussion on Greed. Mac explains how Superior, Wisconsin, with a better harbor has lost out in business to Duluth because of the covetousness of Superior real-estate agents. From here on, through several days, Myles harks back on Greed and continually finds possible relationships in men's actions. Myles shows a perceptive mind in making these moralizing generalizations against the customs of the modern world. Fished-out lakes, cut-over timberland, almost-extinct Indians, exhausted iron-ore mines, the war in Korea, Hiroshima, — each of these suggests in Myles' mind examples of man's Greed. If the former talk on the Mystical Body of Christ, because of its incomprehensibility, had incited Mac to daydreaming, this one on Greed, irritates him, immersed as he is in the modern world and accustomed to perceive only that which gives him a practical advantage. It irritates him, moreover, because he feels disarmed against the logic which Myles deploys, but even more, because it goes against his own swindling propensities.

Accordingly, Mac reverts to irony: "You talk like you got holes in your head." With such or similar expressions, he "defended the indefensible and fought back." By other remarks also he means to hurt Myles, for instance, ridiculing his "escape" from the seminary. Myles kindly ignores the remarks and presists in sermonizing. But when Myles hears "the tired but amiable croaking from the back seat," the reader wonders whether the expression refers to the effect of the sermon or the drink.

In the expression just quoted, the author heightens two aspects in Mac's characterization with the adjctives *tired* and *amiable*. Mac is "tired" in that he has given up in his efforts to debate with Myles. He cannot follow the latter's arguments, and he has none of his own to keep proposing. He is "amiable" in that he is willing to retain the good will of Myles, even while teasing him somehow pleasurably, jocosely, as in the first stages of drukenness.

With artistic reticence the author has refrained from insisting in the first half of the narrative on the fact of Mac's inordinate indulgence in drink. He has simply suggested it here and there, as with the bottle in the hospital bed, the invitation for a casual drink in the tavern, the cocktail lounge scene, and finally with the comic performance of Mac's debating. The author's reticence fulfills its purpose in characterization by the impression it leaves on the reader that Mac normally hides when he gives himself up to drink. But Myles' awareness of it is clear by now as the statement: "Myles who was getting to know Mac . . ." implies. The next step in Mac's

degrading revelation is his indulging in liquor in a hotel room in the very presence of Myles.

Contrastedly, the persistence with which Myles sermonizes shows how the roles of the two companions have been reversed. Earlier it was Mac who instructed Myles unsuccessfully in the ways of the practical world, changing ties, withholding information, exaggerating facts. Now it is Myles who teaches an equally dull pupil in the ways of the spirit and of morality. Moreover he is persistent. Myles' persistence as moralizer is shown particularly after Mac gets into the habit of inviting him to his room for a drink. The comparison of the one possessed by the drink to one possessed by the devil applied to Mac going about the hotel corridors at night as a roaring lion seems particularly telling. But Mac, the very afternoon of this last admonition takes another pledge from another "hard nut" to close a "deal for a production," Myles realizes then that his situation is becoming peculiarly unbearable. He reflects upon his bad fortune all through his life: as a scout, kept from watching a college football game; in the seminary, dismissed; and now, in a ridiculous role meekly enduring boozy Mac's teasing.

It is significant how Powers, in the development of his characters, allows for stages of indecision such as are true to life. This allowance shows him a perceptive analyst of character. Vicissitudes and changes in life are not all in the same direction. The author has presented Myles as growing consistently stronger. But now a most natural weakness appears, for Myles too is tired, and discouraged besides. This experience predisposes him, ironically, to turn once more to Mac for help after the latter presents him with a sports shirt and then later offers him a key position in the future store of his dream. In Myles' consciousness the doubt rises: "Was it possible that Mac, in his fashion liked him?" For that reason, at the same time that Myles reveals his own dream, his great desire to become a priest, he likewise confides in Mac once more concerning a possibility of contacting a favorable bishop. In a further effort to elicit Mac's help, Myles' own urgency with respect to the Selective Service is finally revealed. What actually happens is that Mac is given an extra topic for haranguing at night: Myles is not a cradle Catholic, he is a fake, and he is a draft-dodger besides.

The question could be asked. Why does Mac react as "ill-disposed to Myles' reluctance to serve in the armed forces?" Mac has been consistently protective with regard to Myles, conceivably to keep him in his service. When Myles asks Mac for a possible contact with a bishop, the latter replies that he knows some bishops and that he "might speak to them." By the tone of the expression the author clearly characterizes Mac as not interested in Myles' plight. Why does Mac feel further "ill-disposed" when Myles, with the further confidence of his standing vis-a-vis the Selective Service, presses for an eager disposition in Mac to help him? An answer could be that Mac helps Myles to help himself and that he is annoyed when pressed to do a favor by which he has nothing to gain. There is another reason. Myles, dejected by his failures through life, is seeking someone to lean on to in his real troubles. Mac, on the other hand, has used the tenderness approach simply as a trick or pretext to gain a personal advantage. Very understandably, therefore, Mac hardens up before Myles. With perspicacity the author describes the situation: "Immediately, Mac, who had not been paying much

attention released an ear for listening." Over and above the two reasons just stated, there is yet another. This situation offers Mac a perfect opportunity to regain his lost ascendency over Myles. The net results of Myles' confidences and of his ingenuous query, "Are you a veteran?" are Mac's bragging of having served in two wars and Myles' fear of provoking sarcastic remarks were he to express any doubts about Mac's claims.

That night Myles again is brooding, "thinking of Saint Paul and other convicts" while he listens to Mac's tedious joking: "They'll clap you in jail—where you belong." Myles must feel alone, whithout friends; and, yet, he feels inexplicably caught in the company of Mac. His attempt to sleep in a "rooming house, out of reach," is good but for one night, after which "they were together again." Luckily for Myles this time, Mac, resuming his drunken nagging of former nights, commits the *faux pas* of showing his stomach scar—clearly and beyond doubt an apendectomy scar to the former hospital orderly—as a proof of a battle wound. To Myles this is a revelation that heightens his downcast spirits. If a few days before he had feared to hurt Mac's feelings, now he is amused when Mac treats him with "outrage and sarcasm" and stubbornly continues lying: "Shrapnel—some still inside."

Up to now the author has presented Myles's mental perception as behind that of the reader. That is, the reader sees in Mac what Myles is able to see only at a later period. At the amusing scene just referred to, however, Myles seems to catch up with the reader. Myles retires that night "feeling he had the upper hand." From now on he is surer of himself and better able to interpret Mac.

What Myles lacks is decsion of his own. Mac is now unable to deceive him, but he may have to go on with him for an indefinite time, notwithstanding his intolerable role of a "boon companion" to a cheat, liar, and drunkard. Myles has become somehow accustomed to Mac's ways. He might as well keep on with him "until something happens," a chance meeting with a bishop, or a call from the Selective Service Board. Besides, Myles, being of a good nature, mild and forgiving—he "would not let Mac know he was touching a sore spot"—might even decide to stay with Mac, who needs a driver more than ever.

A further change, therefore has still to occur in the development of Myles' character. His final decision to break with Mac presents a problem which the author solves admirably in the scene of the curate and Myles. Instead of having the decision be the result of Myles' brooding over his bad luck, the author selects this confrontation with a young priest having Myles' "same enthusiasms and prejudices" in order to dramatize a key point in the story.

Myles has been visualizing the awkwardness of his position as a bored, "boon companion" even since his sermonizing on the subject of drink. But habit is stronger than reason. He has been too long with Mac. He needs an outside provocation to realize that the solution to his problem lies on "hitchhiking from see to see, washing dishes if he had to, but calling on bishops personally." That provocation is offered by the curate.

While Mac and the three pastors play blackjack upstairs in the rectory, the curate holds forth in lively conversation downstairs with Myles. The curate is so eager with recommendations, counsels and solutions, that Myles notices his "tendency to lecture." In defense of his own position and to emphasize the difficulty of carrying out a resolution, Myles counters by letting it be

known that the last bishop seen "would not let us set foot in his diocese." And that bishop is the curate's own. The conversation at that point ends abruptly: "the shadow of the bishop had fallen upon them." It is this conversation, however, which serves to stir up Myles in such a manner that the very next day he anounces to Mac his decision to quit, and to quit "Right away."

That the contact with the curate has direct bearing upon Myles' attitude is further made manifest when, in order to retire to his room and leave Mac to his thoughts and his bottle the last night they spent together in the hotel, Myles realizes that the pretext he gives—that it is bedtime—is the same that the curate used the night before to interrupt a conversation that had gone amiss. Another point in the experience with the curate that has deeper implications for the story is the curate's allusion to Moses striking the rock twice in order to obtain the desired water. To Myles, saddened, the allusion evokes another image: Moses did not reach the Promised Land.

In making the decision to quit, therefore, Myles shows the courage of a man that achieves maturity by taking full responsibility of his actions after due deliberation. If he is sincere with himself, he cannot degrade himself by being simply a passive witness to Mac's degradation; he must seek a way of his own, he must strike that rock twice (see the curate's bishop) even if that means to hitch-hike upon a lonely road with some forebodings.

With the characters already developed, what follows is a natural conclusion in a climax of a comedy worked out to the last details of craftsmanship by the author.

Myles, straightforward, without preamble, is made to state clearly his decision to quit. Mac, cautious, asks for time, explores possible motives that could induce Myles to change his mind. First he proposes money. Then, under the influence of drink, Mac offers to help Myles to "graduation," meaning ordination. Myles is imperviable to money and cannot be deceived by chimerical promises regarding something he must "pursue on his own." But when Mac starts teasing him about the possibility of being "4-F" in the draft selection and that, therefore, there is no urgency after all, Myles is "almost tempted to stay." He feels lonesome—he "could think of no one else who did" want him; he is tempted to believe that Mac not only wants him but likes him. The comedy and irony continue, Myles cannot pass the mental test for the Selective Service.

When Mac becomes humorously tender—"I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for you. A place in my business," Myles mentions the word "supermarket," sympathetically, the reader feels. To Mac the word sounds sarcastic—"Mac frowned." He may be sore thinking he is being sujected to ridicule, or he may be rather rather puzzled. "Supermarket" may suggest him, seeing double as he is, an ethereal world beyond his comprehension, like the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ and the meaning of true charity of the corporal works of mercy, or, worse still, the giving of something away "free." Mac's disconsolate confession that he is "not even a Catholic" causes a momentary shock in Myles only to start him looking back through Mac's motives and actions to clarify Mac's little game of teasing him as "not being a cradle Catholic."

Myles is now ready to interpret for the reader what Mac is trying to say as, for instance, when Mac asks to say nothing about "that other" wich for the reader is enigmatic. Myles guesses correctly that Mac is referring to his

"dark secret" (his not being Catholic) and soothes him with, "Don't worry. I won't turn you in." This represents a great development in Myles' mental growth from the time he could not interpret the bottle Mac snugly tugged in bed.

Myles' kind attitude towards Mac is explained both by Myles' good nature apparent throughtout the story and by Myles' firm belief that Mac—"betrayed by affection—and the bottle of course"—truly liked him. As a matter of fact, however, the author does not describe for the reader a single incident that can be considered a sure proof of true affection on Mac's part towards Myles. On every occasion the friendship topic occurs, Mac is presented as either mixed with self-interest (to get Myles a job is to Mac a driver) or tinged with dubiousness (the sports shirt is "soiled merchandise picked up at a sale") or influenced by drink (Myles' utopic partnership in business). But this fact—lack of true proof of Mac's friendship—stresses all the more forcefully Myles' own true nature.

The next morning Mac's final battle to keep his "underpaid chauffeur" starts all over again. Mac appears at Myles' door with "his roll." The bills are refused. He begs Myles to forget everything. Everything is to be forgotten. Mac insists on a two-way deal, a kind of blackmail to intimidate Myles: "You don't say anything about me and I won't say anything about you." Myles has nothing to be afraid of. As a last resource, Mac tries his almost infallible method to crack the "hard nuts," that is, the heart-to-heart approach seeking tenderness. He confides to Myles: "My folks weren't much good . . . my wife . . . No damn good . . . You are the only one I can turn to."

Mac, the master of circumvention, has long searched for the weak spot, all to no avail. Myles, the blind idealist of the beginning, has now become a hard realist. He sees through the maze clearly. It is when Mac wants to show the urgency of baptism to be administered now in an emergency—"the awful risk . . . with my immortal soul"—that Myles sees in the conversion deal merely a repetition of the pledge in "production" deals.

There can be no doubt as to Mac's real intentions. The author makes this character, ironically ingenuous, speak in a final self-betraying question which is left incomplete and shows nervousness mingled with a lingering, slim hope of "baptism"—of cracking the real "hard nut." As pretext for refusing baptism to Mac, Myles explains he cannot give "proper certificate." Mac then asks: "You mean if I wanted to go on with it and come into the Catholic Church?" The inference is that Mac did not mean "to go on with it" before and that if he means it now, it is solely to keep his precious driver.

The final softening-up tactics show Mac's sorry plight. He is utterly unable to move Myles to pity. Mac feels obliged finally to say to Myles: "Had you wrong—thought sure you'd squeal." The reader interprets the words without Myles' help rather as saying: "Had you wrong—thought you'd soften up and the 'team' would go on as usual." There is a fitting image that the author uses when he compares Mac to a serpent "caught behind the head with a forked stick" by Miles. It is then that the final coilings and uncoilings serve to bring out effectively the latters' complete ascendency over the former. The team splits up after Mac is forced to silence by a mere look from Myles.

Mr. Powers' characterization of Myles Flynn implies artistic craftsmanship. The author accomplishes his result without playing upon sensationalism, but realistically, with abundant details of lifelike situations, setting his

main character off humorously against an individual of stolidly non-humorous tendencies. Step by step Mr. Powers has presented the normal evolution of a young man who, saddened by an early failure and wanting to reassert himself, obstinately attempts to return to the seminary and in so doing meets a strange world—a world of hospital nurses that have lost the meaning of true charity; of self-complacent individuals like Mac whose only intent is to have his neighbor do the "donkey work" for him, all in an atmosphere of flattery, duplicity, and concealment; of men whose greed appears everywhere in exhausted iron-ore mines, cut-over timberland, fished-out lakes. In his artlessness, Myles seems a sure prey to Mac's cunning and self-interest. The author, however, shows the ex-seminarian in a natural process of hardening up against the harsh realities of life, unmasking the artful helper of "friends" by slowly discovering one by one all of Mac's stratagems: that of getting a safe driver in a long round-about way, that of making peculiar "productions" and "package deals" through false anti-alcoholic pledges, that of building chimeric projects of church-goods stores to entice a gullible companion, that of faking a conversion to regain his former advantages.

Myles emerges in the end ready to follow his destiny, free from Mac's snares, equipped with an enlightened mind and a strengthened will to meet the entire world with much less danger of bungling in the way. Myles' power of perception reaches maturity when he discerns Mac's insincere desire for baptism in terms of the various anti-alcoholic pledges. In the end Myles also reaches maturity of the will: he has learned to control the movements of his heart, remaining kind in his judgment of Mac while disapproving the latter's inclinations to crooked and corrupt ways; and, above all, he has courageously decided upon his own way of life, "alone, walking the plank of his gloom."

Truly, Myles' characterization has been worked out by an author meticulous of his art, an author who achieves his purpose flawlessly and convincingly.

3.—"PRINCE OF DARKNESS"

In the story "Prince of Darkness" Powers presents a forceful portrayal of corpulent and towering Father Ernest Burner who at middle age, broods over his failure as a priest and dreams only to have a parish of his own in order to spend the rest of his aimless days contentedly with assistants doing the "spade works" for him.

The world of reality is focused on a particular day of a priest's life and his day is conveniently divided into the three parts: morning, noon, and night. The incidents, at first, may appear superficial and inconsequential. But as the story develops the careful reader sees how they all fit in some way to explain the attitude of this defeated, gluttonous priest and, viceversa, how this priest's attitude or mood ties all these incidents together into a meaningful story.

The narrative begins when Mr. Tracy, an insurance man, enters uninvited to the dining room where the fat, tall priest, after his morning mass, is at breakfast alone. The amenities of courtesy being terminated, the priest is at a loss in dealing with the man. Father Burner is presented as annoyed by the "devilish nuisance" which "might be driven away only by prayer and

fasting, and he was not adept at either." Later on describing the room, the author alludes to a natural discomfort in the priest's mind at the look of the pictures on the wall of the last three popes, "successively thinner" as well as at the sight of a "fabulous brown rummage of encyclopedias, world globes, . . . mirrors, crucifixes, tropical fish, and too much furniture."

Whatever further meanings it may have, this introduction strikingly shows the priest's actual lack of the asceticism ordinarily associated with the priesthood. In the ensuing conversation with Mr. Tracy, the talk of insurance is not without some appeal to Father Burner's love of ease and comfort; nevertheless, in the exchange of confidences the priest feels "mortally impoverished." The perfect sales talk provokes a contrary effect on this priest who finds a pet weakness laid bare. Father Burner actually seeks security in wishing the direction of a parish. He feels he is simply growing fat and angry, frustrated in his ambition to be a pastor:

> "As a seminarian twenty years ago, it had all been plain: ordination, roughly ten years as a curate somewhere . . . a church of his own to follow, the fruitful years, then retirement, pastor emeritus . . . It was not an uncommon hope . . . [that already] had materialized for his friends. But for him it was only a bad memory growing worse."

As a consequence, Father Burner becomes wary, hating Mr. Tracy's "foaming compassion." In spite of the fact that he feels "mysteriously purchasable," that he receives, "miserably little," and that with the insurance it might be "easier to face old age," he is disturbed by the "idea of a priest feathering his own nest." He even wonders why he takes the "acestic interpretation," and he somehow feels "weak from a nameless loss." If the author took such pains in describing previously the objects found in the dining room, it was because it offered a perfect reflection of Burner's confused state of mind, immersed in trivialities and feeling in his own body the "constant aggrandizement of decay." Thinking of the future irritates this perennial assistant, and the wily talk of the insurance man suddenly brings the stout priest to his feet, ironically and comically leading Mr. Tracy to the door.

No sooner does Father Burner again sit at the table than he instinctively thinks of a reason, or a way, to explains to the two young priests that he hears coming, that they are not to interpret his late breakfast into a long breakfast; "late, see?— not still," says he trying to ward off unfavorable comment on excessive eating. However he does have to endure Father Quinlan's sharp witticism about the Angelic Doctor's weighing three hundred pounds and the follow-up remark from ingenuous and visiting Father Keefe about a pituitary condition. Tension is felt rising in the harsh words Father Burner addresses Father Quinlan, his rectory companion, and in his reaction towards the latter's friend: in shaking Keefe's hand, he experiences the "fat man's contempt and envy for the thin man." Try as he might Burner finds himself talking against his will in favor of insurance, a subject he has tried hard to avoid, but he must perforce oppose Quinlan who half jokeingly invokes the day's gospel to talk against Tracy's insurance: "Take nothing for your journey . . . "

Keefe, evidently seeking a pleasant subject of conversation that would allow a peaceful breakfast with his friend Quinlan, unwittingly pulls another sensitive fiber in Father Burner's ego. The visitor praises the parish church and, aiming to flatter the older priest, refers to it as Father Burner's. The latter, who all his life has been longing without success to have a parish of his own, revolts at the suggestion. He emphatically rejects the idea of clerical ownership and ridicules the Dean and with him all Irish clerics for alluding to church property as theirs. A warrior deploying a sword in defense in defense of his country would seem out of context here, but Father Burner, of German origin, offers a sorry contrast wielding a spoon. His words are lost but the description of his behavior at this moment hovers vividly throughout the story: "He jabbed at the grapefruit before him, his second, demolishing its perfect rose window."

With that last sentence Mr. Powers gives the reader a vivid image before which all the actions and incidents in which the protagonist is involved should be examined. There is the priest who, through lack of moderation, loses himself in the materiality of earthly ambitions, food-centered pleasures, and non-priestly dawdlings, and, through this material immersion, destroys the perfection of his sublime calling.[2] His later spite and brooding must easily be understood. Now he simply gives vent to his ill humor by voraciously enjoying his breakfast: "he quartered the pancakes" and poured more syrup into his plate "until the butter began to float around the edges as in a moat." With the gustatory excitement, his actions ironically betray him in his purpose to forestall unfavorable interpretation for his drawn-out breakfast. On their part both young priests watch his healthy appetite in awe. Getting up and pulling the shades down, Father Burner succeeds in drawing the attention of the young priests away from the table, but comically enough, becomes unusually courteous by asking about Keefe's parish.

Part of the clerical gossip has to do with Perpetual Novenas and their termination. The Dean—an old pastor who resists change and is absent, moreover, in this particular discussion— is also dragged in for comment. Father Burner finds himself saying something which runs counter to his own continuonsly pursued ambition. His most earnest desire is to be appointed a full-fledged parish priest, but he ends the discussion lamely with: "Many are the consolations of the lowly curate. No decisions, no money worries."

Some time later Father Qiunlan is quick enough to make manifest Father Burner's self-contradiction in the matter of church statistics: at one time against them, new for them, and then back to the former stand. The cross-talk between Burner and Qiunlan is most disturbing to the former because the results of the interchange point to the former's discomforted mind. At every turn Father Burner's ill-constrained impetuosity fails to hide his own inner dejection, which naturally ends in outbursts.

Burner's overbearing attitude becomes apparent in various ways. He shouts with impatience at Mary, the maid, for not reporting quickly to the door; he stops Qiunlan brusquely in order to answer the doorbell himself.

(2) This presentation of the long, drawn-out breakfast as against the morning mass could be taken as an illustration of how Mr. Powers wants to emphasize in this stories the constant war between the material and spiritual element in man. This interesting thematic aspect is treated in the third chapter of the present thesis.

With the woman at the door he means to be stern when she demands an explantion for the stars in the servicemen's flag in church; returning to the dining room he interrupts discourteously the conversation of the two young priests who discuss the junior clergymen's examinations: he is in the know about history tests and, as self-appointed examiner, he gloats over ingenuous Father Keefe who succumbs mercilessly to a pointless, irrelevant question. In saying grace he makes the sign of the cross "with slow distinction" solely, it is felt, as a vain inner self-satisfaction.[3]

He has not been able to cope with the piquant repartee of Father Quinlan; but the maid, the lady parishioner, and timid Father Keefe have given him new courage. Very understandably, Burner details the work for personal call to wayward parishioners in the manner of a pastor to his assistant. Quinlan receives the order from the would-be pastor who tosses him a stack of cards from the parish card index.

There is no doubt as to the great care the author has shown in the development of the main character in his story. So far Father Burner's reactions have evolved to the extent that if wily Mr. Tracy has left him pondering over his empty life and Quinlan's ridicule has exasperated him, he has nevertheless emerged lording it over those weaker than himself, like the maid, the lady parishioner, and even Father Keefe. This would make Father Burner an ordinary bully-type of a man. Under close scrutiny, however, this "bully" is found in an inner conflict. Father Burner's outburst in calling the servant-maid was just an outburst of temper soon forgotten which probably did not reach the maid; with the lady parishioner, soon after he means to be stern, he feels sorry for her; with Keefe, after Burner leaves him nonplused with the pointless question, he feels inferior, he "saw in him the boy whose marks in school had always been a consolation to his parents." Actually he is burning inside with self-dissatisfaction.

Accordingly, the reader arrives to the noon section of the story smiling over Father Burner's comical figure sorting out clothes in his disorderly room and shouting, "Oh hell," looking for his aviator's helmet. His daydreaming as a golfer and war ace only adds to the frivolity of a life which weighs each day heavier with a feeling of a growing void and defeat. Powers makes his character instinctively retreat from the window at the sound of high heels on the front walk and advert to the prayer posted on the wall of the room, which reminds him that "priests are weak human beings" but have a sublime vocation. Father Burner does not pray, "his eyes raced through the prayer and out of the window . . . " The impression is that he is annoyed by the adjective "sublime." He is simply not touched by high ideals. He is interested in this world only, especially that parish of his own. Therefore, the "inspiration" comes to him to expedite matters by writing second letter to the Archbishop.

Part of the disorder in the room is due to the golfing outfit, but this particular day Burner goes out to add flying time for his pilot license. As he drives to the airport, it starts to rain and he cannot have his flying practice. Again the author stresses the shallowness of Burner's thoughts and ambitions: "Raining so, and with no flying, the world seemed . . . a valley of tears."

(3) Before this episode Bruner mentally has down-graded Father Quinlan for crossing himself "sloppily enough to be a monsignor."

Burner decides now to stop at a hamburger stand where he is a regular customer. Honking the horn of his car carries the message: "Two hamburgers, medium well, onions . . . — his way." A woman comes out with an umbrella over the hamburgers more than over herself. At the question of drinks she hesitates after mentioning "pop, milk, coffee . . . " "A nice cold bottle of beer," comes the firm order ("the fatal words") from Father Burner who immediately "puts her down for the native Protestant stock." No sooner has she returned with the desired bottle than the thoughts belittling her exteriorize in the priest who "had to smile at her not letting pious scruples interfere with business, another fruit of the so-called Reformation." The incident boomerangs, he checks his smile too late and feels uneasy because "her lowered eyes informed him of his guilt."

Golf, airplanes, and of course, a couple of hamburgers is what occupies this trivial and food-centered priest. It is significant in the story that such a trivial thing as a hamburger gives rise to a long and intensive brooding. This time he is alone snugly seated inside the car with no insurance man nor Quinlan to provoke him. The first incident of his recollection is that of a little girl bewildered at the sight of his enormous appetite, identified by the child as the vice of gluttony and crying, "Oh Fawther."

This is the start of further meditations that emphasize his sense of failure as a priest. Success for him lies in having a parish of his own with his mother as housekeeper. But he is now forty-three; seventeen years after ordination he is "a curate yet and only . . . the only one of his class without a parish."

His previous daydreaming about being a martyr and now a possible chaplain is part of the same vain effort to escape his inner void: "He knew in the corner of his heart [that this] would be only exterior justification." His failure as a priest weighs him down. His last appointment as the Dean's assistant had been rumored as derogatory to Father Burner.

The nickname, "Prince of Darkness," is yet another instance of how time-consuming, non-priestly activities absorb the life of this priest. The recollection of its origin (the Dean referring to Father Burner's long staying in the darkroom to make tintypes) comes after Burner thinks of the Dean, in spite of certain obvious foibles, as saintly. The Dean, further, in Burner's consciousness, possesses a faculty of something like smelling sins, and in his brushes with the Dean, "Father Burner played the role of the one smelled."

Prince of Darkness may here in the context of the story carry the idea that the priest's main sin is his inability to see on a higher plane. He is too earthly: in his ambition to get a parish, in the pleasure he derives from eating, in the non-priestly trivialities that fill his day— and all this in direct contrast with the occupations of the real priesthood.

Burner's other nickname, that of the "Circular Priest," likewise, hilarously accentuates what gnaws at his heart: "the mark of a true priest" can easily be found in the Dean, in the two young priests he had talked to in the morning, even in Father Desmond, his friend, sick in the hospital.

Quite artistically, Powers describes in the hospital scene what further confirms the visitor's inability to see within himself his real plight or his unwillingness to consider it in earnest. Father Desmond, in delirium or from the influence of alcohol comes out loud in his own vilification, a self-derogation with which his visitor should also be burning: "I'm a dirty stinker! . . . Lord, Lord, I am not worthy." Burner judges the situation for what it is from the

viewpoint of Father Desmond, an Irish exaggeration; and when the sick priest begins to include him in his self-contempt, he ends his visit saying, "Hire a hall, Ed!"

On arriving at the rectory, Burner is told of a telephone message from the chancery office calling him as an extra help for the evening. In this manner the "evening" division of the story is introduced.

Waiting restlessly in a Cathedral confessional, Father Burner's mind runs back and forth. He has not been called to see the Archbishop before hearing confessions, "he had seen the basis of his expectations as folly once more"; he despises the "dull pretenders" in church; he feels uncomfortable at the sight of Vicat General "troubled with sanctity." When the dejected priest is finally told to see the Archbishop, his imagination runs wild with new hopes and dreams, vain and earthly: how he should break the news to his colleagues and "receive the old quips and smiles with good grace"; how he should treat his mother gently "even if she talked too much"; how he should meet the Archbishop, "reliable, casual, cool, an iceberg, only the tip of his true worth showing."

Actually, before entering the Archbishop's study, Father Burner's uneasiness acquires a vague sense of guilt, afraid "to be found standing there like a fool or a spy." Later, in the presence of the Archbishop, the same uneasiness causes the priest to think he may be choosing the wrong chair and makes him hesitate to acknowledge Father Desmond as his friend. This last incident creates in Burner's own consciousness a peculiar Judas-like situation somewhat embarrassing to himself before the saintly prelate. Finally, Father Burner turns out to be insincere as he concedes to the Archbishop the success Quinlan, "the prig," has in Gregorian Caant.

Thoroughly enjoying the comedy most readers would agree without difficulty that Mr. Powers has let another of his pet, priestly characters act freely and naturally. They see the venal priest thoroughly enmeshed in his own inner contradiction as a direct outcome of a sense of defeat and failure. Mystified and unsure of himself, Father Burner receives the ascetic truth from the holy and kindly Archbishop that the devil is not to be found outside but witnin one's self, that temporizing with the rich does not save their souls, that the "fat baby" in the picture is not Christ. Father Burner, after an ungainly start, plays it safe throughout the sermon on holiness: "Yes, . . . Very true . . . Oh, yes, Your Excellency." He misses not one cue to declare his humble obeisance before receiving the envelope containing his new assignment. It is a long suspense carefully worked out with detailed characterization. Both priest and readers become anxious to learn the outcome. The new assignment, again as assistant in a parish, will leave Father Burner in the same or worse condition, but better enlightened as to his role in this world. The struggle against the feeling of defeat in what the reader knows is a trivial item in the priestly life will go on.

Mr. Powers' skill in analyzing the character of this material-minded priest who has abandoned the spiritual ideals and must suffer the consequences of an inner void and self-dissatisfaction is evident all through the story. In incident after incident Powers unfolds with relevant details the inner struggle and sense of defeat that pervade the priest's thoughts. The author describes, with keen insight into the priest's consciousness, all of Father Burner's shifting moods, from dreamy revery to disenchantment, from hope to pain at the

recognition of failure. The author makes Father Burner see himself, at each successive experience, divested of some of his dignity and self-esteem. Confronted with the insurance man, he sees discreditably exposed his love of ease and comfort in an assured future with a parish of his own. His confusion and concern about being overweight is heightened by the sharp witticisms of his colleague, Father Quinlan. His inner sense of shame at bullying or despising others is stressed when he inwardly pities the lady parishioner, admires Father Keefe's success in school, and shuns to compare himself with the Vicar General "troubled with sanctity." His dayreaming as a war ace, Army Chaplain, or martyr serves to underscore all the more pathetically his heartache at the lack of the spirituality that should characterize the priest. His brooding at the hamburger stand and his visit to Father Desmond in the hospital light up for Father Burner a truth which he cannot ignore— that he falls far short of the "mark of the true priest."

Poetic justice is evidently meted out in Father Burner's final frustration of a cherished dream that would falsely remove the sense of failure in his life. Powers has well prepared his character for the transcendent impact as he leaves Father Burner, pondering at the curb of the street and reading disobediently his new assignment from his wise and knowing Archbishop. The Archbishop's admonition that he look into the sublimity of his calling and rise above the material world seeking "not peace but a sword" brings the irony full round. Author Power's characterization of Father Burner can truly be said to be masterful.

4.—GENERAL VIEW OF OTHER STORIES.

The three stories —"The Trouble," "The Devil Was the Joker," and "Prince of Darkness,"— that have here been thoroughly anlyzed would be sufficient to establish Mr. Power's craftsmanship in character delineation. But every single story of the twenty that appear in the two volumes under consideration could be thus analyzed and be found similarly successful in their portrayals.

One could take "Jamesie," a story of another boy but, unlike the character of "The Trouble" who barely awakes to a world of complex and deep emotions, this one is presented as a development towards a painful, yet formative discovery: Jamesie's baseball idol turns out a crook. With artistic touch the author sets off the various stages in the evolution of Jamesie's discovery. First, it is the boy's fondness of reading and of baseball. Then, the author presents half a page of a newspaper article hinting that the "Local Pitcher Most Likely to Succeed," Lefty, lacks team spirit. Then it is Jamesie's changing moods as he leaves the paper to answer a call from his father, a widower, who hands him the rotogravure section: the boy is no longer interested in it, he prefers to indulge in reading another chapter of *Baseball Bill in the World Series.*

An only child and motherless, he lives in a world of his own imagination. Calling on his friend Francis Murgatroyd who lives next door, he re-enacts the scene just read. His friend is Blackie Humphrey, the crook of the gambling syndicate, and he is Baseball Bill, the uncorruptible pitcher of the book. This dialogue between Jamesie and his friend is a marvelous piece of characterization which includes that delightful blend of the world of the

imagination and the world of reality in which a boy like Jamesie lives at that age. This section of the conversation between the two friends ends this way:

> «Blackie was offering Bill a cigar, but Bill knew it was to get him to break training and refused it. "I see through you, Blackie." No, that was wrong. He had to conceal his true thoughts and let Blackie play him for a fool. Soon enough his time would come and . . . "Thanks for the cigar, Blackie," he said, "I thought it was a cheap one. Thanks, I'll smoke it later."
> "I paid a quarter for it."
> "Hey that is too much, Francis."
> "Well, if I am the head of the powerful—"
> Mr. Murgatroyd came to the back door and told Francis to get ready.
> "I can't go to the game, Jamesie," Francis said. "I have to caddy for him."»

For the next scene the author takes the reader to the ball park where the local team is to play another from a town nearby. Jamesie at the gate, sees the players file past him. His interest in Guez the opponent pitcher is through details that suggest the heroism of battle: "the scarred plate on the right toe," the tears in the stockings, the "iron drape of the flannel." Jamesie's friendly attitude springs naturally from the association he makes to Baseball Bill; but as he is repulsed by Guez, contrary feelings surge and, with a vengeance, he would bet everything against Guez.

Jamesie's real hero, however, is Lefty, the pitcher of the local team. Lefty's identification with the imaginary hero of the book he has been reading is complete. He is totally unable to see otherwise. Therefore, he can see only honesty and truthfulness when Lefty insists that the man under the grand-stand is not his father. Jamesie would rather think it is his own error, that the man with "orange gums"—strange coincidence— just looks like Lefty's father.

Lefty throws the game in a way that implicates his father's gambling under the grand-stand and rightly goes to jail. Nevertheless, Jamesie staunchly stands by Lefty against his cousin Gabriel and against his uncle Pat, against everybody,even against good Aunt Katy. It is not until he goes and meets Lefty in jail that the scales from his eyes drop at the smell of tobacco and drink which he recognizes as the smell from Humphrey's mouth, the crook Jamesie has read about in the book the previous morning.

There can not be any doubt that the author has worked his character to the last possible detail. Jamesie is plainly there with ample room to move about freely, full of life, ingenuous, imaginative, a passionate defender of his hero, a true human being capable of learning the truth.

Mr. Powers can also write about old people. "The Old Bird. A Love Story" is one instance. Here he realizes a brief but penetrating study of the true nature of love and shows how it informs the character of Mr. Newman, and elderly man who "as husband and only provider" hopefully and nervously applies for and succeeds in obtaining a temporary job one morning (presupposing previous failures), works in "sweat and humiliation" through

the day, and goes home in the evening to meet an understanding and loving wife.

Mr. Newman's efforts to show his capabilities and shun people pitying him are characteristically revealed through his concern for being out of work and his fear of being too old to be considered for a job. His attitudes and reactions towards the people he comes in contact with spring from the same source as those he has towards his wife. Facing the information girl, under the appearance of brusqueness, he actually suffers in the attempt to hide his timidity. He is afraid to hurt, he desires to be unobtrusive, he trembles "under the horror of butting in where he wasn't wanted." His apparent jauntiness —"Got an application for a retired millionaire?"— derives from his desire "To make it easier for her to refuse."

Later on, standing before the interviewer's desk, Newman avoids showing eagerness of immediate attention and shies away from looking directly at the personnel manager who is reading a letter. Newman likewise feels embarrassed when he is presented to the department head in the shipping room as a possible "A-l packer" (He has not meant to brag nor to deceive when he has been provoked, previously, to declare himself as"handy with the rope," he has rather "trembled under the desire to be worthy.") He labors under the fear of being "indecently aged." At evening, as he leaves the factory, he experiences anxiety as he approaches the time clock thinking of the annoying delay he may cause to the employees queuing up behind him when his turn comes up. His anxiety, were he to bungle up his punch card, is not altogether devoid of considerateness.

But if he is considerate of others he is even more so towards his wife when gets home. He does not tell her at first that his job-seeking efforts have been rewarded, though she surmises it. He knows it is not much of a reward since he had to surrender his "well-loved white collar." She on the other hand is not over-eager to know, she bides her time and waits with a determination deeper than his. When he decides to tell her everything, he purposely avoids revealing his own anxiety about being too old. When she joins him in full partnership saying, "I'll have to pack you a lunch then, Charley," and when she invites him to look through the window at the snowy beauty of the night, there is a flitting moment of quiet exultation which, however, Mr. Newman cuts short realistically by observing: "Keep up much longer it'll tie up transportation."

They both consciously endeavor to comfort each other and feel their way about it touchingly. He tries to answer one of her questions by affirming he likes the job, but then he is forced to reveal, frankly, the job is only temporary. He pains her through this revelation and she, him, suggesting the possibility of keeping the job after Christmas. They know and love each other so well that they both suffer, each knowing the other's painful efforts to avoid inflicting pain. It is through this loving pain that the author achieves the beautiful portrayal of this elderly married couple who understand each other through words that remain unsaid, who love each other in total absence of effusive display of sentiment. There are no kisses and no embraces, yet, the author manages successfully in sorrounding them, in spite of their sad economic plight which they both share equally, with a pervading feeling of harmony and true love.

It is not usual for Mr. Powers to dedicate his artistic efforts to describe

a man of violent and explosive tendencies. In "The Eye" he has presented his readers with Clyde Bullen, the owner of a pool hall in a small town in Southern United States. In a confused atmosphere of vulgarity, ill-breeding, rowdyism, and prejudice, the author succeeds with apparent ease in portraying this head of a gang of loafers as a man of flesh and bones with a peculiar conflict. This conflict makes him evolve rather reluctantly from a position where he is able to exact from his gang a collection for the benefit of a Negro, the rescuer of Clara Beck— Clyde's own "best girl"— from drowning, to another position where he is forced to please the irresponsible crowd by making it possible for them, after locking the same Negro in jail, to satisfy their lower instincts of cruelty and destruction with an evidently unjust hanging.

After a close search into the story, the characterization of the protagonist is seen clearly set off against a whole array of minor characters: the narrator, Roy, an illiterate youth, a menial flatterer of Clyde, yet, intensely inquisitive and curious with an insatiable desire to tell his tale; Skeeter, the gossip monger, peddler of pornographic pictures, devious, cowardly and irresolute, easily moved by the gang to suit its purposes; Banjo Wheeler, a former boxer and a degenerate drunkard, stupidly provoking, and first victim of Clyde's quick outburst; Ace Haskins, another instigator of mob killing, avid of gossip, with stubbornly biased opinions; Old Ivy, the bartender, a Negro studiously stupid as self protection and naturally kind and sympathetic towards Sleep Bailey, the fearless but helpless victim of an unreasoning and mad rabble. Clyde's own guilt in the pregnancy of the girl is never in the least suggested by the abject flatterer and not innocently biased narrator, but that is the only thing that hovers in the imagination of the reader if justice is to be done and the real culprit is to be unmasked.

The wonder in this particular story is that the author manages to squeeze so many characterizations into the twelve short pages that the story contains.

Powers has evidently been preoccupied by social and race problems, as they have preoccupied every thinking man of the modern world. This preoccupation has resulted in the creation of such characters as those found in "The Trouble" (analyzed at the beginning of the chapter), "The Eye," just described, and "He Don't Plant Cotton," which also deals with the sufferings of the Negro race in United States. In this story three Negro night-club entertainers, in spite of the fact that jobs are hard to get, decide to quit when their white patrons' abuse reaches the limit of endurance. Mr. Powers sympathetically probes into their psychology and finds them exceedingly human.

"Renner" reveals an even more complex social problem. Renner, the main character, is a Austrian Jew refugee, a former university professor, seeking freedom and social justice in Eastern and Mid-Western United States. In the end he finds it impossible, because of a general mistrust of immigrant professors from Nazi Europe, to teach in an American university; with difficulty he gets a job in a factory. But, worse yet, as he steps forward in behalf of a co-worker, in defense of the co-workers' rights and dignity, he gets fired from his job. The story illustrates an immigrant's embittered, though puzzled and blurred, vision of the United States and the world at large.

In "Blue Island," Powers presents a couple in a suburban area who are inwardly tormented by a shady past and try to get accepted in their new surroundings. Ethel, the young wife, helped by an older woman who poses

as a friend, organizes a mid-morning coffee party for seven neighborhood housewives as a get-acquainted gesture. The older woman turns out to be an interested saleswoman of household articles who tactlessly makes her commercial talk and displays copper pans and bottles of "no ordinary polish" while coffee and cake are passed around. Ethel ends at the window grim and cold, left alone after the shamefully disintegrated party, gazing down at her husband as he arrives with a "club of roses."

If there is cruelty in "Blue Island," there is meanness in "The Poor Thing." This story is about Teresa who, through pity and not without self-interest, seeks a job with an I-don't-have-to-work pretext. She becomes trapped into the service of The Poor Thing, a lifelong invalid who under a mask of piety and kindness hides a most enervating pettiness which includes being egotistic, niggardly, and spiteful at the same time. The humorous reversal (or is it humorous?) in this story is that the pity is for Teresa.

But, above all clerical personages are Powers' pet world, which includes priest, nun, and housekeeper, church usher and female parishioner—parish life in general and not excepting the rectory cat. Undoubtedly, priests are best adapted to the author's quiet style and to his personal taste; it is in these men that good and evil can best be observed without recourse to sex-psychopaths or violence-seeking outlaws. Powers' world is a world of normal people, and the clergy with whom he deals are if anything too "normal."

As an artist, moreover, Powers knows that he must search meaning through conflicts and contrasts; in the priesthood this contrast exists hand-made—high ideals and often lackadaisical practice. The pietistic reader may be shocked but not the ecclesiastics, who recognize the truth of the picture —know the reality of the characterization. Moreover, the author's intention is not bound with the anticlericalism of a Latin-American "liberal"[4] 19th-century brand—who would delight in denigrating the clergy, but it is always seen to be humorous and rooted in a deep-seated understanding and love of his characters. If an initial feeling of mistrust is experienced by a casual Catholic reader, the feeling gradually turns, once the author's intention becomes clear, into deeply enjoyed laughs. Ecclesiatics who read these stories are invariably surprised to find in a lay writer such knowledge and insight into the lives and non-official activities of the Catholic clergy in the United States.

In some instances, it is true, clergymen may feel uncomfortable seeing their human foibles laid bare with such an uncanny penetration of their human element; for in the United States the custom is to respect the clergy, and the Catholic priest is generally regarded with the deference due to his high dignity. As some clergy misunderstand these stories, so some lay readers may be unable to see through the surface of apparently disrespectful detail —priests caught in unguarded moments. If they cannot see the humorous intention of the author, they are likely to misinterprest many of these stories.

Mr. Powers is a Catholic perfectly at ease in his Church. His stories may, at times, be thought of as inspired by a desire to contribute in a movement

(4) For the sake of American readers, the word is pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, "al" as in "altitude"; historical reference is made ot the political struggle between "liberales" and "conservadores." The latter supported the Catholic Church while the former attacked her.

towards a general renewal in the spirit of the gospel. Father Eudex in "The Forks" might be taken to personify this desire. He is a young priest recently ordained at odds with his pastor, a monsignor, on the matter of appearances or "taste" and also on the interpretation of "the mind of the Church."

First Father Eudex is told that "it isn't prudent" to buy a cheap car even if it means that he will spare Monsignor's car "which was long and black and new like a politician." Monsignor warns Eudex saying: "People watch the priest." Then, referring to the news of the day on the subject of labor unions and strikes, Monsignor criticizes his bishop for getting "mixed up in all that stuff." In his own eyes he is prudence personified and the social problem simply called for a hands-off policy. In the eyes of Father Eudex, other outspoken, would-be solutions to the real clerical problems clearly show that Monsignor "dearly wanted to be, and was not, a bishop." Later, with "baleful eyes" Eudex sees Monsignor depart in his long, black, new car—"in a one-car parade"—for a ride around the city to create "good will for the Church."

Upon his return, Monsignor is appalled to find Father Eudex, in undershirt, helping the overworked janitor in the garden and "making a spectable of himself"—"disgracing the Church." During dinner Eudex is duly warned of all this in the middle of a lecture on table manners which include the use of forks. Two things are foremost in Monsignor's intention. One is to modify "Eudex's conception of the priesthood which was evangelical in the worst sense, barbaric, gross, and foreign to the mind of the Church." (The young assistant was not to be trusted since he had been found reading *The Catholic Worker.*) The other is to initiate and season Eudex in good taste. What Father Eudex finds out and feels intensely is that "the air of the rectory was often heavy with The Mind of the Church and Taste."

The story is a rebuke to self-complacency and worldliness in the clergy wrapped in an artistic and humorous characterization of both clerics. In describing Monsignor's exaggerated care of the car Powers writes: "Monsignor stopped in admiration a few feet from the car—her. He was helpless before her beauty as a boy with a birthday bicycle . . . He kept her on special diet—only the best of gas and oil and grease, with daily rubdowns." Further down in the story the author gives Father Eudex's thoughts: seeing Monsignor remove a cinder from the tread of a tire, Eudex fancies " . . . he saw the car lift a hoof, gaze around and thank Monsignor with her headlights."

Of a more humorous vein "Dawn" revolves around a letter addressed "Personal" to the Pope. The letter lies on Bishop's desk, and it had already become a "hot potato" that neither the housekeeper as collection counter, nor the curates of the Cathedral, nor Monsignor Renton, nor Father Udovic had dared to touch. Father Udovic, as chancellor, is obviously flattered since he sees in the letter the result of his own idea of a special collection to "personalize" Peter's Pence. Nobody knows what might be inside the envelope, but if there is any substantial contribution, Udovic should be given credit for it. Therefore, he takes it as a personal task to move heaven and earth in order to discover the sender. Letters and announcements follow—all with the Bishop's approval; Udovic gets busy with phone calls and appearances in the Bishop's office—one without a witness—and the innocently looking envelope still lies on the desk. All these are only exterior doings, a

small part of the world of possibilities that crop up in Udovic's mind: there are countless fluctuations, from the hope of a millionaire's gift to the fear of an enemy's insultingly abusive letter. Finally the sender of the letter, a woman parishioner, is lured into the antechamber of the Bishop's office, where Father Udovic tries to extricate from her the secret contents of the envelope. She demands the presence of the Bishop. The Bishop enters the room. Father Udovic urges the woman to make her revelation. The envelope contained one dollar!

As the Bishop walks out leaving chancellor and parishioner to blame each other, the Biblical text: "Sound not the trumpet before thee" rings hard on Father Udovic's ear. The nature of the situation and the way in which the incidents had piled up one upon another effectually helped the reader to take Udovic's plight as amusingly pathetic.

"Losing Game" is another perfect comedy. Father Fabre is a young priest who feels ill at ease with his mousy old pastor and needs to brace himself in order to ask most tactfully for a table to put his typewriter on. The old pastor bides his time so exasperatingly that his young assistant cannot help deciding, in an outburst of feeling, to force his way into the church basement, now used mainly as a storage room of old household furniture. The old pastor, seeing himself defeated in his dilatory tactics, conciliatingly catches up with the young priest who is about to break the combination lock of the door. The pastor opens the lock and both of them enter slowly the dimly lit room. Comments are made, for and against, the possibly useful pieces of furniture. While in the basement, a deflected bullet hits the calf of Father Fabre's leg—a bullet from the .22 rifle held by the pastor, who is shooting at the rats under the old newspapers. Upon returning from the hospital, Father Fabre finds in his room the old-fashioned, cushioned chair that he had ironically described as too good for himself, but not the table about which he had cunningly concealed a real desire. The table could hold not only a typewriter, but it could be used also for playing cards and setting down beer or wine glasses.

"Zeal" like all Powers' stories about priests, plays on the humorous side of life in search of deeper meaning. This time events involve a train trip from St Paul, Minnesota, to New York in the initial part of a pilgrimage to Rome. Father Early, in charge of the expedition, is a talkative, busybody sort of a man who makes himself a nuisance to the dignified Bishop who would have preferred solitude in a comfortable parlor car of the train to avoid contact with all the hustle and bustle of the pilgrims. Before long the Bishop is enmeshed in the over-zealous ways of the instrusive priest. A stop in Chicago to change trains allows the group of pilgrims time for sightseeing. The Bishop simply is unable to refuse Father Early the favor of accompanying an unhumorous elderly couple who are unwilling to follow the group to the Art Institute.

Back in the train that is t take them to New York, the Bishop finds himself in the dining car with Father Early and his embarrassing behavior. This time Father Early takes on conversation with the young couple at the next table. He wants to entighten them on the immorality of tipping practically in the very presence of the waiter. The young man and the woman are "resilient from drink." Later in the evening and in bed in his compartment, the Bishop is unable to compose himself for sleep. He feels he must get up and

find what Father Early is up to. He finds him in the rear of the club car engaging in conversation the young man who had been drinking with the woman in the diner. Obviously the priest was doing his tedious best to keep the young man away from a dangerous liaison with the woman. Father Early then excuses himself for a moment and leaves the young man alone with the Bishop. Upon returning from the lavatory, the priest finds that his spiritual protégé has gone, but unmindful of this failure he turns now, in spite of the late hour, upon the waiter for what the Bishop surmises, as he bids good night, will be a sermon on the iniquity of tipping.

By next morning the Bishop has reflected long enough to see his own defifiency in his excessive love of ease and solitude, and he has agreed to a more cooperative role in the pilgrimage. In spite of Father Early's annoying ways, the Bishop appears in a more pliant mood and agrees to take charge of a group of the pilgrims.

There are also nuns in Powers's world of fiction. "The Lord's Day" describes the situation of a Sister Superior pleading before an unimaginative and ungenerous Pastor for the life of the mulberry trees, the only means of protection in a sun-scorched and pebble-covered yard. They are ordered cut down in an act of sheer peevishness by the "incredible priest." She is later unable to exact from him a badly needed new kitchen range. The failure in her efforts to prevent a sad situation for the school children or to obtain better conditions for her community pathetically stresses her own helplessness.

Life in the convent is reflected in the very human way the nuns react to the situation. The elder Sisters Louise and Paula each in her own particular way yields to envy and bitterness thinking of older times and better superiors. One of them simply goes to sleep while the other finds solace in the old coins when the community gathers to count the parish Sunday collection for the disliked Pastor. Sister Antonia on the other hand, understandingly comes to the help of the Superior by allowing some humor to relieve the tense situation, rallying the community into activity with: "Come on, you money changers, dig in!" Simple and guileless, Sister Florence sees her suggestion of a competitive game agreeably received; industrious and ingenious Sister Eleanor makes ends meet for her enormous map by pasting the partial maps sent by the different gas companies all over the States. This is truly a picture of life in any group of human beings, even among those committed to religious profession.

If the nuns are dominated by the Pastor in the "Lord's Day," it is the Pastor that appears henpecked by his housekeeper in "The Valiant Woman." She happens to be Mrs. Stoner around whom the story is built. She prepares a birthday dinner which includes cake and candles for Father Firman, who celebrates the event in the company of a visiting priest from a near-by parish. Outwardly, the story is a realistic characterization of a meddlesome, lightheaded, well-meaning, overly helpful, annoyingly companionable, and distastefully sticky housekeeper. The real story goes on within Father Firman. He feels he might be better off by dismissing the housekeeper but cannot find valid reasons for doing it with justice. This interior drama is what gives the story its full mpact. But as far as characterization is concerned, Mrs. Stoner stands out in a portrait that gives her a superior rank. She is "all the dominating housekeepers who have ever ruled parishes and

priests rolled into one."[5] She is valiant in the Scriptural sense, the "mulier fortis" of the Book of Proverbs, but only ironically so. Her doings are not of a price of things brought from afar nor has she opened her mouth to wisdom nor looked well to the paths of her house.

The story starts at the end of the dinner and Mrs. Stoner, between trips to the kitchen, is constantly intruding in the conversation of the two priests. Referring to another housekeeper of another parish, she finds no more precise words for identification than: "She is at Holy Cross!" The author adds the missing irony: "Mrs. Stoner made it sound as though Mrs. Allers were a pastor there." At the end of the day Father Firman and his housekeeper play honeymoon bridge. The reader cannot help admiring the author's ability, as here, to characterize in a vein of most pleasurable humor. Mr. Powers describes the end of the game thus:

> "Now she was doing what she liked most of all. She was making a grand slam, playing it out card for card though it was in the bag, prolonging what would have been a cut short out of mercy in gentle company. Father Firman knew the agony of losing."

Most of Mr. Powers' priests are viewed with a critical eye, and they fare badly in the scrutiny. They are venal, daydreaming as war-ace pilots or champion golfers, taking empty pride in their appearance, or in their new cars. They may be entangled in petty politics of preferment ("The Death of a Favorite" and "Defection of a Favorite.") Some are old and incomprehensible; others, young and over-zealous. Even Father Eudex may seem peculiarly conceited in his exhibitionism as he contemplates a future scene among his fellow priests in which he explains to them his own way of settling the destination of a one-hundred-dollar check which he sent down the drain in pieces as a protest to the "hush money," excess-profits greeting from a company that underpays its employees, most of whom are Catholic.

But in "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" Mr. Powers has put his heart and soul in an overtly simpathetic view of a saintly old Franciscan priest, Father Didymus. In so doing the author enables the reader to catch glimpses of the sublimity which human nature may sometimes reach in the priesthood. The story probes profound spiritual problems and, therefore, it requires a patient and intelligent reading to find its perusal rewarding.

The title refers to a quotation from one of the poems of St. John of the Cross that deals with the mystic experience of inner struggle a soul must face in the attainment of spiritual perfection. The poem and its exegesis appear as part of the reading Bro. Titus does for the benefit of the kindly old priest. The down-to-earth incidents in which Father Didymus is involved depend on: his fascination with the lives of the early Popes full of robust and sound realism even though written by a heretical author; his friendly and humorous appreciation of the companionship Bro. Titus, a simple and holy soul, the telegram announcing his brother's (Father Seraphin's) death in St. Louis; his stroke at midnight in the chapel, and his last days in a wheel chair facing the window and the canary Titus is thoughtful enough to bring him.

(5) Sister Mariella Gable, *This is Catholic Fiction*, Sheed and Ward, N. Y., 1948, p.28.

Through all these incidents there is the subtle insight into the mind of Father Didymus. It is the growing sense of the struggle he has to wage in attaining complete detachment from the material world through continuous self analysis that gives life to the story. In examining the reason for refusing to travel to visit his brother Seraphin after twenty-five years of separation, he sees his self-denial exaggerated to the point of using "his brother as a hair-shirt." Later he concludes he has done the right thing but for the wrong motive— maybe spiritual pride, or sheer laziness— so that his lifelong struggle towards holiness leaves him with a sensation that he is still at the beginning of the spiritual ascent.

Yet, it is an atmosphere of hope that pervades the story. In a brilliant paragraph towards the end, author describes Didymus' hopeful clairvoyance as follows:

> "With wonderful clarity, he saw what he had made of his life. He saw himself tied down seeking the crumbs, the little pleasures, neglecting the source, always knowing death changes nothing only immortalizes . . . and still ever lukemarm. In trivial attatchments, in love of things was death, no matter the appearance of life. In the highest attachment only, no matter the appearance of death was life. He had always known this truth, but now he was feeling it. Unable to move his hands only his lips, and hardly breathing, was it too late to act?"

Closeness to God! It is a hard point to make in fiction, but Mr. Powers succeeds in making it through the beautiful characterization of Didymus. It is the fascination of the lifelong struggle of a true hero.

Summing up, it can now be affirmed that Mr. Powers is fascinated with human nature and that his ability at creating lifelike characters is astonishingly penetrating. He has fashioned a fictional microcosm which is the admiration of a number of outstanding critics and judicious readers. He has brought to life characters that range from sagacious and fraudulent salesmen to devout and guileless ex-seminarians; from jazz-playing entertainers to pool-room loafers. One may find young and old people in his stories; invalids and their nursing companions; new comers trying to get socially established in a suburban area or a brooding refugee in a bar— every one of them with specific interest and peculiar problems to face in life.

Powers has admirably penetrated the child's world, either to awaken manly emotions or to confront the hard facts of reality in disillusionment. He has entered the world of race struggle fearlessly and eloquently, observing it through the eyes of patiently suffering Negroes or disgustingly prejuidiced Whites. Some of the characters may appear to a critic exotic people in strange situations as the Mid-Western priests of these stories do to Evelyn Waugh who finds them, nevertheless, convincingly real. "They exist," he says "with their gadgets, television and ball games, their incurious orthodoxy, their parish suppers and bingos, their whole-hearted devotion to parish and diocese, their lack of courtesy and of aesthetic appreciation, their peculiar ascendency in their communities, their isolation from an educated laity."[6]

(6) "Scenes of Clerical Life," *Commonweal*, 63, March 30, 1956, p. 668.

The hard, clean-cut, penetrating, and comprehensive characterization of Father Burner in "Prince of Darkness" and Father Didymus in "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does," and those of the ex-seminarian Myles and his false partner Mac in "The Devil Was the Joker," all four of them, stand a good chance to immortalize the fiction writer that brought them into being. If one may detect less originality in the Pastor and his curate, Father Fabre, of the stories "Losing Game" and "The Presence of Grace" that portray, according to Mr. Kazin, the movie version of a Bing-Crosby-and-Barry-Fitzgerald combination,[7] there is, nevertheless, something lasting about Father Fabre and his pastor that endears them to the reader.

It has been pointed out that Powers' pet characters are priests. It is plain that the great variety of priests that live through these stories reveal a world that is neither all white nor all black. As Henry Rago says:

> "There are shades and shades: the very beautiful and holy, which is not to say untroubled, the death of [Father Didymus] . . . ; the heartless wordliness of Monsignor in "The Forks" and the Pastor in "The Lord's Day;" the humor and loneliness of the priesthood in "Valiant Woman;" and the delicately controlled luke-warmth and yet pathetic humanness of the principal character in "Prince of Darkness."[8]

Or, as another critic adds:

> "Mr. Powers knows that priests are still men, that there will be some quarrelsome, some easy-going; that they will desire preferment, play at least mild politics for it and feel disappointment in life when they don't get it. But if Mr. Powers is without illusions, it is even more true that he is without cynicism. He writes for the most part of the seamier side of the priesthood, of curates in large, poor, city parishes, living three or four together in rickety presbyteries; and yet most of them are trying to do their best for their parishioners and themselves at the same time, even if sometimes they get humanly discouraged about the whole business."[9]

In his world in miniature, Mr. Powers' art is comprehensive enough about man. A man may be disappointed in his ambition, even if the man is a priest trying to get a parish. A boy may be disillusioned, as Jamesie is, when his god-like hero shows his cloven foot. In "The Trouble" man cries in deep sorrow; in "Renner," man is puzzled; in "He Don't Plant Cotton," man suffers and smiles. Like Didymus, Eudex, Firman, the Bishop (in "Zeal"), and Myles, men think and discover truths about themselves and others; like Burner, Fabre, and Udovic, men also reflect and are on the way of self-discovery. Man is pitiable or over-bearing like the Nun Superior or her

(7) Cf. Alfred Kazin, "Grace and Gravity," *New Republic*, 134, April 30, 1956, pp. 19-20.

(8) *Commonweal*, 46, August 22, 1947, p. 457.

(9) Basil Davenport, "The Seamier Side of Priesthood," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 30, August 14, 1947, p. 13.

Pastor in "The Lord's Day." Man is cunning and devious like Mac. Man is unfeeling and hard-hearted as in "Blue Island" society, or cruel and violent as in the three stories of race hatred and discrimination. Man, in fine, is capable of loving and being loved as Mr. and Mrs. Newman express it so eloquently in their quiet and simple way; he is capable of sublime heights through complex inward self-conquest as Didymus.

Such lifelike and varied portrayals cannot help but reveal the deft hand of the artist. These portrayals, moreover, reveal the author's penetrating mind and prolific imagination together with his stout-hearted, compassionate humor. Through these portrayals Mr. Powers conclusively proves that he is indeed a true creator of character.

CHAPTER TWO

TECHNIQUE

A.— PLOT.

It has already been pointed out that in Powers' stories the narrative framework, which is sometimes reduced to a minimum, may leave the casual reader unimpressed. A serious reader, however, very soon becomes aware of the double-level pattern in which most of the stories are written. What to one reader, therefore, looks like a complete absence of plot, to the second appears as a marvelous interplay of external events having their projection in the protagonist's inner struggle.

"What happens? Where is the plot," one may ask, for instance, "in 'The Lord's Day'?" Sister Superior contemplates the desolate school yard left treeless in an act of peevishness by the pastor the day before. She remembers how she pleaded for the life of those mulberry trees; now she must take her community to count the collection money for the pastor; she feels she must extract from him a new kitchen stove for her community; the unimaginative pastor is unable to see the need and refuses to buy them the needed stove.

Could one say that the conflict of the story really is between Sister Superior and the pastor if he hardly realizes her interior drama? The concrete details of the story are in themselves of minor proportions; nevertheless, with a writer such as Powers these details become alive with meaning and give rise to the real essence of the story which is Sister Superior's pitiful state of anger and revulsion before egotism and tyranny in the person of a pastor who remains unconcerned.

In "Zeal" a similar situation occurs but in a way which is even more subtle. Apparently it is all Father Early's story; as far as the incidents are concerned he is everywhere commenting on everything and conversing with everybody in the train. Actually it is the Bishop's story. It is the change (or revelation) of Bishop's attitude towards his people that constitutes the point of the story. This is achieved by the Bishop who reflects upon Father Early's enthusiastic (although meddlesome) activities, but in this priest's unawareness of the Bishop's inner transformation.

If there is no plot in the simplicity of the concrete facts of the narrative— plot to talk about in the old sense of the word— one may observe, however, that most of the characteristics of plot are found in such stories since the situations are, of themselves, intriguing and not without suspense.

Sister Superior, in "The Lord's Day," is pictured brooding over the felled mulberry trees in an action that she considers not only catastrophic but

demonstrative of monstrous arbitrariness. Her awareness of its implication in the events that follow, work up in her consciousness a mounting reaction of self-assertion to re-establish her dignity not only before the priest but before her community as well. While leading her community to the rectory, for instance, "She thought of herself as a turnkey releasing them briefly to the sun."

Similarly in "Zeal" the contrivance of the story is supplied by the very confrontation of a staid Bishop with his overzealous priest in a situation which unfolds itself into a humorous reversal. The Bishop who would do his utmost to avoid Father Early's company, ends up unable to compose himself to sleep without reflecting on the priest's doings, "still out there, on his feet and trying, which was what counted in the sight of God, not success."

Other characteristics of plot are invention and unexpectedness, and these are found in abundance in Powers' stories. Invention may take the form of a kind of adventure in the Bishop's mind, to follow up with "Zeal." This whole story is construed in the projection of all Father Early's actions into the Bishop's state of mind. It is the Bishop who, at first, suffers at the thought of people associating him with "Crazy Early." It is the Bishop who feels uncomfortable at his own attitude of "no support" to Father Early's zealous ways. It is the Bishop who through his own reflections is able to see beyond the annoying meddlesomeness of his inferior a truth that has been obscured by his own complacency.

This idea of adventure is even put forward metaphorically by the author in "Losing Game" where the search for a table in the church basement is referred to as a trip through a jungle. Powers says: "The pastor could feel the debris closing in, growing up behind him. The path ahead appeared clear only when he looked to either side." The reader appreciates this bit of humor.

Invention may mean complication. Returning to "The Lord's Day," the struggle that unfolds between the pastor and Sister Superior has its counterpart within the community itself. There is Sister Louise, and Sister Paula, each in her own distinctive manner contributing to the resistance movement; each, victim to envy or bitterness, thinking of older times and better superiors. On the other hand, simple and ingenuous Sister Florence thinks good-naturedly of making a game out of the monotony of counting coins, and Sister Antonia, understanding and wise, is ready to collaborate in order to reduce ill-feelings to a minimum.

The unexpectedness or surprise in these two stories is that found in any human being in consonance with his character. The Bishop's own reactions might be a mystery to him but, if so, they are unexpected revelations of his own contradictory nature. At one time he may think of himself as the paradigm of civility, and yet at another he will be restless at the thought of his complacent egotism. Sister Superior in "The Lord's Day" has her own surprise. She knows well the meanness of the pastor and the envy and bitterness of some members of her community, but she certainly does not expect her parley with the pastor— who suggests preposterously the felling of the last tree in the school yard as the only solution for the kitchen stove to work properly— to end with "blood assembling in patches on her cheeks . . . wanting to get upstairs and wash the money off her hands."

It is plain that, the plot actions being rendered mainly as inner conflicts, the climaxes of these stories are designed to make the final revelation come through either as a painful experience or a pitiful condition; and this, as shown, is expertly done by the author.

These two stories have served as illustrations of Powers' use of antithetical characters who, placed in peculiar situations, supply the plot to the story. In each of these stories, one of the characters remains unaware of the reaction he causes on the other. An analysis of "The Forks" and "The Valiant Woman" discloses similar situations. In "The Forks"' it is Monsignor who remains indifferent and the young curate that suffers revulsion at the sight of the encroachments of material culture and comfort to the detriment of pastoral care. In "The Valian Woman" it is Father Firman who wriggles and pouts wishing to get free from a situation he himself has allowed to develop and which he is now incapable of changing. The housekeeper, on the contrary, remains insensible to Father Firman's inner feelings not through lack of pity—which she shows, with bursting comicality, pleading for the life of the female mosquito— but simply because she does not become aware of them. In her lightheadedness she does not even realize her domineering attitude. Father Firman, however, feels he must be extremely careful not to let her know his interior, lonely drama.

At other times Powers may use the same pattern, but he presents the characters with consciously fostered self-assertiveness which causes dramatic tension between them and renders the stories livelier. The best illustrations of this competitive pattern are "The Devil Was the Joker" and "Prince of Darkness".

In "The Devil Was the Joker," Mac appears directing the show: attracting Myles into his friendship, and displaying such persuasive qualities before his employers, the Clementine Fathers, that he wins their entire confidence and gets a new job from them for Myles. Soon it appears that Myles is somebody not in the least like Mac, not so persuasive, nor very clever, and neither quick to take advantage of the least opportunity, but somehow, stubborn in his opinions and not easily diverted from his attitudes. Mac immediately becomes aware of the situation and sets about to deploy his persuasive art. It is a long battle as described above in the first chapter: Myles gradually grows wise and hardens up to reality and in the end is able to unmask and reject the deceitful ways of the amiable but false companion.

In "Prince of Darkness" this developmental pattern of struggle for self-assertion is seen and felt throughout the story in Father Burner's own consciousness of it. In each successive scene Father Burner undergoes a humiliating experience followed by an outburst or a self-deceiving daydream which in turn is counteracted by a sobering reflection. Before the insurance agent he feels "mysteriously purchasable" and "though in other problems he was never the one to take the ascetic interpretation," he rejects outright the insurance proposition simply as an act of self-defense; he is extremely sensitive to people thinking of him the way he sees himself. In the following scene as he finishes breakfast, he must explain that it is a *late* breakfast to Quinlan and Keefe that they may not imagine it is a *long,* glutton-catering one.

After the first exchange of words in the tart repartee that follows, Burner's outburst jabbing at the grapefruit and flooding the pancakes with

syrup carries with it a painful awareness of his weakness, all the more searing because he feels the two priests watching. His bully-type reaction first towards Mary, then the lady parishioner, and finally meek Father Keefe is pure, one-sided, self-assertiveness, which in turn psychologically recoils and castigates him inwardly, though unnoticed by the victims. But the unbearable Quinlan is more difficult to deal with. Burner must content himself with the flattering illusion of his own superiority by feigning to commandeer Quinlan's service for contacting wayward parishioners.

Even in the "Noon" part of the story which is taken up practically by Burner alone in a series of daydreams, the writing of a letter, and a ride to the airport, Mr. Powers is surprisingly able to maintain the same pattern in the self-assertion that causes the tension required to keep the story alive. The first image evoked in the daydreams is that of a publicity-seeking, golf-playing, "par-shattering padre"; then that of a war-ace, "sneering, scar-faced, and black of heart"; later it is violence that is suggested in the "fighter coming off the ropes." The letter to the Bishop is Burner's second, intended for quick action and "full of dynamite." At the airport by the hamburger stand, Burner's brooding over the failure he has made of his life has the effect of deflating a bubble. But the ever-rebounding Burner characteristically reacts, savoring the dream of "meeting a remote and glorious death" as a possible war chaplain, as a means to make him come out even." Thinking of the Dean, he does it in terms of an "encounter" with the Bishop, and this reminds him of the Dean's formidable position. Burner's bouts with the Dean are worse than those with Quinlan. If the Bishop cannot cope with the Dean, Burner can expect only embarrassing situations from him. It is due to the Dean that Burner is known in the diocese as Prince of Darkness[1]; and he may as well brood over that other title of his which also refers to his attempt "to get back at two Jesuits," that of "the circular priest."[2] In the same spirit, and in psychological reversal, he becomes susceptible of others taking revenge on him. The woman at the hamburger stand is thought of by Burner— who has been belittling her in his mind— "hoping in her simple heart to see him wreck the car and meet instant death in an unpostponed act of God."

It is not necessary to explain in detail the last part of the story in order to see the author's consistency in technique. Burner is always measuring up his possibilities to stand against any people he may see before him. The people in the Cathedral and the Vicar General have, therefore, the effect of preparing him for his final confrontation with the Archbishop, which is worked out into a marvelous climax.

Self-assertiveness is an important motive-force in man, and Mr. Powers knows well how to use it to advantage in creating the friction and tension that give the sensation of a fishing line that the author, like an expert fisherman, keeps taut, never for a moment slackened, until the "fish" is landed at the end of the story.

Self-assertiveness, furthermore, serves another purpose in Powers' stories. It gives them a marvelous bouyancy which is the buoyancy of life itself; the

(1) Pun played on his hobby (photography) and the time he spends in the dark room.

(2) Instead of "secular priest," due to a misprint in an article he had written.

ever-rebounding characteristic that is so evident in Burner and Mac tends to become a standard procedure in Powers' treatment of character and incident. Life is felt through contradiction and an uneventful life lacks the dialectic dynamism which constitutes the interesting thing about man in life.

A very keen critic in an essay entitled "J. F. Powers: On the Vitality of Disorder" has pointedly remarked:

> " [Powers'] pendulumlike use of motivation, reaction rebounding from reaction, [is] made necessary by his close attention to psychological friction among his characters. Although this friction is frequently revealed through apparently trivial thought and act, often comic in effect, it is rooted in the deadly serious effort of each character to establish his identity and authority in the scheme of things. Competitiveness is central in Powers' work."[3]

The article goes on to observe hôw this motivation may appear at one time or other as a kind of pure "psychological cannibalism" ("The Poor Thing") or mixed with racial antagonism ("He Don't Pant Cotton"). It may yet take on sociological implications ("The Old Bird, a Love Story" and "Blue Island") or resolve itself, particularly in the stories about the Catholic Church, in a "feinting and maneuvering towards settling the hierarchic structures" ("Death of a Favorite").

From this suggestion and from the treatment it has been given to Father Burner's self-assertion, it is easy to see how a detailed criticism of all these stories under this aspect alone could take the proportions of a thesis. But it is not necessary to go to that length which could only prove monotonous. The developmental pattern is clearly seen in most of the stories once the reader is set on looking for it.

In the same essay just quoted above one may find the following explanation of Powers' technique in reference to the typical climax in his stories:

> "[A] centripetal movement... begins on the outskirts of things, with the inconspicuous, literal mundane detail and slowly whirls in towards a still point of revelation... The protagonist is at least temporarily freed of the compulsion to maintain self, sees himself and others as victims of a condition endemic to humanity."[4]

It is not difficult to find an illustration that would amply justify this quotation. There is, for one, in "Dawn." The envelope on Bishop's desk represents the "outskirts of things": Monsignor Renton at the Catedral with his curates and his housekeeper fussing about the personal letter addressed to the Pope even before Father Udovic, as chancellor, brings it to the attention of the Bishop. Then the whole parish must know of it, that the one parishioner responsible for the envelope may appear and explain.

(3) George Scouffas in *Critique, Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. II, No. 2, Fall 1958, p. 41-42.

(4) *Ibidem*, p. 42.

It is then that things "slowly whirl." A battle is hinted between Monsignor Renton and Father Udovic. By suggesting that the announcement be made in the parish bulletin, Udovic eulogizes Renton's cherished activity; but almost immediately, recognizing he has been tricked by his own eagerness into a procedure overstepping the Bishop's intentions, he retracts and hurts Renton by asking that a simple oral announcement be made. Things continue to "whirl" with Udovic's reveries fluctuating between hope and fear: hope that a rich old man might have inserted a substantial check; fear that an enemy might use an anonymous letter to abuse the Holy Father with insults . . . reveries running the gamut from a spiritual bouquet of an innocent child to some "devil"-pestering nonsense of a feeble-minded nun.

The "still point" of the story arrives when Father Udovic faces Mrs. Anton, the one both responsible for and proud of the poor widow's mite in the envelope. Father Udovic realizes his own sin of pride in Mrs. Anton's. This is how Mr. Powers ends the story:

> "He realized that they had needed each other to arrive at their sorry state. It seemed to him sitting there saying nothing, that they saw each other as two people who'd sinned together on earth, might see each other in hell, unchastened even then, only blaming each other for what happened."

This is a typical Powers' ending. It is not the old-fashioned, hero-unmasks-villain scene, but a scene where the hero unmasks himself, where the hero identifies himself with the enemy. The incident of the letter and the situation evolved from the search for the sender become the mechanism through which the author concentrates some aspect of pride in human nature and then releases it in a final burst of laughter which illumines a truth with a pleasurable glow.

One may find in other stories an explosion of sorrow at the sight of a dead mother after a race riot ("The Trouble"); or a burst of indignation as the pleasure-seeking pastor denies to the nuns the small comfort of a needed new stove ("The Lord's Day"); or an irrepressible feeling of revulsion at the sad effects of blind rowdyism and race prejudice upon a courageous old Negro ("The Eye"); or a puzzled look at the complexity of human experience of world injustice in a Jewish refugee ("Renner"); or some freezing moments wondering at the capacity for refined cruelty in an invalid ("The Poor Thing"); or social meanness in a sales agent of kitchen utensils ("Blue Island"); or a cry of protest against materialism in the clergy that substitutes culture for cult ("The Forks"); or a soothing feeling of wonder at the capacity of man to smile under suffering ("He Don't Plant Cotton").

Most often, however, Mr. Powers chooses the comic effect, particularly in his favorite priests' stories. But no matter what the author chooses to do with his story, it can now be said that his treatment of plot tends to be elusive. He may even make it appear as though he does not care about plot. Nevertheless plot may be found in every one of his stories. It is so well integrated into the narrative that to some readers it may escape notice.[5] This

(5) William Goyen writing in *Nation* (182, May 12, 1956, p. 413) says: Powers' stories are "inconsequential though well-wrought anecdotes."

technique without technique is one of the marvels of modern short-story writing, and Mr. Powers proves that he possesses it to an outstanding degree. All his stories display in one way or another characteristics of adventure, surprise, supense, and intrigue which constitute the essence of plot and, in some subtle way, play upon some aspect of human nature in order to make a meaningful revelation.

B.—STRUCTURAL UNITY.

Plot may be considered as structural pattern. In this regard no general pattern has ever been held, nor can be held, as the ideal one since it is precisely under this aspect that there exists in short-story writing the greatest diversity and freedom. Authors are free to present their explorations of human nature in whichever way is best suited for their purpose. If there are certain conventions they must take into account, there is none that binds a writer of short stories to limit their length, or to divide them into a definite number of parts, or to order the various incidents that compose them into a pre-established model.

One thing that a reader will always expect to find in a story is some comment, however subtle, on human nature. This comment must necessarily include some human incidents arranged somehow into a meaningful pattern. A short story, whatever its parts, length, and order of presentation, becomes an artistic whole.

In considering Mr. Powers' technique in story structure, therefore, one must establish above all, the author's method of achieving in his fiction this essential artistic unity. Mr. Powers has been known for his uncanny ability to isolate situations and characters[6] and this ability is brought to evidence with brilliant success through his central characters. The one character selected for the general focus of each of his stories clearly dominates from beginning to end.

The figures of Fathers Burner, Didymus, Udovic, Eudex, and Fabre, the boy in "The Trouble," Jamesie, Renner, Teresa, the old man in "The Old Bird, A Love Story," She— the Nun Superior in "The Lord's Day,"— they all pervade their particular story and embody its meaning.

If sometimes the main character is not discernible at the early stages of the story and there lingers a doubt in the reader's mind as to who the *subject* of the story is, the doubt disappears with the end of the story. This may happen for instance, in "Zeal" or "The Valiant Woman," where the Bishop and Father Firman finally emerge as the characters through whom the meaning of the story is brought to light.

Reflecting upon all these stories one cannot help admiring the apparent ease of the author in maintaining his focus on one single character. This is done with great skill and according to the highest standards in modern short-story technique. The one character chosen to bear the meaning of the story is never for a moment left out of the scene. All other characters that enter the narrative do so in order to add some aspect or relationship of contrast to the attitude of the main character, but they do it in a manner that makes the reader seem to observe them through the protagonist's eyes

(6) Cf. Gable, *op. cit.*

or consciousness.

Taking "The Lord's Day" as a case in point, it is *she*— Sister Superior— that is felt all through the story. It is *she,* thinking sadly of the events of the day before, imagining Father "returning to the scene of the crime"; meeting her community and leading them to the rectory dining-room; watching them organize themselves for a ficticious ball game in the counting of money; announcing to them that "Father is going to look at the stove"; taking him to the kitchen— it is *she* that pervades the story.

The reader can easily see how the author gently effects the transitions needed and how he makes the presentations of the various characters that come into play without forgetting the main character altogether. First it is the priest and the janitor that are introduced as she remembers the scene of the day before, one grabbing the axe from the other and she thinking that the priest is "facying himself hundreds of years back, the most notable person at the birth of a canal or railroad, with the children for his amazed audience [as] he dealt the first blow."

Then it is the members of her community that file past before the reader as she leads them, procession-like, to the rectory dining-room amid foreboding thoughts. ("Going under the basketball standards, she thought they needed only a raven or two to become gibbets in the burning sun.") One by one some of the Sisters are presented to the reader, but he is not allowed to forget that *she* presides; that it is she who looks "hopefully to Sister Anatonia" as Sister Florence proposes the "game"; she, who feels deeply the resentments of Sisters Louise and Sister Paula, one sleeping, the other grumbling; she again, who overhears together with them the loud conversation between the pastor and the young curates; she, who remains oppressively silent throughout the commentaries of her community on one side, and, on the other, the going and coming of the pastor, to and from the kitchen refrigerator in the rectory, in search of a thirst-quenching beer.

On closer examination, one realizes that of the eight pages devoted to the story, the five middle ones deal extensively with direct dialogue among the various characters and not one word is quoted from *her*. Her only direct intervention in the incidents described is contained in a one-line paragraph: "She asked Sister Eleanor how the map was coming." This obviously is intended to distract the Sisters from the back-biting commentaries or reactions— like those of humph-humphing Sister Cigar Box—derogatory to the priests. What this really leads up to is the building up of a greater suspense for the explosive reaction in her final conversation with the pastor where her stoic, emotional stability and dignified appearance totter.

Similar analyses might be made with practically any story in these two volumes under consideration and be found equally successful on the matter of focusing character. "The Valiant Woman" has already been suggested as a peculiar story together with "Zeal" in the sense that almost all external activity belongs, respectively, to the housekeeper and to Father Early. Although the stories start outwardly underscoring the dominant chacracteristic of the woman or the meddlesomeness of the priest, both are stories that imply final awareness of a particular situation as a basis for the plot— awareness that both Father Firman and the Bishop vividly experience; both of them in their respective stories appear in a seemingly passive, tolerating mood which turns out to be not so tolerant. The Bishop is roused from his

lethargy and indifference towards his people, and Father Firman finds himself unable to escape from a humiliating situation he has encouraged into being.

Besides the central character, time and place are also considered in the story as elemental to artistic unity. Time does not seem to pose a problem to Mr. Powers. In fact he finds the classic period from morning to night as convenient length to unfold the plot in a good number of his stories, to wit: "Prince of Darkness," "The Forks," "The Old Bird, a Love Story," "The Valiant Woman," "The Eye," "He Don't Plant Cotton," and "The Presence of Grace." Some may extend to the following morning like Jamesie" and "Zeal." On the other hand, "The Lord's Day," "The Trouble," and "Losing Game" deal with plots that originate and end within a period of two or three hours. "Renner" implies even a shorter time. Here the author is able to cover a background of a lifetime in a few pages using a confidant as a teller quite effectively for compression of the narrative.[7] All the plot-action, however, takes place in a conversation over three or four glasses of beer.

Longer time limits are also used. "Death of a Favorite" and "Blue Island" require three days while "Dawn" and "The Poor Thing" cover three weeks. One thing seems sure, Mr. Powers handles with deftness the problems of scale and time in all his stories; he makes their length proportionate to their scope or degree of complication, and he makes their plot duration fit their subject and purpose within the bounds of credibility. The present thesis includes stories that range in length from eight pages like "The Lord's Day" to thirty-five like "The Devil Was the Joker." This last one is made up of a series of incidents that clearly indicate the passage of time necessary for the progressive and gradual hardening process to develop in Myles. In consequence, the author here extends the action of the story through several months. In "Defection of a Favorite" the possible change of character viewed in Father Burner likewise involves over a year's duration, which coincides with the time necessary for Father Malt, the pastor, to return from hospital. "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" presents the character of old Father Didymus already developed, but his complex psychology needs a great deal of analysis and a special treatment with an unhurried pace to round out his personality; therefore, Mr. Powers also uses a period of several months for the time unit of the story.

Place or setting in all these stories is used simply, without extravagance, without straining the point which would invite cheap sentimentality, confusion in the plot, and lack of due motivation within the characters. This does not mean that Mr. Powers fails to render setting vividly; quite the contrary. The abundance of concrete details in his stories is never used for its own sake, but always meaningfully to anchor the plot and characters to a world of reality or to create an atmosphere in consonance with the overall effect of the piece of fiction.

Here the study calls for a relevant comment on Mr. Powers' preference for the kind of world he creates in his stories. His marked preference is not a world of nature but of civilization. It is not a world of mountains and

(7) This may involve another technical problem which will be dealt with later when treating exposition and complication in the story.

rivers, of woods and valleys but of domestic scenes in church rectories, convent halls, chapels, dining-rooms, bed-rooms, and kitchens. There may be street scenes, rides to the airport, rides in street-cars, passing visits to drug stores and jails, conversations in restaurants and billiard halls. It all suggests, even in rural areas, city life. Even the story that has travel as a basis for incidents, "The Devil Was the Joker," is presented with a background of paved roads through a scenery of exhausted iron-ore mines, cut-over timber land, and fished-out lakes which also suggest the progress (or regress) of civilization. But this preference is not a whim of the author; it is rather a matter of careful selection which relates this background functionally to the story in order to add credibility to the characters and incidents, to enrich its theme, and to strengthen its artistic unity.

So far, character, time, and place have been considered as the material elements at the base of artistic unity in Powers' fiction. There now remains to consider these elements in relation to their purpose, that is, the idea behind them which constitutes the formal and essential unity of the story. It is this idea behind the story which gives meaningful coherence to its various parts and incidents, and even to the characters themselves. What led, for instance, Mr. Powers to choose the characters he did in "The Eye" if it were not their very repulsiveness in this ironic, yet forceful and artistic protest against violence, ignorance, and prejudice?

A way to look at this technical problem is to view the structural pattern in relation to the climax of the story. Selectivity is now seen as paramount. It is through the selection of incidents that meaning can be given to the story, and it is from their logical ordering towards a final impact that one may judge the artistic achievement of a writer.

Here again Mr. Powers scores high. All his stories reveal a close relationship between detail and over-all meaning, between concrete situations and the basic idea as a whole. Sometimes the very pattern of construction reveals this relationship as happens very clearly in "The Lord's Day." The story is built on a line or a series of contrasts. In the setting there is shade and sun suggesting a movement from the coolness of the mulberry trees to the suffocating heat in a treeless yard; there is also discomfort in the nuns' rickety convent and convenience in the pastor's modern rectory. This is a fitting background for the main characters themselves: a heatedly peevish pastor is set off against a cool-headed, long-suffering nun. Within the pastor himself there is a contrast of attitudes: towards the nun, harsh and insensitive; towards his curate, kind and understanding. Contrasts also occur within the community itself as explained above.[8] Finally the nun herself is subject to contrast. Her dignified, strong, stoic-like attitude comes to a disatrous end; she is deprived from her superior poised equilibrium by that one last failure —not unlike many others— to get a new kitchen stove. The basic idea upon which the story is built appears to be the contradiction inherent in human nature itself— the change from the coolness of patience to the heat of anger, from cold reasoning to hot emotion.

Further contrasts also could be found. The element of suggestiveness in Mr. Powers' stories seems limitless. The rickety convent still has a corner of solace, the chapel; the modern rectory has still to get rid of cockroaches.

(8) Cf. Chapter One, section No. 4.

The possible ease of life in a convent is destroyed by the unforgivable conditions that have the appearance of forced labor. The Lord's Day, a day of rest, love, and happiness in the praise of the Lord is made one of taciturn, somewhat passionate criticism of the Lord's ministers and representatives.

Some stories state their theme. "The Trouble" has its theme stated in one "j'accuse" particularly directed to Catholics. The author makes the priest who administers the last sacraments to the dying woman admonish the white man who has participated in the street race riot and who has just been saved from certain death by the Negro grandmother. The white man tries to argue lamely the reason for his feeling safe in the Negro home saying: "I'm a Catholic, Father." Feeling the strained situation, the priest says in poignant reply: "That is the trouble." The title is thus forcefully referred to the theme of race struggle and the Catholics share in it.[9]

If a reader objects to what may appear "using the art of fiction as a disguise for preaching,"[10] one may remark that in this instance nowhere has Mr. Powers sacrificed the reality of his characters to prove his point. His protest as found in the story should not be considered as an interference with his art. The incident is not forced upon. It is but the natural result of duly motivated reactions in the characters. The action of the plot refers to the experience of an almost complete range of human emotions logically awakened through a race riot and having for its culmination the manfully felt sorrow in a motherless Negro boy. The relation between theme and action, nevertheless, is obvious and the implication unavoidable. The lesson is well absorbed in the story and the reader's emotional response is shared in unison with the author.

A similar situation of an obvious lesson is found in "Renner" where the protagonist voices an overheated protest on the theme of social justice. Negro problems also appear in "The Eye" and in "He Don't Plant Cotton". The first treats the theme ironically; the second never reaches a direct statement on the theme. "An Old Bird, a Love Story" states its theme in the title as a tactful invitation from the author to observe the various incidents under this aspect and see whether or not the story really clings to the mold; and the reader appreciates the invitation as he relishes the fact. Love does inform even the most trivial actions of Mr. Newman sorrounding them with a glowing significance.

In all of these stories Mr. Powers proves himself the master craftsman drawing from each the effects he intends. He shows thereby, that he is equally deft in presenting the theme bluntly or subtly. His preference, however, lies with subtlety, perhaps, because it offers a greater challenge and a greater variety of approach.

Briefly recalling the other two stories thoroughly analyzed in the first chapter, it should be easy now to see how close they follow the idea or thematic pattern set by the author. The protagonist in "Prince of Darkness"

(9) Cf. Gable, *loc. cit.*

(10) The expression is taken from Brooks, Purser, and Warren, *An Approach to Literature*, N. Y. 1952, p. 14, but the objection proper to Powers' stories is found in *Sewanee Review*, vol. 56, summer 1948, p. 527. Reviewing *Prince of Darkness*, Robert Daniels there says: "The Negro stories in particular are badly didactic."

is clearly seen through incidents which besides characterizing him, center in his failure to react according to the ascetic view of his sublime calling while he gives himself up to the enjoyment of eating pancakes and hamburgers, or dreaming imaginary glories as a golfer, war ace, or army chaplain, with the consequent dissatisfaction, boredom, and shocking surprise of his aimless life.

The line followed in "The Devil Was the Joker" is also quite evident. Guileless Myles' hardening process, after the initial and inadvertent fall into Mac's wily embrace of false partnership, is logically brought to a final and successful disentanglement. Here the reader is confronted with two characters whose wills are set to follow different roads: one downward in material and moral degradation, the other uphill in a struggle towards personal integrity. Or, put in another way, it is innocence in an encounter with evil. Innocence is shown with an inner virtue capable of developing its own self-protecting shield impervious to evil.

Father Burner is presented in a personal struggle within himself feeling the tension of a life spent in the enjoyment of the senses, winning the battle over a life of asceticism and prayer, and leaving behind a sense of void. Myles and Mac impersonate the spiritual and material worlds in a hand to hand skirmish, each character remaining what he is at the beginning. Burner faces a possible change of attitude which is, however, not probable in view of his inveterate habits of gluttony and sloth. Myles and Mac follow each his own way, hardly influenced by the other, the one made wiser and stronger through experience, while the other, weaker and duller through vice.

"Losing Game" follows another aspect in the process of change of human nature: both parties concerned— Father Fabre and the pastor— have their views on each other modified and enter upon the road of mutual understanding and conviviality. Viewed in this manner no one is the victor and the title carries its meaning into this higher level too. But the basic idea which is stressed behind the concrete details of the story seems rather the conflict that has always existed between inscrutable old age and restless youth; authority and the efforts to circumvent it. In the inevitable clash, the young subordinate is always the loser.

It is delightful to see how Mr. Powers makes these ideas come out alive in a story full of circumstantial and character-revealing details in an atmosphere of delicate humor. The old priest is introduced through an inch opening of the door showing the chaos in his room: " . . . the radio in the unmade bed, the correspondence, pamphlets." He appears noiselessly moving about with a "ghostly step" and wearing a green eyeshade. Later the secretive old man is described working over a combination lock and the purposely faulty wiring before entering the basement. There is found the hoard of the old collector: a cartridge belt, a wrinkled bicycle tire, a beekeeper's veil, two workbenches, a few "unemployed statues" and further "furniture and junk."

Two salient characteristics are vividly represented: the secretiveness of the old priest and his habit as collector of odds and ends; all the perplexities of old age and its adjunct store of tradition. The setting has its full effect on the intensity of the conflict between the past and the present and adds its due share of credibility to the emotional problems involved: the old versus the new, passivity versus action, the "conservationist" versus the practical-minded.

The whole treatment of the story is further enhanced, in its humorous tone, by the jungle image fittingly evoked by the author for the hunting adventure in the chaotic basement. Thus the inner attitude of the pastor is rendered more picturesque than through his mere laconic speech and enigmatic reactions. The law of conflict is concretized in a very specific goal: to get a table for a typewriter. The conscious will of the new curate is set on a definite aim in defiance of authority. He attempts, nevertheless, to explain the enigmatic behavior of his secretive superior. He, somehow mingles defiance with willingness to bide by "the rules of their little game." Once the pastor decides to go to the basement it is a hand to hand battle—so it seems to Father Fabre—or, better still, mind versus mind. Since the young curate is cut short in his forward march towards his goal and thus prevented from arguing his case as a *fait accompli,* he endeavors a in all shrewdness, weighing his every outspoken comment, to outwit the old pastor and lead him to the granting of that table whose worth Fabre has purposely underrated. But his carefully planned maneuver is fated for disaster. "His false praise of the chair" boomerangs and defeats him.

The mysterious aspect of old age also reflects on the mystery of fate and this in turn on the obscure side found in the principle of authority. In this manner the story may be looked upon as an adventure through the jungle of human nature to find concealed relationships. The jungle emerges here as chaos and disorder and "junk." It bears its resemblance to the moral world, which is one of inertness and procrastination in the old pastor and of uncontrolled desire, urge to brashness and insubordination in the young curate. Yet, there is the underlying principle of authority coupled with other principles hidden in the depths of the human heart that finally bring out order from chaos, obedience and submission from insubordination, understanding and condescension from rigid mistrust.

There might be someone inclined to think that the analysis just made needs a stretching of the imagination. But the fact is both apparent and startling in all of Mr. Powers' stories. The force of their suggestiveness is simply and pleasurably overwhelming. Their compactness gives them such an explosive force that the tiniest detail may appear in the manner of a spark that throws its light upon a series of engaging aspects of human nature. All this is evidently the result of the close relationship that Mr. Powers always manages to maintain between matter and form, concrete facts and root-idea, situation and theme. This is technique at its highest level, subtly but unerringly producing what Frank O'Connor, commenting on Powers calls, "a peculiar shock of delight... [but] not a delight that disappears as the shock diminishes."[11] This is technique truly functioning for the ends of art.

C.— OTHER ASPECTS OF TECHNIQUE.

1. EXPOSITION AND COMPLICATION:

At this point it is appropriate to quote Sean O'Faolain, a well-known critic, about the latest trends in short fiction. He has this to say:

(11) *The Saturday Review of Literature,* 39: March 24, 1956, p. 22.

> "Modern short-story tellers have sought for greater compression... They aim to make situation and construction merge into a single movement and when they succeed they bring the short-story to its peak of technical achievement."[12]

This authoritative remark gives an important clue for further looking into Mr. Powers' technical success. It is not difficult to observe how stories like "The Valiant Woman," "Prince of Darkness," and "The Devil Was the Joker" follow this trend to the letter. The three of them begin at a crisis that places the reader immediately into the action of the plot. Thus exposition and complication are simultaneously treated in order to give greater compression and greater force to the narrative.

The first story presents Father Firman already dominated by his housekeeper. The second starts with the scene of the insurance man in which Father Burner dismally feels his defeated attitude towards the ascetic view of life. The third opens with one first tangle between the protagonists where ingenuous Myles seems no match for wily Mac.

In order to see more clearly what this "aim to make situation and construction merge into a single movement" actually means, one may take as illustration the opening lines of "The Valiant Woman." This is how the story starts:

> "They had come to the dessert in a dinner that was a shambles. 'Well John,' Father Nulty said, turning away from Mrs. Stoner and to Father Firman, long gone silent at his own table. 'You've got the Bishop coming for confirmations next week.'
>
> 'Yes,' Mrs. Stoner cut in, 'and for dinner. And if he don't eat any more than he did last year—."

Here is dramatic presentation in a vivid scene. In those few lines not only have the main characters been introduced but place, time and a supenseful silence have been delightfully blended with a good measure of suggestibility. It later develops that the dessert "they had come to" is a birthday cake. But so far in those six lines the author has told the reader many interesting things:

1) Father Nulty turns away from Mrs. Stoner.
2) Father Firman is at his own table and "has long gone silent".
3) Mrs. Stoner meddles into the conversation.

Decidedly Father Nulty means to carry on a conversation with his fellow priest and host whom he comes to greet and cheer on this special occasion, but for some reason he has been diverted from his avowed purpose by Mrs. Stoner who monopolizes the conversation; therefore, he consciously turns away from that terribly talkative woman. Father Firman at his own table is silent; he has been that way a long time. Here then is the core of the inner action that gradually reveals itself and makes itself felt with increasing force as the story progresses. The master of the house who has refrained from

(12) *The Story*, p. 201.

using his authority to relegate the housekeeper where she belongs— to the kitchen and house-cleaning chores— is now helplessly unable to change a state of affairs which has seemingly reached an ignominious equilibrium, which is not at all an equilibrium. Just as decidedly as Father Nulty intends to avoid her, Mrs. Stoner returns in unabashed assertiveness using words that sketch her strikingly with vulgarity and petulance. This character delineation is surely that which Mr. O'Faolain refers to when he comments on the merging of situation and construction. With the dramatic presentation of the characters already involved, an alert reader is roused from the start.

Following a more traditional line, the structure of the story might have these steps: a) Rectory in a town inconveniently distant from large cities; b) Father Firman's need of a housekeeper; c) The housekeeper gradually lords it over the rectory; d) An old friend, a fellow priest, arrives to greet Father Firman on his birthday; e) Final scenes at honey-moon bridge and alone in his bedroom where Father Firman explodes futilely against the female mosquito.

The compression in those seven lines by which Mr. Powers selected to begin his story can now be appreciated. He has practically brought the reader to the end of the story. He can concentrate on those aspects he wants to stress in order to reveal the pitiful human condition in the person of this particular priest, a victim of circumstances.

This tendency to treat exposition and complication simultaneously is delicately observed in most of Mr. Powers' stories. There are some, however, especially among the earlier ones, that do not follow this treatment; for example: "Lions Harts, and Leaping Does", "Jamesie," and the "Trouble." The one that deviates most from the pattern is, perhaps, "Renner." In this story another technical problem is involved: how to maintain a dialogue charged with tension if it is to be mainly an expository conversation. Renner is simply going to tell what happened to him. The author solves the problem deftly by having Renner tell the narrator, his confidant, only those significant details of his life which are the result of an uncontrollable impulse. Renner's past is coaxed out of him by the presence at the bar of characters that vividly remind him of a series of past crises that lead up to the present one— his peremptory and unjust dismissal from the factory an hour before.

Thus it is evident that even in those earlier stories the author strives to render active those elements in the narrative, like expository comment, that otherwise would remain inert. Nowhere in Mr. Powers' work is there a development more noticeable than in this tendency to give more attention to the dramatic aspect of storytelling. He himself states his judgment on the matter:

> "I have always blended action and comment... action and characterization... If it comes to a showdown I have to admit characterization is more important. And yet that is to ignore the dramatic aspect, the thing that can turn the blood hot and cold if done right."[13]

(13) Quoted from an undated letter, "early in 1945," that Powers wrote to Mr. Charles H. Shattuck, which was quoted in an article by George Scouffas: "J. F. Powers: On the Vitality of Disorder," *Critique* II, 2, Fall 1958, p. 51.

This endeavor to search for the proper combination of the elements in the story has yielded larger treatment of dramatic scenes and more interaction between characters through tense dialogue[14] as evidenced in the opening-up paragraphs of "The Valiant Woman."

2. *SETTING:*

What has been said about Mr. Powers' active rendering of exposition could also be said about the setting he selects for his stories and the atmosphere with which he surrounds and impregnates them. The close relationship suggested in "The Lord's Day" (as analyzed above) between plot and the exterior background and in "Losing Game" between externals and implied characterization provides some proof of Mr. Powers' skill. But, as has already been explained, the author is mainly concerned with stories contained in scenes that describe city life; consequently the setting, instead of presenting an added motive force in natural environment, rather implies, in those concrete details, the social and economic forces that give life to these stories. Thus the setting in "Blue Island," "The Poor Thing," and "The Valiant Woman" point to isolation and loneliness; in "The Forks," to culture and materialism; in the Negro stories, to race struggle. At times, however, natural setting merges into the theme without the author stressing its significance but banking on concrete details objectively, thus avoiding lessening credibility and at the same time contributing to the creation of the proper atmosphere for the story. In "He Don't Plant Cotton," Mr. Powers manages to introduce a background where outside scenery and weather blend, causing a strange mixture of feelings that symbolically suggest the feelings and attitudes of the hero. An introductory paragraph presents the desolation in the drab, down-town streets of a big city like Chicago where "people's clothing and the thermometer are the only signs available to distinguish the seasons of the year." It is winter and the weather stands for the cold reality of life; the scenery, however, is provided by the snow, white under the street lamps and varicolored under the neon signs.

For Baby, the protagonist in the story, life holds the two contrasting aspects suggested by the cold and the snow. As a musician in a bar-room under the ground floor of a building, the prospects are monotonous and uninviting. The drinking hall with "a stale blend of odors, shadows, darkness and music" is a "white place" and he is a Negro; and judging from his brooding sadness while the warm street car takes him to his work, he is far from pleased with it. As the story develops in mounting suspense, his decision to quit the job together with Libby is quite understandable. Nevertheless, on reaching the place he meets with members of his own race who do cheer him up. First there is Dodo, a "midgety, hunchbacked black," who "when he played on the piano his feet never touched the pedals"; then there is Libby, in whose voice Baby detects "the tiniest touch of satire" as she sings Southern songs to drunken, Southern, white patrons. There is a strong bond of friendliness that holds these three Negroes together in an indestructible unity. Each in his own way admires the other. Baby watching Dodo play the piano sees in his shadow a happy dancing spider. Libby rejoices in dreamlike fashion

(14) Scouffas, *ibidem.*

while she imagines Baby vanishing into the drums he plays. Dodo is even capable of forgetting his underlying hatred of the whites as he beholds Libby and Baby singing. Here is the varicolored beauty within the drabness of their work. It is then that they display a subdue dignity in their attitude to refuse being the object of coercive and indecorous abuse from their white patrons. There is sadness in their suffering condition— jobs are hard to get— but there is a sublime feeling in recognizing in themselves worthwhile human values. There is a greater capacity for joy amid their suffering subtly conveyed when Baby acknowledges, with pleasure (after the attempt to flag a taxi ends in a renewed affront, the white driver refusing to pick them up and leaving them cold and shivering on the side walk) still resounding in his ear "that fine young-woman laughter" which is Libby's.

3. ATMOSPHERE:

As far as atmosphere is concerned, "Renner" offers a peculiar blend of the ficticious and the real. All of its background is closely restricted to a single room—the bar. The furniture found there seems to be placed as part of a theatrical scenery to remind the teller of the "good old days": "the cloudy mirrors, the grandiose mohogany bar, tables and chairs ornate with spools and scrollwork, the burnished brass coat hooks and cuspidors . . . swillish brown paintings . . . " The minor characters are introduced, suggesting sound effects as from a stage in a theater. What is first heard from them is described as "an aromatic mixture of English and German." It all may be a dream for all that matters.

The author fosters the dreamy mood of the story further by making the teller surround Renner with a kind of mysticism that appears half-masking reality. The text of the story reads:

> "Renner, using both hands, elevated a glass of beer in momentary exposition, raised his eyes to heaven, and drank deeply. I wondered if, despite everything he might still be fascinated by the Germans."

A few lines further down, Renner is referred to as a man whose character shines through a "face with a depth and decision of a wood carving about it." Slowly, notwithstanding this dreamy mood of unreality, the world of fiction takes on real life. Recalling his boyhood in Austria, Renner prides himself on his stubborn resistance to the sergeant hired to discipline him at the age of eight and thereby reveals himself as a man not likely to lend himself as an obedient tool in a game which emphasizes man's servile conditions. At the time of his exile in Eastern and Mid-Western United States, he finds it virtually impossible to exercise his intellectual abilities. As a former political science teacher and after fleeing the Nazis at the beginning of World War II, he finds that his profession presents "too much guilt connected with it." Feeling a martyr's blood coursing through his veins and under a strong emotion caused by his dismissal that very afternoon from the factory where he has been working and coaxed further by the individuals he sees in the restaurant, he has chosen to discuss his bitterness over a few glasses of beer with a sympathetic fellow worker. The discussion reveals

the refugee as an introspective lover of freedom, insensitive to politics, but with a very strong conviction concerning the rights and dignity of man. The insubordination that costs him his job is precisely a fearless protest against the working conditions and an impassioned defense of the workers' rights. His past experiences with disloyal people (the perfidious stenographer, the faithless wife, the reneging co-worker) have led him, moreover, to mistrust people in general, and these same experiences make understandable the extravagant statement of feeling more at home in the company of horses— "in their uninterrupted insanity"— than with men.

The "I," the teller of the story, simply becomes the dispassionate witness to Renner's vexation who speaks of it realistically. The other minor characters in the story, seen playing cards in a corner of the room, tend to become symbolic, but they are clothed with such realism by the deft hand of the author, that they wittingly and convincingly provoke the protagonist's emotions. Emil, the waiter, reminds Renner of his little stenographer in Vienna who for ten years treacherously recorded everything for the Nazis. Emil, "with whom cordiality was a method," is the shrewd flatterer that takes advantage of every opportunity and on this occasion, at the expense of Mr. Ross, the successful Jewish businessman who comes to this German restaurant vainly attracted by the waiter's adulations. The easy-going, stocky Irishman, drunk and "one with the universe," may be directly related to Renner's exasperated remark about people "copulating with circumstance" and being truly lethargic. The "Entrepreneur" is the card-player with his back to Renner. He is presented as ambitious, overbearing, awe-inspiring, and with an "expressive head" wearing a close resemblance *"par derriere"* to the superintendent who but an hour ago has fired Renner. The Entrepreneur is the man of action and quick decisions presumably also like the sergeant major of Renner's childhood, or the Geometry teacher in Innsbruck, disseminator of race hatred and contempt. It is the Entrepreneur's contemptuous imitation of Mr. Ross's Yiddish dialect that causes Renner's final outburst of anger which ends in a mixture of shame and resentment: resentment towards the world's injustice, shame because of his error in laying the blame on the ones not responsible for it. Renner is bewildered to find in the card players in the corner "four surprised faces . . . [with] nothing about them familiar or hateful to Renner."

The net result is a superb and vivid picture of a disillusioned and embittered man presenting and enclosed, narrow vision of reality. The final ironical equivocation of Renner's overfervid mind, mistaking reality for its image, completes the circle in a complex peripety. Fate is represented here in the enveloping action of the world's social environment, a force which is antagonistic and indifferent to the individual's vital needs and rights. The good old days were not so good then, and are not now, nor will they be in the future. There will always be evil in the world. The meditative mood at the beginning of the story serves as a contrasting background for the explosive awakening at the end. The series of crises brought to life by Renner's emotionally provoked remembrance of past events provide the logical sequence of his impassioned confrontation with the social environment.

4. *POINT OF VIEW:*

So far the story has been considered in itself. There is, however, the

author-to-reader relationship that must not be underestimated. If there is explosive compression in the simultaneous development of expository comment and action-filled complication, there is a vantage position from which the author seems to observe what he— or his intermediary character, in the first-person accounts— is going to narrate. This results in an author-to-reader relationship which is at the bottom a question of authority, a "confidence trick,"[15] necessary for the credibility of the story.

What any fiction writer seeks, above all, is to create an illusion of actual experience in the reader's mind, and this is usually done in shors-story writing in terms of one character in a particular situation and scene. The result, when the attempt is successful, is similar to that obtained in "The Lord's Day" according to the analysis already presented. The reader sees what the nun sees, thinks what she thinks, feels what she feels, for the same reasons that she feels and thinks. This is the result largely of the right choice and use of the point of view. Life as felt by the nun is felt by the reader and great art is that which, through details such as the cut-down trees, "a pebble in the lacings of her shoe" while crossing the yard, "a Chinese coin with a hole in it" at the counting the parish collection, and the fateful kitchen stove, presents life with an immediacy of actuality. What modern fiction, at its peak of technical development, is trying to do is to make the reader imagine the actuality as experienced by the main character.[16] This is what Powers accomplishes in almost everyone of his stories. He may select a first-person narrator either as the protagonist ("The Trouble,") or as an ignoble character and unreliable observer ("The Eye,") or simply as a simpathetic confidant of a fellow-worker in time of deep distress ("Renner.")

On examining these stories for the logic in the selection of point of view, one finds that the author competently manages to draw a positive effect in narratives that would naturally suffer from the restricted view of the narrator. In "The Trouble" the hero is the Negro boy whose style even reveals an innocent ingenuity which precludes all vainglory and convinces the reader of the hero's true feelings. Moreover, the boy's own language and comment give Mr. Powers advantage in defining the boy's growing sensitivity without resorting to deep analysis. "The Eye" has for its narrator Roy, a member of the gang, whose biased and repulsively "reasoned" report works for greater effect in the over-all irony that fills the characters with scorn from the author and reader alike. The narrator in "Renner" is the hero's fellow-worker and sympathetic confidant. The setting of the story is so restricted and limited in space (the bar) and time (one or two hours) that the emotionally balanced narrator can be taken at his word as presenting a true and objective report of what happened. By limiting the story to a conversation in a bar, a whole lifetime is conveniently summarized in the strictly selected incidents that have a direct bearing on the story. In these three cases, by not simply evading or diminishing the drawbacks of a first-person narrative but by making them serve in a positive way towards the over-all immediacy and vividness of the experience, Powers has revealed the finesse of a mature artist.

(15) O'Faolain's expression in *The Story*, p. 169.

(16) Cf. Gordon and Tate, "Notes on Fictional Techniques" in *The House of Fiction*, N. Y., 1960. pp. 442 and 443.

Mr. Powers has also ventured the whimsey of selecting a cat to tell a story. He has two such stories: "Death of a Favorite" and "Defection of a Favorite." Both of them are told by Fritz, a rectory cat, and both of them relate his experiences with "poor" Father Burner (the protagonist in "Prince of Darkness") and elderly Father Malt. Father Malt is the pastor and Fritz is his pet. But Father Burner, who has just moved in from another parish as assistant again, dislikes Father Malt's pet, intensely.

"Death of a Favorite" is primarily the story of the cat—a cat conventionally endowed with a keen power of observation, great intelligence, and a few additional attributes far beyond the capabilities of an animal. "My observations [Fritz is speaking] . . . incline me to believe that one of us—Burner or I—must ultimately prevail over the other." In that sentence lies the core of "Death of a Favorite." Ultimately the cat will be restored—after a period of exile, victim of the assistant's whims during the pastor's absence—to his rightful place, a chair at the old priest's right hand.

By artistic consequence, there are sharp portrayals: Father Burner—Fritz's enemy—the teaser, the practical man, and the ill-tempered grumbler; Father Philbert, the chummy, conciliating, age-wise missionary; the missionary's helper, candid and timorous; Father Malt, the old pastor, deaf but, just the same, friendly, revered, and well-liked by his parishioners; the ushers with their petty jealousies in their desire for preferment. The story itself is highly intriguing, and the cat viewpoint stands out as highly original.

In "Defection of a Favorite" Fritz seems to leave the role of the protagonist to Father Burner who expects to succeed to Father Malt, his pastor, after the latter's serious accident. This situation brings about a change in Burner's manner of acting and provides ample material for characterization. Although he continues to be late at Mass and to be "unwilling to take a total loss on sacrifice," the growth of responsibilty becomes more and more evident in plans for a building program, economy measures to cut down on the electric bill, preparation of sermons, converts' meetings, even a gift to the housekeeper. He was doing a "bang-up job" of it.

Another interpretation of this story would be that the game going on between Fritz and Father Burner, of which Father Burner is unconscious, offers a striking parallelism with the problem between the assistant and the pastor, a problem of which the pastor remains ignorant. This interpretation would give a major role to the cat—which perhaps he has. A book review in *Time* seems to follow this interpretation. The reviewer sees in the cat viewpoint a fitting, well rounded-out irony for both stories, for they are "being told in the first person by a parish house cat, an unlikely but affective observation post from which humans frequently appear the more feline.[17] In the former interpretation, the cat as a minor character, used more as a narrator, tends to minimize the great disadvantage of this point of view, namely, undue eavesdropping on the protagonist in an improbable situation.

Mr. Powers can be extremely funny in a queer mixture of the burlesque and the philosophical. In these two stories he exercises his satiric abilities to the utmost, perhaps beyond the point where true art lies. In any case these stories are the only ones, of all those considered, that have met serious adverse criticism.

(17) Vol. 67, March 19, 1956, p. 110.

Alfred Kazin, a highly respected American critic, is of the opinion that the cat viewpoint, being a simple gimmick, would have sufficed for only one story.[18] Evelyn Waugh, the contemporary English writer most admired by Powers,[19] gives even weightier reasons. In an article which otherwise highly commends Powers' stories and talent—"I see no limit to his possible achievement"— Waugh feels obliged to say:

> "I am not quite so happy about 'Death of a Favorite' and 'Defection of a Favorite.' Here the tales are related in the first person by the presbytery cat. It is a form which has been tried by other writers more sucessfully. It postulates an element of fantasy which Mr. Powers lacks. It is not enough to portray the personality of a sharp child and endow it with few extraneous attributes of brute creation . . . The essence of the observing and recording animal should be a false conclusion, the irony established by the readers' knowledge of what humans are really up to and the cat's erroneous explanations based upon cats' motives."[20]

Moreover, there is certainly bad taste shown in the improbable behavior of the clergy in "Death of a Favorite" as evidenced by the avalanche of letters of protest from many Catholic readers to *The New Yorker* that first published it and by the numerous book reviews in Catholic magazines.[21] This objection to bad taste refers mainly to the scene where Father Burner and Father Philbert force upon Fritz a conditioned reflex to make him run away at the sight of the crucifix by paddling him repeatedly in front of it.

As against all adverse criticism, there are serious critics who have been led to consider one of these two stories as outstanding. Martha Foley selected "Death of a Favorite" in *"The Best American Short Stories of 1951*[22] and so did the editors of *Perspectives U. S. A.*[23] Robert O. Bowen in a *Renascence* article praises Mr. Powers' stories for their "consistent distinction between the serious and the pretentious" and selects "Defection of a Favorite" as "the best story in the anthology."[24] He comments further: "Fritz is a highly intelligent and sophisticated cat and plays out his delicate game for power . . . with Metternichean deftness. One is almost through with the story . . . [before] one realizes that this is the real condition we hear so much ponderous talk about in regard to Gide and Sartre."[25] Another re-

(18) "Gravity and Grace," *New Republic*, April 30, 1956, p. 20.

(19) Cf. Donald McDonald, *Catholics in Conversation*, p. 190-191.

(20) "Scenes of Clerical Life," *Commonweal*, March 30, 1956, p. 668.

(21) Referred to by James P. Shannon, "J. F. Powers on the Priesthood," *Catholic World*, Sept. 1952, pp. 433-434. Among other quotations Shannon cites Rev. Alfred J. Barrett, Director of Fordham University Institute of Professional Writing, as saying that "The story is so ill-proportioned as to be a failure."

(22) Boston, 1951, pp. 268-285.

(23) No. 5, 1956, pp. 49-68.

(24) "Black Cat, White Collar," vol. 9, Autumn, 1956, pp. 41-42.

(25) *Ibidem*.

viewer puts both of these down as among Powers' "most engaging stories."[26]

Countless high school teachers may well join the commentators, for the cat stories offer a striking illustration of the function of the point of view in story-telling. Yet, the final judgment could be left to the author himself —an unlikely judge—who seems to have been urged into writing the second cat story with a more compassionate view of Father Burner. He thus conciliated animosities among his articulate readers and at the same time tacitly admitted the lack of good taste shown in "Death of a Favorite."[27] Moreover, Mr. Powers himself has graciously thanked Mr. Kazin for his criticism.[28] Accordingly, no more cat stories are likely to flow from Mr. Powers' pen.

But the first-person narrator is not the only point of view, nor the most frequently used by Mr. Powers. Mostly he uses the third-person approach. He views his characters in a detached, objective way, keeping a proper distance, not too close, avoiding cheap sentimentality, and not too far, avoiding contempt and sarcasm. The only exception of this attitude of sarcasm towards his characters is found in "The Eye," but even then Clyde Bullen, the main character, is presented inwardly struggling (ironically and feebly it is true) for justice.

Almost invariably, when using the third-person viewpoint, Mr. Powers allows himself to enter the mind of only one of his characters, limiting his omniscience in this way to focus interest on the protagonist. Exceptionally, in "He Don't Plant Cotton," he shifts on occasion from Baby, the protagonist, to Dodo and then to Libby. In both instances the author expertly reinforces the main action of the story by uniting the three characters in mutual admiration. Dodo rises above himself hearing Baby sing "Ol' Man River"— "Ordinarily he was capable only of hating them [the white patrons]. Now . . . he was enjoying them . . . he was confused. He went further and started to pity them." Libby in a dreamlike experience watching Baby play the drum loses herself in the music— "he vanished for her in the blue drum. The sticks still danced, but there were no hands to them and Libby could not see Baby on the chair. She could only feel him in the blue glow." This psychological treatment is in complete harmony with Baby's own frame of mind. In previous passages Baby is presented dreamily enjoying the image of a happy spider dancing on the keyboard suggested by Dodo's silhouetted shadow over the ceiling. Or else, he is described "beaming his veteran admiration of a fine young woman" and catching "the tiniest touch of satire in Libby's voice" as she sings "Dixieland" and rejects the drunken whites' calculations with "slightly overripe fervor" at the words, "Look away! Look away!"

Sometimes Mr. Powers allows the reader to see more than the main character as it happens in "Jamesie." The jail scene, conclusive evidence for Jamesie, comes long after the reader has realized who the crook is. At other times the reader keeps pace with the main character, as for example, the Bishop in "Zeal." At other times, the reader is kept guessing the real trouble, as for instance, with Father Burner in "Prince of Darkness" or with Renner in the story named after him.

(26) *Booklist,* 52: April 1, 1956, p. 110.

(27) Cf. Shannon, *loc. cit.* p. 435.

(28) Cf. Donald McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

Mr. Powers is superb in handling the point of view. He may withdraw to a distance allowing the reader to see only "two old men grown gray in the brown robes of the Order." He may move close enough to the old Franciscans in the shadowy room to hear: "Can you read one more, Titus?" and then reveal it is the priest Didymus talking. He may be merely objective describing purely external actions: "Titus squinted at the page"; or he may peer into Father Didymus' subconsciousness through a symbolic dream of a serpent-like river "spiraling brown coil on coil under the golden sun" and reveal a past artistically intertwined with a fantastic imagery that completely envelops and draws the reader into the Dantesque experience of the underwater stroll inside the "brown belly" following Didymus in the brotherly company of recently dead Seraphin, recalling "ordinary things" like the death of their mother, kicking a water-logged boat at the bottom, making the olive-green silt rise and "speckle the surface with dark stars," and having a crayfish "clad in armor . . . brandishing hinged swords" do battle with them. Mr. Powers may descend still further and show the very depths of Didymus' soul in agony and protesting in a situation that "would be like refusing to see Seraphin all over," whose solution seems to lie in a disconcerting "watered-down precaution": Half-paralyzed, he decides to pray for health. "He was so sure he was not a saint, that he did not consider this easier road beneath him." Skillfully the scenes present a struggle that goes on and on, in a spiral pattern, always recurring but always on a subtly higher plane until, insensibly, Didymus reaches the top and does not know it; he remains in the dark: "He tried to lose himself in the sight of God and failed."

5. *HARMONY AND BALANCE: (Illustration with full-length analysis of "Lions Harts, and Leaping Does")*

One may now illustrate the wonderful sense of balance and harmony that Mr. Powers displays in his fictional art. "Lions, Harts and Leaping Does," like any story that lays claim to being a literary masterpiece, presents the total effect the story is intended to produce through a happy integration of all its technical elements. Atmosphere, setting, characterization, plot, and theme— all blend and fuse into one whole and finished work of art. To show the interrelation of these different aspects in this story should be of particular interest since it has been widely acclaimed as the most outstanding of Mr. Powers' literary achievements.[29]

Atmosphere of Darkness

Taking Atmosphere first, if one is to select a word that would best describe the basic medium through which the central action of the story makes itself felt, that word would be obscurity.One may not always, at first, become aware of the deep meaning or essential role that darkness holds here, but this can easily be observed on secondary readings. The story opens "as

(29) Cf. Ray West, *The Short Story in America*, N. Y. 1952, p. 106; Harry Sylvester, "Communications," *Commonweal*, Nov. 10, 1944. pp. 101-102; also, Gable, *loc. cit.*

the angular winter daylight forsook the room" and both Didymus and Titus "were left among the shadows"; Didymus' sensation of darkness is particularly noticeable just before his dream in the chapel; he wakes up there after having gone to sleep, still on his knees. Before he tries to resume prayer he endeavors to determine the time and looks for a sign, "a light from across the court" and through the stained glass, that would indicate that "the earliest birds would soon come in to say their masses." He also wonders if there is a moon. The dream sequence follows and ends with Titus, candle in hand, finding, postrate on hands and knees, Didymus who soon afterwards collapses. The next scene finds Didymus at the end of a day that has been described as "grayly" promising more snow although soon, "gauzily rain descended in fine spray." Seated in a wheel chair before the window, he watches the days and nights go by. The daylight serves only to keep time, like a pendulum, like the canary's swing. There is no mention of the sun throughout the story except in the dream which originates, in contrast to the mid-night darkness of the chapel, with a bright panorama under the "golden sun" and terminates with an effect of a blinding flash: "The sun like molten gold squirted him in the eye." It is really the result of the flame Titus holds before him. The moon, however, dubiously absent this night, shines in all its splendor the night Didymus receives the Last Sacraments, but he has to order Titus to turn off the light to become aware of it: "Then he saw the full moon had let down a ladder of light through the window." Ordinary light, whether it is the flame of a candle in the chapel or the electric bulb in the room, annoys poor Didymus; he needs light of another kind, like the mysterious, cold, blue light of the moon, to see clearly into his soul. It is then that he sees with wonderful clarity "what he had made of his life."

The exterior semi-darkness that envelops the story as a whole derives its symbolism from the very experience described. The seeking after God is, in reality, an experience in the dark. God is the Incomprehensible and all man-to-God relations (or vice versa) involve necessarily an element of darkness, of mystery. There are several levels upon which the metaphor works itself into the story; as background, the dying day foreshadows the death of Didymus; with impaired physical sight, Didymus needs the help of Titus for reading; intelectually, Didymus also searches for light that would enable him to see the right order of things; on a still higher level the dark night prepares him for a new light and a new life— the night of Faith that leads to the light of the Beatific Vision.

In "Spiritual Canticle," the poem of St. John of the Cross from which the title is taken, the Beloved apostrophizes the lions, harts, and leaping does, symbols of the passions— the irascible and the "concupiscible" faculties of man, sources of moral disorder and vexing distractions— and conjures them with the words, "touch not the wall." The whole verse is integrated to the Powers' story via the readings Titus does for the benefit of Didymus. The "wall" is the particular setting in the poem for the intimate mystic experience; it is precisely the walled garden where the soul meets her Beloved. From the point of view of the artist, Mr. Powers in his story, stops short of the mystic union but symbolically intimates it at the end in the peaceful death of Didymus.

In another poem, St. John of the Cross has described the experience of

a life devoted to total renunciation and complete detachment from creatures with the over-all metaphor of "Dark Night" which both entitles and embodies the whole poem. Mr. Powers has, therefore, very fittingly selected darkness as the medium through which the meaning of the story is expounded. Psycholgical darkness becomes a central force that supplies the drama for Didymus, whose mind is harassed by the most perplexing doubts as to the true motives of his actions. His every thought, desire, word, or deed is subject to a re-evaluation and produces its own counter.[30] His constant preoccupation with the intricacies of spiritual perfection has led him into labyrinth from which he can not see his way. Faith keeps him from falling into despair.

Significantly Didymus feels at home in the complete darkness of the chapel, and later, in his room, prefers the semidarkness of the moonlight to the brightness of the electric light; interior doubts, likewise, bring no frightful consequences. There is but one brief mention of Salvation and Damnation:

> "Unsure of himself, he was afraid to go on trial. It would be no minor trial, so construed, but one in which the greatest values were involved— a human soul and the means of its salvation and damnation."[31]

The problem appears like an academic reflection rather than an actual experience of extreme fear. The body hardly feels its effects. Half-paralyzed, he simply "did not wish to see (what was apparent) the greatest significance of his affliction," that is, his failure to achieve complete detachment. His fear is from love; he fears to displease; it is not the result of a guilt complex. He is afraid to go on trial because he cannot tell whether or not he has actually pleased God by refusing to travel to St. Louis to see his brother, "an old man with little left to warm him in the world." The acceptance of his condition in the wheel chair appears to him as even a greater source of anxiety: he feels he may be seeking himself no matter what he does. He simply cannot see his way out. "Thus he decided to pray for health and count the divine hand not there."

Didymus does experience fear, but it is significantly diminished by his confidence in God— "count the divine hand not there." This strange conclusion has already been anticipated when Titus finds Didymus before the stroke of paralysis, asleep in the chapel. Here Didymus does fall prey to intense fear, but it is provoked by a natural sense of shame —not darkness nor his sense of insecurity:

(30) Cf. Scouffas, *loc. cit.* p. 45.

(31) Before this, thanking Titus for bringing him the canary, Didymus refers to the days he must spend in "this infernal chair." Then at the end, there is another reference in the words of St. Bernard: "Hell is paved with the bald pates of priests." The first instance is simply a mild interjection. The second, is part of the "holy error" Didymus incurs in order to be on the safe side. Neither of these instances may be interpreted as seriously affecting Didymus' confidence in God's goodness.

> "He blushed and grew pale. Had someone besides Titus seen him sleeping? But listening he heard nothing. No one was up yet. He was no longer pale and was only blushing now. He saw it all hopefully. He was saved."

Actually, Didymus is wrong and he soon realized someone is in the sacristy, and, "as he walked palely toward it" he collapses. The point to make here is that Didymus finds consolation in the supposed fact that Titus has been the only witness. Titus has been for Didymus the prototype of perfection, simple, straightforward, undeviating from his goal, unaffected by cold or the flux of circumstance. He is another Christ, therefore, Didymus reasons: "Had the sleeping apostles been glad it was Christ?" The undercurrent of confidence that permeates the story in some subtle way runs parallel to the experience of darkness from beginning to end. This is a luminous darkness that allows clear sight under some aspects; it is accompanied with a hope and a certainty derived from an unshakable faith and confidence in God's goodness.

"Thus he decided to pray for health . . . " This is a strange and anticlimactic conclusion; yet, paradoxically, while giving up perfection, he still strives after it He tries to convince himself he is not a saint and then accuses himself of presumption. He settles upon a course of "manifest prudence": he "desired to walk and in a few years die a normal uninspired death," nevertheless, he is "ill at ease in his wheel chair." Strangely enough, it is now that Didymus begins to think more of the canary than of himself. Unconsciously, this enables him to begin to transcend his subtle egotism. Before his decision to pray for health, Didymus sees the canary like a companion in captivity, both of them suffering; now he forgets himself and thinks only in freeing the canary even if to do so means "the impossible effort" that causes him to fall from his wheel chair and possibly to die soon afterwards.

SETTING: NATURE'S SNOW

As to setting, the story presents very few details concerning the particular time and place. The author seems to have little interest in determining the precise date of the story. The first reference to time is to "Anno" 404. The date refers to the year of the peaceful death of one of the early popes whose life one Franciscan monk reads to another from a book written after 1555. Unhurriedly the author supplies here and there bits of information, and gradually the reader realizes that the action occurs in relatively modern United States, somewhere in or about the State of Missouri. The inference is that it could happen anywhere at any time in the history of Christianity. This indifference as to the historical time lends to the story a peculiar quality of universality.

Later, the vagueness as to the particular time of the day serves another purpose in the scene where Didymus finds himself awake in the chapel. This vagueness reflects the state of doubt that envelops the central character. The passage reads:

> "The clock struck. One, two . . . two. Two? No, there must have been one or two strokes before. He had gone to sleep. It

was three. At least three, probably four. Or five. He waited. It could not be two . . . "

Time here is made to serve actively in bringing out the salient character trait of always doubting Didymus, "unsure of himself." Some time later the author presents Didymus at the window watching the days go by with monotonous recurrence and considering time not in its essence of flux—"the vulgar error that time flies"—but as an image, in its fixed recurrence, of eternity; and yet not eternity in its traditional way— "since it was neither heaven, nor exactly purgatory, or hell." Time here is felt like a permanent force that binds and imprisons. Attached inescapably to his wheel chair, Didymus sees "time hanging in the room like a jealous fog that possessed him" and thinks: "It seemed impossible each time Titus came that he should be able to escape the room." Time in this last instance is used with dramatic symbolism to signify a natural force opposing freedom which is in a way the core of the story: complete detachment from self; Didymus really seeks perfect freedom "in the highest attachment."

The geographical place where the monastery is located is likewise simply implied at a distance not very far from St. Louis. Father Rector sympathetically remonstrates with Didymus for not availing himself of the opportunity of going there to see his brother.

But if further regional details are surprisingly lacking, natural background, on the other hand, is here used to a degree perhaps which is not found in any other of Powers' stories.[32] The snowy landscape of winter is there, like time, to embrace and dilate the story into universal proportions and, like darkness, in a complex metaphorical way, to absorb it. "The impression is one of nature quiescent, static, eternally fixed, and purified."[33] Treated in detail as it affects both visual and sensory perceptions, wintry cold compenetrates the story in manifold ways. The first perception of cold is visual. As Didymus approaches the window pane, he clouds it with his warm breath.

The symbolical meaning of this clouding of the window pane can be seen later in the story. Didymus, in his endeavor to mortify self, acquires an aspect of coldness still discernible in spite of his advanced stage in perfection. This is evidenced by the way he ignores Father Rector who is left standing in the doorway when the latter is anxious to know what possible distressing news might have reached Didymus in the telegram. Didymus only nods in reply to Father Rector's verbal greeting and interprets the paternal concern as idle curiosity and moves on, telling Titus to hasten along for the walk outside. Didymus is wrapped in himself to solve his complicated casuistry. His response is inadequate to the reality of the situation; his psychological insight is blurred as before a clouded window pane. His spiritual vision, too, is ironically clouded through his own refined and subtle egotism: in an obsessive preoccupation with his own sanctity, he is incapable of a kinder and truer interpretation; he neglects the practice of true charity, the crown of spiritual perfection. This is precisely his plight. He cannot see clearly through his own motives. He cannot say whether he acted right by refusing to travel to St. Louis to see his brother. Cold in one of its effects relates to darkness.

(32) Cf. Scouffas, *loc. cit.* p. 47.
(33) *Idem.*

Nature's cold also encompasses Didymus early in the story. When he starts to walk outside in the company of Titus, he feels "the freezing air bite into his body"; at the end of the walk "his knees felt frozen, his face... the same way." Again his inability to judge the reality outside is brought out: "It had not looked this cold from the window." Besides the sensation of cold, an added aspect of hardness and fixity is presented. Ice covers the stones of the walk, "thin edges of ruts cracked off under foot". Both Titus and Didymus are caught by the author's camera-eye in historical perspective in a fixed image of stone— "They seemed peripatetic figures in Gothic frieze."

Nature, as described in the story, presents, moreover, exterior changes that are intimately experienced by Didymus and that, in some way, point to similar interior transformations in him. The freezing cold walk has started him into a reconsideration of his position in regard to his refusal to travel to see his brother; his peripatetic reasoning is brought to a standstill. He cannot move on to a conclusive argument. He stands figuratively frozen still on the road to perfection. But the solid ice on the walk and the hard, old snow in the tree crotches together with the little fresh snow appear, later, disintegrating, melting in the misty rain. As Didymus sits before the window wrapped in blankets, the landscape wearies him; he sees it "moving... split up in patches... involved in a struggle of some kind." Partly real and mostly the effect of his ill and feverish mind, it all conspires to confuse him still further. He struggles to re-establish some order and reflects that "he did not believe [the disorder in the landscape] was actually happening." He closes his eyes but this "background of darkness became a field of vari-colored factions, warring, and, worse than the landscape, things like worms and comets wriggled and exploded." After a time he finds some consolation in watching the raindrops fall; his feverish condition having diminished, he sees distinctly the outside reality and is glad he is able to perceive some order in nature: "Watching the raindrops prove gravity." The order he has sought in vain before, "in the treacherous landscape," is now restored; the tree branches are not "hideous waving tentacles" and the ground is there "dead and unmoving." Yet, "he was grateful for nature's, rather than his, return to reason." Inwardly, Didymus remains in a state of confusion and strain till moments before his death.

Nevertheless, the effects of nature's cold point to the final reversal of the central action. Cold means hard ice on the stone walk; cold weakens into a disintegrating and deforming force that melts ice and turns it also into fluid rain; but it also may yield snow that is soft and white. Cold, a harsh and unpleasant reality acutely experienced at the beginning, is transformed into a thing of beauty peacefully beheld by dying Didymus. Cold reverses its symbolic effects together with the general trend of the plot.[34] A perfect peripety is involved in the story. Didymus has fostered all along the thought that Titus is the prototype of perfection. He needs this moral support in his struggle to attain tranquility of soul, which he identifies with complete detachment as a necessary condition for union with God. At the

(34) This interpretation of the reversal in nature symbolically related to the action in the story was suggested by the commentary on Joyce's "The Dead" found in Gordon and Tate, *House of Fiction*, N. Y. 1960. p. 183-186.

end and about to die, after a long period of besetting cerebrations, and, like Pope Marcellus, after being "daily tormented with strife and noisesomeness," Didymus looks to Titus, to God manifested in the sanctity of man. But Titus is nervous and grieving: nervous, trying to keep Didymus from knowing the canary's sudden escape, and grieving on account of its loss. Didymus, on the other hand, is not in the least perturbed anymore. Moreover, he sees clearly through Titus' plight: "The thought of being the cause of such dissimulation in so simple a soul made Didymus to want to smile or to cry, he did not know which . . . and [he] could do neither." Subjectively he dies without having attained his goal, he is not able "to lose himself in God." Objectively, however, he dies with one last thought sublimely uniting compassion for Titus with complete detachment (brotherly love and humble resignation to the divine will) in one last act of love of God. Even after his physical strength fails, his kindly good will persists: "How long would it be Didymus wondered, before Titus ungrievingly gave the canary up for lost in the snowy arms of God?"

Thus it is seen how natural setting expands the story into a limitless universe that compenetrates it and envelops it. All this naturalistic background, first captured by the reader's eye as a mere scenic feature of the story, is later transformed into a fitting symbolism of the story itself. Mr. Powers treats such elements as darkness, time, and natural setting not merely as inert background but as actively signifying a re-enactment of the story through a symbolism that holds its validity by the relationship it establishes with the actual experience of the protagonist. Returning to the original treatment of darkness, the story certainly derives meaning from the paradoxical experience of seeing in the dark. Intellectual light is needed to see natural truths, but the story goes beyond the realm of human understanding to a life of which man has but a glimmer, like the snowflakes Didymus sees before his death "darkly falling." The old snow, seen in the tree crotches "white and dirty," is now depurated and transfigured into the splendor of the falling snowflakes distinctly seen in the blue moonlight and introducing a new era of restful peace in a new universe.

Main Characters

From the above, it can be clearly established that the main characters, Didymus, Titus, and the canary fit into the whole scheme of the story. Titus is set as a foil to Didymus following the general alignment of contrasts: fixity and fluidity, stability and unrest, solidity and insecurity, immobility and change. Both Titus and Didymus are saints but of a very distinctive sort. One represents the complexity of a life in the strain and stress of the struggle to attain a goal which at the end looms impossible; the other personifies simplicity in a state of perfection already past the harassing doubts and perplexities of the actual combat. Didymus' original attitude towards Titus is one of admiration, as towards one who is beyond the effects of nature. At one time, during the walk, Didymus sees a piece of thin ice lodge, unmelting, between Titus' bare toes in open sandals; he inwardly exclaims: "A fine Franciscan!" He, who feels the cold intensely in spite of his woolen socks, sets his mind to work and consciously belittles himself in the psychological chain reaction that ends up in an impasse. He has unstintedly en-

deavored to reach that state of impassiveness he admires so much in Titus He has not hesitated to refuse to see his own brother, Father Seraphin, in an act of utmost self-sacrifice intended to cause the flowering forth of Christian perfection. But "the water and sunlight of sacrifice" causes instead, in this instance, the best flower in the garden— charity— to wither.

Titus is seen as having already acquired that perfect moral harmony which appears a practical impossibility to Didymus. Titus can quote *The Imitation* without sounding voluble and can appear in ice-cold weather as if devoid of feeling. His simplicity has for its characteristic trait that "willingness to serve" that fuses, in one act, love of one's neighbor with true love of God. He reads for Didymus, accompanies him in his walks, and takes care of him, invalid, till the end. Didymus, in return, correpsonds gratefully to all these demonstrations of kindness, particularly after Titus brings in the canary in a covered cage. But even before, at the beginning, Didymus already teases Titus for trying to trick him by stating from memory passages of *The Imitation* instead of reading from Bale's book of the Popes. At the time Titus brings in the covered cage, Didymus feigns unbelief as to the existence of the canary that is inside. At the chirping of the bird, "Didymus shook his head in mock anger [and said:] 'You made that beastly noise, Titus, you, mountebank'." Titus is then "profoundly amused." Humorously, Didymus had called Titus "mountebank," but later in his inner struggle to establish the all-important right order of his own intentions, he notices "something of the faker in himself."

These few observations should be sufficient to realize the artistic function of the character Titus in relation to the character Didymus in the story. The final reversal of their roles has already been pointed out; it is Titus who has to dissemble and Didymus who observes him half amused and half in pain reflecting beautifully the double aspect of true love.

The canary's symbolism is also quite apparent. The incident, it is true, is treated objectively, as an illustration of Titus' kindness towards Didymus. The canary, nevertheless, works itself into Didymus' consciousness as an agent of revelation. Didymus feels himself caged in together with the canary. He longs for freedom as he feels the canary does. Through natural pity towards the canary he abandons his self-pity and loses himself, as it were, in the canary. Didymus becomes the canary completely purged of self-love. The canary's escape through the window into a sure death in the quiescent snow augurs Didymus' escape to the true freedom of the life-in-death Christian paradox.

INCIDENTS

The integration of all the other various incidents in the story can, likewise, readily be noted. The lives of the Popes that Titus reads do contain significant details that mirror some aspects of Didymus' intimate life. The first biography, that of Pope Anastasius, who "slept with his forefathers in peace," foreshadows Didymus' death and at the same time expresses Didymus' own deep-seated desire. Pope Zepherinus, "a man . . . more addicted with all endeavor to the service of God than the care of any worldy affair," and Pope Marcellus, "daily tormented with strife and noisesomeness," do speak to Didymus with a voice from an old world which is still valid in the

contemporary world. They— Pope Zepherinus and Pope Marcellus—do reflect his own life: the first, at least, in desire; the second, in fact.

The allegoric dream Didymus has in the chapel, perhaps, requires a more subtle interpretation in order to see the full force of its inclusion in the story. It is a dream that injects life into Didymus' past in that it creates the sensation of a mind abounding in thoughts, images, and sensory perceptions, from whose apparently tumultuous confusion emerges an obscure symbolism. The sight of the "flower-flecked land under the golden sun" is soon lost and replaced by that of a "murmuring serpent" which recalls the Biblical account of Eden and the Fall. The beautiful bright panorama of the beginning, the perfect order of nature, is destroyed by the serpent, the traditional symbol of temptation and sin. Both Didymus and Seraphin enter this disordered world and, smiling, they "were walking murkily up and down the brown belly of the river in mock distress." This time Jonah's experience, humorously re-enacted, points up to the penance and purgation of soul which constitute a major aspect of the plot. The recollection of their parents' deaths provokes in the two brothers a conversation in which they compare amicably their own lives. Seraphin "making a vow not to die until [Fra. Bartolomeo] is made a saint" presents a past with a parallelism that reinforces the main action in the story, namely, Didymus' lifelong endeavor to attain sanctity.

Here Mr. Powers does not make Didymus, not even by thought, appear in the least jealous, but makes him simply mention his former teaching occupations ("giving Pythagoras no rest in his grave") as answer to Seraphin's achievements. The competitive spirit in which Mr. Powers delights so much is conspicuously absent here. Didymus single-mindedly keeps all his energies for the purpose of conquering self. The day before Didymus reproached himself for saying a few words that could be interpreted "as though work *per se* were extremely important" and as though he was belittling Titus' work in the kitchen and the garden. Now, in the dream, when subsconsciousness shows itself uninhibited, there is neither trace of envy nor vanity.

This may be taken as a sign that Didymus has reached a high degree of perfection. Nevertheless, his own tension in avoiding the perils of pride and self love becomes, ironically, the insurmountable obstacle that appears in the end about to wreck his life's work of personal perfection. The water-logged boat found at the bottom of the river might signify the possibility of this failure. The crayfish might represent his present troubles, his constant self-examination which causes an unbearable disquietude of soul, although, in the actual scene depicted, the pain is obviously caused by the prolonged position on his knees. Mr. Powers' constant care to ground his fiction on reality is rewarded in this whole dream sequence with a marvelous fusion of fact and fancy resulting in significant fecundity.

What follows the dream carries great force also. Didymus awakes blinded by the flame in front of his eyes and slowly realizes he is on his hands and knees. The image he forms of himself— "a four-leggend beast"— is in perfect accord with his own efforts towards self-abasement. Soon afterwards, as he rises to proceed to the sacristy and then collapses, the realization of his own fallen condition in those brief moments before he remains unconscious, confounds him:

> "The floor, with fingers smelling of dust and genesis, reached up and held him. The fingers were really spikes and they were dusty from holding him this way all his life. For a radiant moment he saw the justice of his position."

The complex peripety inherent in the plot forms itself with mounting inner force. Physically exhausted and seated in a wheel chair he is powerless to move; Didymus contemplates the possibility of a saint's death if he had truly refrained from seeing his brother purely for the love of God, or of a well-deserved punishment for his comfort-seeking laziness in refusing to travel to St. Louis. "By some mistake he protested . . . Unsure of himself, he was afraid to go on trial." At this moment Didymus reaches a crucial stage as he becomes entangled in the intricacies of his own mind. It seems that his purity of effort is shattered: "He simply desired to walk." While he strives towards the sublime heights of perfection, he builds a cage that holds him hopelessly behind the bars of his own ego; but the moment he seems to give up the effort, he inadvertently opens it.

This is indeed one of Mr. Powers' brilliant psychological explorations.[35] Didymus actually reaches his end but through no effort of his own. The end comes through a mysterious transformation. Sanctity is not only man's work but God's also. This story truly reflects the contradictory ways of man and the hidden ways of God.

Having shown "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does," it would be an easy task to point out similar reationships in the other stories under consideration. Various references have already been made to this effect while analyzing the plot or the structure of "The Lord's Day," "Dawn," "Losing Game" and others. These analyses should be sufficient to accept as valid for both volumes[36] the surprising comment that John Cogley makes for all the stories found in the first saying that Mr. Powers succeeds in "not once missing a nuance, over-simplifying, underplaying, or striking a false note,"[37] which is no small praise. Unquestionably, Mr. Powers' work is that "quiet steady, self-assured art of a man who knows exactly what he is about."[38] Plot, structure, exposition, creation of setting and atmosphere are all different aspects in the technique of story writing that must be harmoniously developed as a result of the author's painstaking effort to keep that sense of proportion in which not a single aspect may grow beyond the point of its purpose in the over-all effect. Mr. Powers reveals to an extreme degree his keen sensibility as to these exacting demands. He has chosen for the scope and subject matter of his stories situations which, in most instances, can hardly be called dramatic, and characters that are, for the most part, ordinary, normal people. As William Peden says:

(35) Sister M. Gable has not hesitated to call this story the work of a genius. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 28.

(36) Possible exception, "Death of a Favorite" as explained above.

(37) *Catholic Worker*, July-August, 1947, p. 5.

(38) J. K. Hutchens, N. Y. *Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, March 18, 1956, p. 2.

> "Mr. Powers is such an accomplished writer that the casual reader may be unimpressed by his constant control over every element in each story, by his happy integration of plot, and place, character and idea. It is difficult to single out any one story for praise; each is a complete whole, finished work of art."[39]

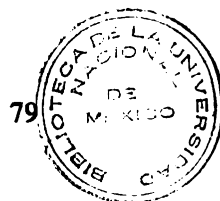
The same critic goes on in his penetrating essay to comment on the possible sources of the author's success in stories which are "disarming for their apparent simplicity." He successively mentions Powers' "maturity" which enables him to create a great variety of characters, his "ability to insolate the significant from the merely interesting," and "the way he constantly suggests the universal in terms of the specific".[40] Alfred Kazin in an article already cited feels equally startled by Mr. Powers' maturity for he wrote: "what an original... and what a true writer he seems on the immature American scene."[41] For Mr. Kazin that literary immaturity in the American scene consists in "striking an attitude of being 'psychological' or just reporting the violence of some unusual experience."[42] Mr. Powers' work, on the other hand, is about usual experiences which are reported in an unusual way and, as a result, are intensely felt. It is the atmosphere of high intensity (and that in spite of the unspectacular material) which marks all these stories as fiction of high order and plainly proves the author's maturity.

In an over-all view of this chapter on technique, it is clear that Mr. Powers' elusive plots and his seemingly flimsy framework in the stories are deliberately so presented. Such technique is in the mood of the best standards of modern fiction. Of this there can hardly be any doubt. "The function of technique," says Sean O'Faolain, "is to create illusion, not to break illusion by poking its nose through it."[43]

What the great Irish critic is saying is that a technique that is felt as technique while reading for pleasure destroys its very purpose in fiction. Mr. Powers' "technique without technique" is then no small literary achievement. It has been pointed out that Mr. Powers does show in his stories all the characteristics that usually accompany plot in its ponderous sense. They all comprise elements of intrigue, invention, and surprise. There is intrigue in the humorous situations that imply an over-all irony, as shown in "Zeal." There is invention in their exploration of the jungle in men's minds, as illustrated in "Losing Game." There is the surprise inherent in man's inner contradiction, as Father Burner in "Prince of Darkness" and the Nun Superior in "The Lord's Day" plainly experience. All Powers' stories evince an abundance of self-assertiveness, which provides the motive force for the life-giving conflicts that may result in the contrasting characters such as those found in "The Devil Was the Joker."

Structurally, the stories can bc said to be built on one single idea embodied principally in one character. Scenes develop around that character and that idea or design. Mr. Powers has great skill in describing minute

(39) *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 32, Summer 1956, "The Tightrope Walkers," p. 472.
(40) Peden, *ibidem.*, p. 472.
(41) "Gravity and Grace," *New Republic* 134, April 30, 1956, p. 20.
(42) *Idem.*
(43) *The Story*, p. 208.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incidents that lead up to delightfully ironic situations which light up, in the end, one or more hidden aspects of human nature with an intensity of an actually felt experience. This is done successfully in every single one of his stories. He shows also great skill in maintaining his focus of character by not losing sight of the protagonist while introducing the minor characters (e. g. She in "The Lord's Day.") Time, as an element that contributes to the concentration and unity of the action of the story, poses no problem to him. He is equally adept in the short time-unit periods of a few hours as in the longer ones of several months or over a year ("Defection of a Favorite,") but the classic period of a day seems to agree more with his taste and sense of form. The time limit from sunrise to sunset suits him well for the development of the action of a good number of his stories. Place or setting is, by preference, limited to interiors: kitchens and dining rooms in rectories and convents, chapels and bars, and all that suggests the advance of civilization including cut-over timberland and fished-out lakes.

Theme in Mr. Powers' stories may appear bluntly and fearlessly as a cry of protest against flagrant social injustice in an enveloping action of a society that overwhelms the individual, or invitingly tender as in "An Old Bird, a Love Story"; or, preferably, theme may be presented with subtlety as in all the priests' stories and a few others like "The Poor Thing," "Blue Island," and "Jamesie." But no matter how subtly the idea may be conveyed, the idea comes through clearly and brilliantly. Jamesie ends disillusioned with his hero; Mrs. Davici, psychologically trapped by her "charity"; Father Burner, dissatisfied and shocked by his lack of asceticism. In "The Devil Was the Joker" Myles emerges enlightened and strengthened, Mac pulls away rolling along the path of degradation. The ideas of authority and insubordination surge alive and all dressed up with flesh and bones in a conflict that also includes old age and youth, tradition and progress through the humorous situation developed by the interesting characters involved in "Losing Game." "The Valiant Woman" has been instanced as an illustration of Mr. Powers' deftness in the merging of Exposition and Complication into a single movement for the compression of the story in order to give it a greater explosive force. "He Don't Plant Cotton" exemplifies the author's ability to use natural setting symbolically; "Renner" shows how the author can use the social background actively through the reactions provoked by characters that clearly represent the social evils of an actual society.

As to use of point of view, Mr. Powers' maneuverability and judgment are evident by the ease with which he seems to use the different methods and by the results obtained. Whether he uses the first-person narrator in its various forms of main character or otherwise, sympathetic witness or vice-versa, or whether he uses the third-person approach in a more or less limited, omniscient way, Mr. Powers is considered (with the possible exceptions of the two cat stories) as an expert in his choice and treatment of point of view. His "camera" shifts to view his characters from far or near. His panoramic views or scenic close-ups are delightfully combined with medium range "shots" that create dramatic alternation according to the needs in the particular story. In his exploration of the human mind, he may descend to its lowest interstices through the stream of consciousness method as he does with the symbolic dream of Didymus, or he may deal with the intricate theological cerebrations of the protagonist. Always and flawlessly

the author solves his problems of "psychic distance" so that the picture or impression derived from the story leaves no doubt of the expert's sure touch.

Balance and harmony between the various elements involved in short fiction are beautifully illustrated in that masterpiece called "Lions, Harts and Leaping Does." A most intimate experience is rendered visible and palpable through the marvelous use of practically all technical resources available in fiction. Point of view in its rythmic alternation of "psychic distance" gently but insistently universalizes the concrete and the particular. Setting and atmosphere merge dramatically into the very plot of the story through the subtle treatment of symbolism. Characters, situation, and incidents are so deftly related to theme that Snow and Darkness may be said to contain the story, that Didymus embodies it, and that the freezing cold walk outside on the monastery grounds, or the collapse after the dream in the chapel, or any other incident for that matter may suggest the story as a whole— so harmoniously interlocked and so proportionately balanced are all its parts.

It is truly a marvel to find in Mr. Powers' work this "technique without technique": elusive plots that penetrate their stories with intriguing situations not devoid of invention and full of surprises; a startling ability to concentrate on the character that embodies the story; a fine sensibility to atmosphere; a vivid imagination for description; an artistic sense of form and proportion joined to a brilliant proficiency in prose-writing. In a word it is the technique of a master.

CHAPTER THREE

ARTISTIC VISION

Having established in the preceding chapters that Mr. Powers possesses to a high degree the technique of short story writing and the ability to create three-dimensional characters, the third and last chapter of this thesis will examine the ideas involved in his stories. It is an attempt to extract his view of life from his work.

1.— STRESS OF MEANING OVER FACT

On first approaching Mr. Powers' stories one may be in doubt as to whether their author is actuated by a serious purpose. If he is—and on second thought this appears to be the case—, one important question that one must attempt to answer is: Why has Mr. Powers selected for his literary work events and situations that in themselves seem so trivial? Is it because of a natural urge in him to go against the grain of contemporary fiction? Or is it that he wants to stress meaning over fact, the thing that has made critics say that concrete details in Powers' stories do not matter?[1] These stories really seem to be an exercise to determine how little material is needed to create fiction.

Of the Powers' stories one can say what Elizabeth Bowen says of H. D. Lawrence's works; they have a "naturalistic surface but with a kind of internal burning."[2] Behind those seemingly unimportant facts and events lies a living flame of human experience, of deeply felt truth. Symbolism, as it has been commented upon in the preceding chapter, is the key to the full understanding and appreciation of these stories. They are designed, like any work of true art, to transcend the limits of their concreteness through the reflective intellect of their creator and that of the observer (the reader or critic). The pages of all these stories are soon read and their details possibly forgotten, but, through reflection, there lingers in the mind of the reader the apprehension of higher universal truths. Thus it is that all the Powers' stories lend themselves to multiple interpretations, as the analyses of "The Lord's Day," "Losing Game," and "Lions" have yielded.

Mr. Powers, then, by a general avoidance of unusual events and abnormal characters conducts explorations of human nature that result in the

(1) Cf. Gable, *op. cit.* p. 27.

(2) Quoted by Mark Schorer, in introductory comment to "Surface and Symbol," *The Story*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1959, p. 252.

ironically penetrating. It is this approach, so rare among contemporary American writers, that makes him stand out in his artistic effort towards the making of a new movement in American literature. What he is subtly saying in his work is that the unusual and abnormal is not necessarily meaningful; often it is the other way around. It may be, in another way, Mr. Powers' deeply-felt reaction against the Despair so rampant among his fellow-writers, Despair usually dressed in unnatural violence or the "unsexed" sex of drug addicts and psychological unfits popularized by the so-called beatnik group. This unhappy group has already filled volumes upon volumes of special interest for the psychoanalyst, but not necessarily for the general public, which likes to sit for pleasurable hours of reading, or for the literary critic who likes to pass judgment on the author's general image of life and the way it is expressed in terms of actual experience.

The fact remains that Mr. Powers has deliberately chosen to make his clear and penetrating insights of human nature in a quiet and unassuming way, and that his artistic revelations have almost consistently produced Hope and Confidence. All this is in marked contrast with the prevailing mood in American literature.[3] Powers, therefore, is waging no ordinary battle in the literary field. In this endeavor he feels practically alone. Says he in a letter:

> "I weigh a theory now and then which goes like this: this country is not housebroken . . . the savage spirits still lurk in the trees and lakes and they do not like this writing going on, and so it is harder than usual to get things on paper right, the spirits always getting in the way. Who will tame the wilderness with prose?"[4]

Perhaps it is to this tendency to banish Despair from contemporary fiction that Powers refers modestly in another letter when he says that Peter Taylor "is more like me, by comparison with others, in that he seems to have a few dull civilized thoughts on occasion."[5]

2.— THE TENSION BETWEENTHE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

Mr. Kazin has appropriately commended Powers' work in that it shows "the ferocious process of Americanization, of normalization, the world of utter mediocrity in which everybody's life is lived . . . [but where] the spirit triumph[s] every time so quietly and unexpectedly that the effect is one of humor rather than zeal constantly yielding literary vanity to the truth and depth of this world."[6] The story "The Presence of Grace" brings this out most admirably. It shows what a soothing balm spiritual grace can be in a world torn by cold indifference, defection of friends, scorn, or hatred. It also points to the superiority of grace over the intellect. Smart and sociable Father Fabre accepts an invitation for dinner with one of his lady parishioners and then is led to believe by the hubbub among the ladies of the Altar

(3) Cf. Rev. John J. Kirvan, "The Unredeemed World," conference delivered over the radio in *The Catholic Hour Program*, Nov. 13, 1960.

(4) Cited by Scouffas, *loc cit.*, p. 57.

(5) *Idem.*

and Rosary Societies that he has condoned an adultery. The old pastor, a mumbler, whose main distraction are the "tamburines and castanets of his coin machine," sets everybody at ease by his stubborn but grace-inspired refusal to ill-interpret the facts. At the end, getting ready for benediction in the sacristy, nervous, and still fearing scandal, Father Fabre sees Mrs. Mathers in the church "kneeling alone in prayer." Then the author gives the reader Father Fabre's thoughts:

> "He had expected the pastor to dismiss the ladies in time for devotions, but he hadn't expected them to come, not in such numbers, and he took it as a sign from heaven when they didn't kneel apart from Mrs. Mathers, the woman taken in adultery, or thereabouts, a sign that the pastor had triumphed as truth must always triumph over error . . . life was a dark business . . . but the way for pastors was ever lit by special grace . . . "

Most of Mr. Powers' work reveals this tension between the spirit and the flesh. In this sense most of the stories turn out to be "losing games": most of them show the flesh that gives way to the spirit. "The fatal ordinariness of life that brings everybody down"[7] makes up the main body of Mr. Powers' work, its soul, however, is that mysterious element found deep in the human heart as an inner spring of hope. Somehow in most of these stories, generalizing now Mr. Kazin's comment on the story above, "the presence of grace makes itself felt—or rather the intimation on it felt as possible— . . . against a background of horrid daily element which is gravity."[8] It is the pull of this world's materialism that gives way to the liberating lift of the spirit. Or, to borrow a title from a more recent story of Powers'[9] the stories may all open with the sentence: "God writes a bad hand," and then they usually end with: "But somehow He writes straight through crooked lines."

Whether he probes into the sufferings of the Negro race or of a despairing and bewildered refugee; whether he comes out with a curiously sagacious traveling agent who loses his underpaid chauffeur in long drawn-out skirmishing, or with a young assistant priest similarly losing in a tangle with his old pastor for the acquisition of a table in a church basement; whether he exposes the exultant pretensions of a priest in a fund-raising campaign for the Pope or the heartlessness of a pastor, such as the one that appears in "The Lord's Day"; whether he presents the loneliness of a priest henpecked by his maid or the meddlesomeness of a well-intentioned but bore-type priest; whether he penetrates the soul of a saintly priest in his last struggles to attain perfection or the dissatisfied inner self of a spiritually empty and defeated priest, —Mr. Powers almost invariably enables the reader to see and feel through these well-thought stories an inner world which is not devoid of certain warmth.

This warmth or liberating lift of the spirit may actually spring from the

(6) "Gravity and Grace," *New Republic,* April 30, 1956, p. 522.

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) The New Yorker, "God Writes a Bad Hand," October 15, 1960, pp. 44-68.

author's implicit faith in Providence: God the Creator, in His loving care, never abandons men, His creatures, in spite of their foolish ways; just as a true artist never abandons his character creations in a world of sheer meaninglessness or, worse yet, creates them to destroy them. It is this vision of reality that explains Mr. Powers' fundamental optimism.

In some rare instances Powers' optimism seems to suffer a shock as when he depicts a cold and gloomy world, and he uncovers, for one, the subtle priggishness and cruelty of an invalid in "The Poor Thing" and, for another, the camouflaged voraciousness of a saleswoman in "Blue Island." These two stories involve Mr. Powers in the exposure of refined selfishness in false piety and the savagery in refined salesmanship. The element of the "flesh" seems here not at all soothed by the "spirit."

Naturally, an element of protest must necessarily be found in all works of fiction; what varies is the emphasis the author lays on it. A hardly unrelieved protest appears in "The Lord's Day" as the Nun Superior reacts against the unfeeling pastor, ruining her sedate composure with her red cheeks of anger. In "The Forks" Father Eudex seems tinged with a kind of spiritual arrogance in his disapproval of the incursions of material culture into the priestly functions; perhaps it is the arrogance inherent to youth with a somewhat holier-than-thou attitude. There is a well-calculated and ferocious protest in "The Eye" against violence and injustice inherent in the race struggle. These stories as well as the two mentioned in the above paragraph truly represent what Frank O'Connor calls "a lyric cry in the face of human destiny."[10]

But that which for simplicity has been called "grace" by Mr. Kazin is found more and more in the rest of the stories. Powers' keen perception has rediscovered the lost value of grace as an element to reckon with in artistic achievement—some may call it love, or compassion, or humor, or, even, balanced optimism. It is the result of a spiritual awareness of an ideal seen as attainable and to which all human actions must be confronted in order to judge of their pettiness and contradiction; but all this is joined to a tolerant view of the weakened human condition. The inner resources of human conscience and feeling are thus released in Powers' fiction with the refreshing naturalness of free intelligence at work. Mr. Powers, having rediscovered the artistic value of grace, it has been his constant endeavor to present it in its most varied forms, without pusillanimity, for the reality which it is, effecting unexpected harmonies in a cold and chaotic world. In his endeavor he is, no doubt, encouraged by religious convictions, but as Richard Foster has aptly said of him, he "has done the virtually impossible by bringing an orthodox theological vision to bear, and with moving validity, on the way we live now."[11]

As an artist, Mr. Powers is driven yearningly to seek out order from the chaos seen rampant in the world. Physical images of disorder are not lacking in his fiction: jungle-like basement, disintegrating rain, a topsy-truvy bedroom. But it is basically to the moral world he refers: egotism found in a

(10) "Fiction — Critical Essays," in *Literary Types and Themes*, ed. by McNamee, Cronin, Rogers; Rinehart & Co., N. Y. 1960, p. 15.

(11) "Comedy Before Tragedy," commentary on Joseph Wood Krutch's *Modern Temper*, in *The Nation*, December 31, 1960, p. 527.

seemingly pious invalid or a saintly old priest; cruel indifference, in the pastor towards the Nun Superior or in the saleswoman towards Mrs. Davicci; envy engendered by love of preferment in ushers as well as in monsignors and chancellors; a world, in general, full of the scourges of sloth, mediocrity, and race hatred. Or, as Mr. Kazin comments with brilliant imagery:

> 'The world of clerical housekeeping gets as muddled as any other. The coffee is apparently a particular horror and there is an obsessive amount of bread-pudding... The atmosphere Mr. Powers creates is exemplary in its suggestion of dyspepsia, over-feeding, and competitiveness."[12]

Father Burner in "Prince of Darkness" seems to fit perfectly in the world described above. Mr. Kazin has probably this story in mind as he views the Powers' stories, as a whole, actuated by that which in the article has been termed "gravity and grace." It is in reality another way of stating the topic in hand. Surprising, though it seems, Mr. Powers does see meaning through all this chaos. The order he finds in the moral world is essentially mysterious; in a way, just as mysterious as gravity or the "mystery of iniquity" itself. The mysterious reality of grace he succeeds in capturing, in the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, is varied and unforgettable. Its image comes to life in story after story.

Long after these stories have been read there lingers in the mind of the reader a soothing feeling that not all is wrong with the world. Father Firman, futilely reacting against a situation as against a mosquito, gives to the final explosion, "counterpointed with sting and whine,"[13] not the hopelessness of despair but of tolerant humor. There is pathos and true love in old Mr. and Mrs. Newman. The Bishop soberly reflects on the intrusive ways of a zealous but gauche priest and is moved to take an active part in the pilgrimage to Rome in spite of (or because of) those gaucheries. Father Burner grows into responsible maturity by accepting his subordinate position manfully (in "Defection of a Favorite.") Father Didymus finally transcends his self-centeredness with bright images symbolically signifying the action of grace: the mysterious beauty of falling snow and the joyful freedom of the escaped canary. Jamesie, disillusioned with his hero, returns home "not through alleys, across lots, between buildings and over fences" as he had done when running away and leaving Aunt Kate crying. "He used the streets and sidewalks like anyone else." Baby has the joy of song and, above all, the love and laughter of Libby to counteract the hard reality of race prejudice. Even Renner realizes at the end that he may be exaggerating and feels compelled to leave the stuffy bar-room in a hurry so that he might seek outside that something which will deliver him from a constraining and limited world. "The Trouble," in portraying the birth of human emotions, naturally ends in deep sorrow as a climax,[14] but even then one may see the

(12) *Loc. cit.*, p. 20.

(13) Gable, *op. cit.* p. 28.

(14) Suffering as climax actually ends the first stage in the process of living before attaining transcendence. "We suffer," says Lemaitre, "And by that door of suffering there enters thought and wonder and disquiet and fear of the unknown and under one form or another reflection and dreams and the need to explain what the senses cannot compass." Quoted by O'Faolain, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

image of charity and grace in the presence of Gramma who exerts her strong moral influence on the boy. In "The Devil Was the Joker," Myles, who feels "alone walking the plank of his gloom," may be thought of as reflecting that throughout his life-process of enlightening the mind and strengthening the will, a Guiding Hand had taken him out of a trap.

In all these stories full of that "horrid element" that presents man submerged in materiality and bound in the flesh, there is always a feeling that life is not a blind alley, that there is a purpose for man and a place for him in creation. In the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, Powers' work presents an essential contrast to much of the meaninglessness of modern fiction. That the spirit triumphs over the flesh is not an easy thing to see in the hum-drum of a busy, gravity-controlled world, but what Powers is saying every so often, though be it softly, is that if one observes carefully signs appear to give the lie to the material world: there are other forces that liberate man from the downward pull.

3.— THE PRIEST, THE KEY CHARACTER

Another meaningful question that could be asked about Mr. Powers' fiction is simply this: Why are there so many priests in his stories? It is not, for one thing, the result of an obsessive urge to paint "The lives of priests whose pates will supposedly pave the streets of hell . . . who are tyrants and dictators to the fathers and nuns under their control . . . who have rationalized or forgotten their vows and who are entirely human in the meanest sense."[15] It is rather as H. C. Gardiner writing in *America* points out:

> "If few of Mr. Powers' priests are obviously saintly, everyone of them is a good man. One may be more interested in getting a pastorate than in practicing penance, another may be more plunged into construction than into contemplation, but each is a hard-working, devoted priest despite gaucheries, imperfections, and minor frustrations."[16]

Moreover, Powers does not write about priests, strictly speaking, from the moralist's point of view. As an artist his function is not to furnish moral lessons. In his revelations of human nature he is the seeker of goodness, of order, and of truth in a disordered and evil world. In his endeavor to show forth human goodness, he excites compassion as in the case of Father Firman in "Valiant Woman," or benevolence as with Father Didymus in "Lions," or even laughter as with Father Udovic in "Dawn," or a surge of ire in protest against injustice as with the Nun in "The Lord's Day." He strives to show forth moral order whenever he finds it in human action since it is through them that human nature is revealed. Father Fabre, from this viewpoint, recognizes the principle of authority above the poor human element of his pastor who, to all appearances, is incompetent, but who, through his sheer negation, solves the imminent moral catastrophe of one of his pa-

(15) Nelson Olmstead, "Reality Permeates Unusual Collection of Short Stories," *Chicago Sun Book Week*, June 15, 1947, p. 3.

(16) "Smorgasbord of Short Stories," March 17, 1956, p. 667.

rishioners, preserves the good name of his assistant, and brings peace among the gossiping Pharisees.

At times the author may be perplexed as though before a mystery, the mystery of iniquity ("Prince of Darkness" and "Zeal") or the mystery of love and grace ("Lions" and "The Presence of Grace"). In trying to decipher the mystery of life as a whole, Powers confronts what has been aptly termed "vitality of disorder."[17] His work shows "patient investigation into the ironies and ambiguities of experience . . . priests with more ambition than pastoral tenderness, church goers of little charity; men and women in whom the contradiction between pretense and actuality startle us like a pair of different colored eyes."[18] In his investigation, however, he is neither shocked nor discouraged. He presents reality as he finds it, the whole reality, including those deeper realities found at the core of things. It is in the revelation of those deeper realities that Powers' work shows its significance. Without closing his eyes to the truth about man, he sees evil with compassion—exteriorly, in the printed page, with cold-eye scrutiny; interiorly, as if wishing to heal a wound of nature. He sees good in man mostly as a sorry mixture with evil, but he sees both without despair. In his penetration of the moral nature of man, the totality of human experience includes hidden harmonies.

In the microcosm of rectories and parish churches, the conflict between good and evil is naturally magnified by the conscientious awareness of virtue and sin of priest and parishioner. The Church and her theology, far from obstructing Mr. Powers' artistic vision, enhance it with a ready-made frame of moral reference by which to judge human failures and foibles. The Church and her teachings, moreover, provide the author with encouragement in the search of the deeper realities and truths imbedded in the human heart. Church and doctrine add a further dimension to the realistic picture of man both in himself and in his relations with his fellow man and with God. By intimation or implication, Mr. Powers may even be viewed as going still further and including in his work an image of God Himself in His triple manifestation: 1) loving Creator and Father, as suggested in "Lions," granting a peaceful death to Didymus, 2) suffering Redeemer, as hinted in "Prince," causing a shock to Father Burner and prodding him to endurance, 3) Sanctifying Spirit, as intimated in "Zeal" and "The Presence of Grace."

Consciously or not, Powers seems to have selected the Catholic priest as the central character through which to make his artistic revelations. How this aspect of his work came about may be implied in what he himself has said of Don Humphrey, a friend now dead: "He was a silversmith, a tremendous artist. He had been a painter at first. He could carve wood. But he ended up by making chalices . . . "[19] The life of a priest is one that is understood to be lived by standards other than those of this world,[20] it is a life where the tension between the spirit and the flesh, the ideal and the actual is most searingly felt and experienced. The priest, moreover, is particularly apt by training and temperament to recognize the deeper spiritual realities found in man.

(17) Cf. Scouffas, *loc. cit.*

(18) Whey, *Jubilee*, 4, May, 1956, p. 47.

(19) McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

(20) Also portrayed in a masterly fashion, yet ironical, in the ex-seminarian Myles.

There are critics, however, who have formulated complaints in the priest as presented by Powers. Father Shannon, for instance, objects because Mr. Powers in his stories does not show "What it means and feels to be a priest."[21] H. C. Gardiner corroborates saying: "He has the knack for catching the sort of rough and tumble camaraderie that does exist among the clergy, but he has not caught the sense of the deep and Christ-like friendship among priests."[22] Yet, it is only fair to Powers to say that he portrays only a fragmentary aspect of the priest's life with a purpose which is not to be interpreted as derogatory to the dignity of the priesthood.

Priests have no worldly office, no home to govern, nor country to rule, and yet, Powers presents them subject to the same ambitions, envies, dawdlings, and boredom of any other man with wordly cares. He takes this restricted view, not concerned with the aspects of worship and care of souls, no doubt, as a means to draw those contrasts which best serve his artistic ends. In real life he pities the priests and admires them at the same time. Of his actual contact with seminarians and priests, he has this to say:

> "I had two friends that went into the seminary . . . One became a priest and one didn't . . . I knew these seminarians well . . . I became interested in their lives which to me, seemed very romantic . . . On the other hand . . . all these young pastors in the suburbs who have to knock down thousands and thousands of dollars to build this and that. Well what does that mean? Shaking hands with some guy, and you can't really tell him what is wrong with him because he's got what you need. I am sympathetic to the priest. I wouldn't want to have to be the first guy that every other drunk calls."[23]

Mr. Powers somehow repeats this conversation in his stories in his own inimitable way, e.g., Myles confronting Mac. There is no personal aversion shown in his portraits of priests though at times he may depict them as nagging, indifferent, lazy, or ill-tempered. He does not complain about them; he rather suffers with them, he suffers with the frailty of mankind overwhelmed by the demands that perfection implies and by the terrible monotony of life.

It is certainly not the beauty of priesthood nor its sacred function that the Powers' stories portray—not the priest as a noble instrument in God's hands, but the priest as a man whose main characteristic is that of being human, that is, weak and limited, but whose potentialities reach up to God. It may be that in his own quiet, yet humorous way, Powers is saying not only that all priests are men, but that all men are, somehow, like priests in that they all have a high destiny and that this destiny is somehow attainable. This is a rather forceful way of expressing belief in the perfectibility of man. In his work as a whole Powers feels consitently compelled to give expression to the priest every man is in potency.

In stating this universal, pries-like yearning for good, the author cautiously shuns an advertizing method that must necessarily paint a rosy, but untrue,

(21) *Catholic World*, "J. F. Powers on the Priesthood," Sept. 1952, p. 43.

(22) *Loc. cit.*, p. 667

(23) McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 198-199.

picture of life. From the artistic point of view, Powers' realism is at its best protecting him both from the contempt of bitter satire and the sentimentality of indiscriminate tenderness: Father Burner reflects and finds that "the mark of the true priest" is not in him, and there the reader finds the truly sad condition of man. As John Cogley says generalizing on the Powers' Characters: "The failures of the pretentious, gross, spiritually obtuse clerical Babbits found in his stories become the failures of the reader."[24] On his deathbed, Didymus, "so close to sublimity or perhaps only tempted to believe so," is still beset "by the grossest distractions . . . : the bingo game going on under the cross for the seamless garment of the Son of Man: everywhere the sign of contradiction and always."[25]

Behind all these perplexities and contradictions inherent in the life of man on earth and presented so vividly throughout his stories, Powers, with subtlety, sees and proclaims the perfectibility in man. He states with literary validity the existence of Salvation in "moments of truth" sincerely experienced. Father Udovic in "Dawn" sees his sin mirrored in the stupid pride of the woman sitting in front of him, the Bishop in "Zeal" recognizes his own failure to tend to his religious flock through and in spite of Father Early's gaucheries, Father Fabre witnesses the marvel of the presence of grace calming down the fearful and horrible gossipers.

But no matter what explanation be given, there can hardly be any doubt as to the irresistible attractiveness that priests hold in Powers' fictional art. There is something classical about it. Katherine Ann Porter commenting on "Prince of Darkness" says: "The story shows the afterthought of an extremely conscious mind with the real sense of form."[26] She may be stating a general characteristic of the author. The sense of proportion that integrates the constituting elements in Powers stories has been the subject of wonder and admiration of various critics, notably William Peden.[27] Perhaps the love of form, balance, and moderation implied in these critical comments may relate Powers to the old Greeks. His method of particularizing or isolating a character trait has been mentioned as that of a classicist.[28] The priest as a key character in his stories adds similarity to the old Greeks. Just as the king offered the ancients a key figure, noble and great, on which to project their studies of human nature in their drama, so does the priest offer Powers his key character for his fiction. There is no other character in the contemporary world that so thoroughly fulfills, in Powers' conception of man, the conditions required to serve as instrument to the ends of his art.

4.— MORAL VIEW

Together with the priest-character and complementary to it, the outstanding feature in Powers' work is the presentation of moral awareness as fundamental to human nature. It is moral awareness what gives to these stories incisiveness and vigor. Powers' realism confronts good and evil as something

(24) *Catholic Worker,* vol. 14, July-August, 1947, p. 5.
(25) From "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does."
(26) Quoted by Matthew Hoehn, *Catholic Authors . . . ,* II, Newark, N. J., 1952, p. 456.
(27) "The Tightrope Writers," *Virginia Quarterly,* 32, Summer 1956, p. 471.
(28) Cf. Gable, *op. cit.* p. 28.

truly real; his is a "rare ability to imagine virtue in its complex relation with evil."[29] All his stories, though humorously and realistically told, reveal this moral tension in man and reveal it, moreover, in a most intricate and complex way. John P. Sisk has made a thorough study of this aspect of Powers' fiction in the article just quoted from.

Mr. Sisk takes the story "Zeal" as typical. The Bishop recognizes Father Early's boring instrusiveness immediately, nevertheless, the circumstances are such that he has to bear up with the embarrassment of Father Early's conversation with the couple near by at the dining car table. The priest's warning, after the couple are gone, "that the boy is in danger. Real danger," leaves Bishop apparently unmoved: it is none of his and Father Early's business. Nevertheless, sometime later, alone in his compartment and in bed, the Bishop cannot enjoy his solitude while he awaits Father Early's return. He must dress again. He finds the priest in the club car holding up the young man in tedious conversation with the obvious purpose to keep him, a Catholic, away from the not-self-respecting woman. The Bishop reflects:

> "What a delicate instrument for good a simple man could be! Perhaps Father Early was only a fool, a ward of heaven not subject to the usual penalties for meddling. No, it was zeal, and people, however far gone, still expected it from a man of God. But even so, Father Early ought to be more careful, humbler before the mystery of iniquity."

Soon afterwards, Father Early leaves for a few moments to go to the lavatory; as he returns, he finds that the Bishop has been unable to keep the young man in the club car. Undaunted in his fight against evil, the priest turns now to the waiter in the club car and starts with him a softening-up talk about baseball before tackling— the Bishop surmises— the more serious topic on "the iniquity of tipping" already heard before in the dining car. On his way back to the compartment the Bishop sees the young man entering the room out of which he had seen another member of the pilgrimage emerge. Near the end of the story Powers comments:

> "The Bishop slept well that night, after all, but not before he thought of Father Early still out there, on his feet and trying, which was what counted in the sight of God, not success. *Thinkest thou that I cannot ask my Father, and he will not give me presently more than twelve legions of angels?*"

Next morning the Bishop appears in a more pliant mood and willing to accept a more cooperative role in the pilgrimage.

The multiple-level interpretation for which all Powers' stories are known is here again at work in the successive stages of deeper complexity weighing the goodness of an act against its evil consequences and its re-evaluation by the reactions it engenders. The first stage is that of a boring meddler, bril-

(29) John P. Sisk, "The Complex Moral Vision of J. F. Powers," *Critique,* II, No. 2, Fall 1958, p. 28.

liantly depicted in relevant details. The second stage begins when the Bishop realizes Father Early's intention to keep the young man away from the occasion of sin. Father Early is still a bore and remains so till the end, but the Bishop sees a quality that had been unobserved in the priest. The third stage presents the Bishop experiencing just before going to sleep the truth that what counts before God is personal effort, not success. Sisk here comments perceptively:

> "We are familiar with the irony of good intentions and harmful results, our delight in which may be nothing more than a despair of goodness; but here we must face the more disturbing irony of the value for good of good intentions that may produce harmful results in a man who still is a bore and ought to be humbler before 'the mystery of iniquity."

The "value for good" here is evidently the Bishop's moment of truth seeing his own deficiency in Father Early's wasteful efforts.

The aim of the artist is to present life as it really is, as it is seen intuitively beneath the surface of appearances. What Powers sees as an artist conforms with a world where good and evil coexist in the same person in a strange and inextricable way. He reveals his fundamental optimism in that the characters he describes are, in spite of their foibles, truly personable. They are capable of becoming aware of evil not only in others but in themselves also and, above all, they can change for the better and this possibility is (and here is where the artistic revelation comes in) not simply stated but felt and experienced as a true condition in man.

In his intuitions about the actual moral condition of man, Powers may "strike one as being completely out of the American grain" if one compares him with such American contemporaries as Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Paul Bowles, Mary McCarthy, and J. D. Salinger.[30] But Powers' moral stand (man being a "limited social creature of mixed good and evil") may be as old as Chaucer's and Shakespeare's and as modern as Faulkner's Sherwood Anderson's, and Robert Penn Warren's.[31]

As a genuine artist, Powers has nothing to do with damning or saving his characters. He is not a judge but an observer. Extremes in moral conduct might be seen in Father Burner at one end an Father Didymus at the other; in between these two all the rest of his characters sway one way or another, with Mac and Myles in the middle. The author simply observes human nature and represents it in vivid and meaningful concrete forms leaving the human person intact, subject to evil tendencies and limitations as all men are, but capable of modifyng them, capable of changing (strange though it may sound to some) for the better.

Powers' realism is of a kind that enables him to see through the hard surface of experience and to reach meaningful liberation of the spirit. His work has no part with total frustration in life.

His optimistic view of reality comes through with refreshing vigor in the humorous story "The Devil Was the Joker," where innocence grows into an

(30) Cf. Sisk, *loc cit.*, p. 31.

(31) *Idem*, pp. 31, 32, and 40.

enlightened virtue in Myles as he steers his way out of an odd entanglement with the roguish Mac.

In the world of childhood, innocence offers the problem of shock in its first confrontation with evil. This theme Powers has treated in "Jamesie." Comparing it with Hemingway's "My Old Man" and Anderson's "I Want to Know Why," J. P. Sisk comments "that in Powers' story the innocent's encounter with the adult world of evil is less traumatic than it is in the other two."[32] Anderson's story presents simply the puzzlement of the adolescent narrator. Hemingway's hero does not show possible change in attitude. Jamesie's experience, on the other hand, is "shocking but educating."[33] The possible growth into an enlightened and strengthened adulthood is seen in the change of mood at the end of the story. First going nowhere "through alleys and across lots, between buildings and over fences," after the disillusionment with his hero in jail, Jamesie returns home, "using the streets and sidewalks like everyone else." "The Trouble" similarly shows the gradual emotional growth of a child into the adult responsible world achieving meaning though sorrow, entering into the company of such strong men and women as the "poetry man," Gramma, the Doctor, and his own Daddy.

Powers has consistently revealed in his work the existence of moral consciousness. In one of his latest stories "Look How the Fish Live,"[34] he leaves his favorite characters and clerical setting, but not the theme of the existence of moral sensibility in man's inner self. The story is outstanding for the spareness of incidents and apparent levity of subject-matter. The hero is unnamed, his apparent inane problem is to keep alive a baby dove his children find soon after it falls from a high nest in one of the trees of the property. He resents being confronted with a responsibility that he regards entirely belonging to the parent birds; he leaves the baby dove near by and eventually buries it after it has been killed by a neighborhood cat. Two neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Hahn happen by and try to engage him in a conversation about atomic explosions, the fallout, and the spraying of mosquitoes. Thereupon the protagonist, whose depressingly meditative mood has reached rock-bottom, bursts into a general disparagement of the world of his immediate experience: "I am sick of it all," he tells the Hahns, "Insects, birds and animals of all kinds . . . " When he clarifies his statement to include children and women and men, the Hahns are led to regard him as a "head case." At the conclusion he refuses the assignment as a city block warden when the woman organizer for civil defense proposes it. Then it is revealed that the particular reason of the protagonist for being so upset is that his home is to be relinquished to the state and be destroyed to make room for the city college.

Going over the story in this new light the details are seen in their full significance. The protagonist has been exceedingly glad in a seemingly unchangeable, happy order and in the enjoyment of the small world of his home property: "It had been a wonderful year in the yard, which was four city blocks and full of trees, a small forest and game preserve . . . Until that day there hadn't been a single casualty." His cherished delusion falls apart

(32) Sisk, *loc. cit.*, p. 38.

(33) *Idem*, p. 39.

(34) *Reporter*, Oct. 31, 1957, pp. 36, 48-42.

when he sees his own children, in their innocence, pitying the baby dove. In their simplicity they also testify to the disorder in nature and to their own embryonic moral sensibility. The reaction in the protagonist who sees the dove's mother "posing on a branch like peace itself, with no thought of anything in her head," must be judged by the fact that he is "not soft"; he has subscribed to "the balance of nature" by violent amoral methods, flooding gophers, killing a "generation of red squirrels from the attic," and spraying mosquitoes; furthermore, he knows what is "the best thing for the bird" yet, he cannot bring himself to accept the role of a butcher. His resentment against the parent bird's incompetence reveals his inner struggle to solve a personal moral problem. He finds contradictory forces in nature, the survival of the fittest or the pre-eminence of force over right is inconceivable to man, yet in some circumstances, man himself uses those amoral methods. The protagonist has done it without remorse in order to preserve his private order, which in turn is doomed to destruction before the state's version of law and progress. The problem is rather complex. The Hahns have tried to eviscerate the moody and exaggerated feeling from the protagonist by simply invoking a law nature: "Look how the fish live"!

Powers' moral stance in his work against a violence he knows as existing in the world appears to be the same as the protagonist's here. Man is not simply a creature in a world where the big fish eats the small fish, though men often may act in this way. "Mr. Hahn didn't see himself in the picture at a all," reflects the protagonist. The new building program which includes the city college that will swallow the protagonist's home appears wonderful to the Hahns: "For them the word state and expansion seemed sufficient." Furthermore, there is the detail remembered vividly by the protagonist that "Mr. Hahn, who had an interest such as newpapers seemed to have in explosions, didn't care to discuss the fallout." Such a detail is related to Hans' asking whether he should get his gun to kill the cat that killed the bird. "No, it's in his nature," replies the protagonist.

If compassion proves the existence of a moral law in man, an exaggerated amount of it could drive him into an insane assylum: The protagonist now ruminates as follows: "Compassion for the Holy Family fleeing from Herod was laudable and meritorious, but it was wasted on soulless rabbits fleeing from soulless weasels. Nevertheless, it was there just the same, or something very like it." After watching the parent birds a little longer, he manages to see the "secret of their success" in the struggle for survival. The rescue of the baby dove is beyond their possibilities: a recognition of one's limitations and a need to struggle according to one's capabilities. As he enters his "doomed house" for the night, he places a large stone on the bird's grave "not as a marker but as an obstacle to the cat if it returned." As Mr. Scouffas wisely remarks: "Not as an act of sentiment which would have reflected self-pity as well as presumptious assertion of self, but as a gesture of opposition within his limits, a necessary moral stance."[35]

This story amply clarifies Powers' moral position in his art. On the one side there is acceptance, endurance, awareness of man's limited condition;

(35) "J. F. Powers: On the Vitality of Disorder," *loc. cit.*, p. 54. Most of the commentaries on the story "Look How the Fish Live" have likewise been drawn from this invaluable essay, mainly pp. 51 through 55.

on the other, there is an element of protest joined to a personal effort acording to the possibilities of man to stay evil and favor good, to uncover the lie and reveal the truth. On one side there is formative humility that stands at the opposite end of contemptuous arrogance; on the other, there is human courage. That is Powers' moral view of the human person. His work actually reveals a sincere unstinted effort on his part in the exploration of the fundamental moral nature of man.

Comparing "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" with "Look How the Fish Live" one can see how both probe the same problem but from different angles. Didymus of "Lions" struggles to attain spirituality and finds himself tied down to earth. The protagonist of "Look How the Fish Live" endeavors to preserve a material order according to the laws of nature and finds a higher order far different from the one he observes in the animal world. One finds he cannot do without the body, the other finds he cannot do without the spirit. Both of them come close to be "head cases," both of them preserve their personality by admitting the unreasonableness of their position. The realization and acceptance of their human limitations become the basic conditions for the "secret of their success." Naomi Lebowitz correctly remarks that Powers' moral stand agrees with Jung who says in *Modern Men in Search of a Soul:* "There appears to be a conscience in mankind which which severely punishes the man who does not somehow and at sometime, at whatever cost of his pride, cease to defend and assert himself, and instead confess himself fallible and human."[36]

But the final significance in these two Powers' stories appears in the protagonists' "gesture of opposition within their limits." For one it is the symbolic stone over the dead dove; for the other, the equally symbolic lunge to free the canary. Both of them imply personal and continued effort. This is simply a return to the Bishop in "Zeal" who thinks of Father Early to be "on his feet and trying which was what counted in the sight of God." The subdued optimism implicit in both stories is rooted in God as source of all good and grace. For one protagonist "all problems were at the bottom theological," for the other, all end in the "snowy arms of God." When the protagonist of "Look How the Fish Live" unrestrainedly talks about the "failure" both of nature and humanity, his neighbor asks: "That does not leave much does it?" The protagonist then muses: "Who was left?" and answers himself:

> "God. It wasn't surprising, for all problems were at the bottom theological. He'd like to put a few questions to God. God, though, knowing his thoughts, knew his questions, and the world was already in possession of all the answers that would be forthcoming."

An over-all view of all Powers' stories will lead to the same subdued optimism. They may present a painful awareness of evil, as in "Jamesie," or of a personal weakness experienced by the protagonists, such as Fathers Udovic and Burner, and the Bishop in "Zeal." The stories do not stop, however, at showing sheer passive acceptance in worthless self-pity or

(36) "The Stories of J. F. Powers: The Sign of Contradiction," *Kenyon Review*, 20, Summer, 1958, p. 499.

meaningless despair of human weakness. Exceptionally a story may consider the humans simply submerged in a cold world as it happens in "Blue Island" and "The Poor Thing." Some stories reveal an instinctive reaction in a cry against unjust violence as in "The Eye" and "The Trouble"; at times they show a burning but impatient protest without the saving measure of humility that comes from the awareness of one's own limitations. Father Eudex seems to be in this last plight, so is the Nun Superior in "The Lord's Day," and, to a lesser extent, Father Firman in "Valiant Woman."

But where both lobes of Powers' moral brain seem to be harmoniously at work, with Oriental meditativeness and Western-World exertive attitude, is in the already-mentioned "Lions" and "Look How the Fish Live" as well as in such stories as: "Zeal," "The Presence of Grace," "The Devil Was the Joker," and "Prince of Darkness." It is through these stories that the greater significance of Powers' moral stand is most clearly revealed: The Bishop realizes his guilty complacence in solitude and is on his way to accept a more active role; Father Fabre's initial protestation is mellowed at the end by an inner awareness of his insufficiency and of the mysterious functioning of the principle of authority; Myles remains charitable in his judgment of Mac but decides to leave him and hitch-hike on his own.

Similarly, Father Burner's sense of defeat testifies to a moral consciousness that is goading him on toward a personal effort in the attainment of true victory over self—hypersensitive Burner, daydreaming of a "glorious death carrying the Holy Eucharist to a dying soldier," finds only his sense of void heightened to the point of agony. Actually, in the story, Burner appears unchanged in the end, unwilling to take the "ascetic interpretation" or a "total loss on sacrifice"; instead of reading, as told, his new assignment after Mass the day following his interview with the Archbishop, he reads it in one of the side streets soon after he leaves the Archbishop's office. But the reaction, the exertive attitude, may be said to exist in the reader who wishes heartily that Burner rise from his spiritual lethargy. Waugh aptly refers to "Prince of Darkness" as "a magnificent study in sloth . . . which brought an alarming whiff of brimstone to the nostrils of at least one reader."[37]

J. F. Powers' secret of moral success seems now fairly clear: Endurance through awareness of human limitations must be joined to a personal effort within one's means and without yielding to despair in the fight against evil. Human success involves, therefore, self-confession and unstinted effort. The fight against violence or egotism disguised in any form must go on. Man must find strength in his weakness and thus achieve the triumph of the spirit over the flesh. It is only then that man's true progress may be said to lie in God's "snowy arms."

5.— HUMOR: THE KEY-NOTE

Humor has already been mentioned as an element that is found in practically all of the Powers' stories. Humor implies a certain way of looking at life and may be considered within the realm of ideas included under the

(37) Quoted on the back of the jacket of *Morte d'Urban,* (N. Y., 1962) from the English magazine, *The Month.*

heading of "Artistic Vision." The tone of voice implies an added meaning to the mere words used in speech. It is thus that Humor adds to the printed page a key note that must rightly be considered as contributing to the full understanding of the author's meaning and to the sharing of the feelings stirred by his art.

Humor exuberantly aids Mr. Powers in the basic ironic twist that characterizes his work, namely, his serious intention veiled in a kind of light-hearted exposition. The serious fact behind the comic story—if it is to be true literature—is its affirmation of human values. It is an acceptance of permanent realities while laughing at the passing moment. It is the timely humorous comment that points to timeless human riddles. It is the joyful leap of intuition from the particular to the universal.

Most of the stories here analyzed deal with trivial incidents— the searching for a table in a church basement, the writing of a letter to the Bishop to ask for a change of parish, the inquiring about the sender of an enigmatic envelope on the Bishop's desk, a boring conversation on a train trip amid Rome-bound pilgrims, the cutting down of some mulberry trees. The stories are deceptively simple and only a discerning reader realizes that what constitutes the real story is not the incidents themselves but the exhilarating experience of their revelation of human nature. "The reader," says a critic, "is continually confronted with a sensation of having been exposed to nakedness—human nature in total undress. So exciting and pleasant is the revelation that the story does not matter at all."[38]

Time and again in this thesis reference has been made to Powers' "humorous intention" in his stories. As a matter of fact, after close examination, one finds Powers' fiction thoroughly impregnated with humor, but it is a humor that may be difficult to analyze accurately. In general one can say that Powers' humor is such that it partakes of the comic without becoming comical; it may be witty, but not farcical; it may show scintillation, but not buffoonery.

The light-hearted stories of "Dawn" and "Losing Game" serve up truly enjoyable laughs. The author succeeds apparently without much effort by taking advantage of truly comic situations. Both stories have been studied under different aspects in this thesis and may easily be recalled. Father Udovic's plight is his realization of sharing a silly pride with a woman parishioner in a Peter's Pence campaign. Father Fabre's losing game becomes hilarous almost from the start by the very contrast offered in the characters themselves: the old mousy pastor and the young, somewhat impetuous, sociable assistant. The Cat stories also seem to give ample room to display the the author's own wit and cleverness because of the peculiar convention of the point of view.

But Powers does not rely simply on hilarous situations or peculiar conventions. Humor in Powers' fiction compenetrates the very style or prose of the narrative. Often, in a style that may be described as incisive, objective, and economical, a paragraph that is engrossed with details is skillfully dilated through delightful suggestiveness.

(38) Gable, *op. cit.*, p. 27

The following excerpt from "Jamesie" may give an idea of how humor in style lightens up an already concentrated paragraph. Jamesie has gone up peevishly to his room feigning sickness but in reality unwilling to take supper together with Uncle Pat and Cousin Gabriel, both of whom, he feels, are in connivance to dislike his hero, Lefty, and to blame him falsely for losing the game on purpose that very afternoon. At this point in the story Powers writes:

> "Somebody was coming up the stairs. Aunt Kate. He knew the wavering step at the top of the stairs to be hers, and the long pause she used to catch her breath—something wrong with her lung? Now, as she began to move, he heard ice tinkling in a glass. Lemonade. She was bringing him some supper. She knocked. He lay heavier on the bed and with his head at a painful angle to make her think he was suffering. She knocked again. If he pinched his forehead it would look red and feverish. He did. Now.
> 'Come in,' he said weakly."

One may observe, in a paragraph like this, the deft use of the descriptive adjective: "wavering step . . . long pause . . . painful angle . . . red and feverish." The adjectives are not literary but effective. Conveniently spaced, they ease up and dilate the concentrated paragraph with scintillating suggestiveness. In the situation described, "wavering step" and "long pause" imply an effort in spite of physical weakness, which highlights Aunt Kate's over-abounding goodness; "painful angle" suggests a finical attitude in Jamesie; "red and feverish" stress the boyish extravagance of the faker.

Mr. Powers' style, considered in this manner, seems endowed with a graceful inner movement that enables the story to transcend the concrete limitations of the printed word, through the joyful leaps of the imagination. In the paragraph just quoted, with details that are first vague—"somebody coming up the stairs"—then precise—"wavering step," "ice tinkling"—, the author presents the boy guessing the rest. It is his aunt, who is suffering from an asthmatic condition, bringing him lemonade and supper. In the interval between the knocks at the door, it is the reader's turn to fill in with the suggestions that the sentence, "He lay heavier on the bed," implies. In point of fact it is a very particularized scene. The image that is evoked in the next paragraph, however, takes the setting out of its enclosed walls and makes it extensive to all the good aunts that people the earth of whose abounding goodness all nephews and nieces have received the choice benefits. This is how Mr. Powers makes the leap:

> "She came in gliding across the room in the twilight, tall and white as a sail in her organdy, serene before her patient."

Aunt Kate is the perfect nurse, but under the circumstances more than a nurse. The simile "tall and white as a sail" does the trick here. It is a method that is not descriptive but impressionistic. The simile, moreover, seems to rise most naturally from the situation itself; it is not forced upon the text to inflate it vacuously, but validated for what it does by universalizing the

particular.

The striking quality of this style lies in the subtle way the author borrows the power of poetry to produce, by means of a playfully or deceptively simpel prose, an intense emotion. The real epiphany in the passage above arrives through contrast in what follows. Aunt Kate raises the shades to light up the room, sets the tray on the table by Jamesie's bed, sits in the tiny rocker—"she did not look too big for it"—, and begins to wonder what "had come between him and her." The childhood story books she used to read to Jamesie are now seen relegated to the bottom shelf of a bookstand by the bed while the upper shelves show Baseball Bill stories, Tom Swift, several numbers of *Sporting News*, and the like. Meanwhile quicky recovered, Jamesie eats supper and thinks Aunt Kate "the best one." He naturally reverts to the game, wants to know what Uncle Pat and Cousin Gabriel bave been talking about at table. Completely blinded by passion, Jamesie suddenly and erroneously blames Aunt Kate for being on their side against Lefty, reveals he is not sick, and runs out of his room pouting back at his aunt, "And Uncle Pat drinks *near beer.*"

Mr. Powers completes Aunt Kate's picture with Jamesie's reflection: "He could not be sure, but he thought he had her crying, and if she did, it served her right..." The boyish peevishness that grows into sheer cruelty brings out touchingly the tenderness, innocence, and goodness of the aunt.

At this point one cannot help quoting O'Faolain who says:

> "Wherever there is wit, or an imaginative stir of humor or passion, or concentration of feeling or observation we will find a more suggestive language leaping across deserts of literalness, and we chase after it to its glittering oasis."[39]

Examples of suggestive language are not lacking in Mr. Powers' fiction; they are judiciously scattered throughout his stories with vigorous freshness "leaping across the desert" of sheer factual details. One of the most felicitous sentences is, perhaps, that already commented upon in the first chapter: "He jabbed at the grapefruit before him, his second, demolishing its perfect rose window." Pleasurably explosive elements of compression and extension are comprised here, concrete details that characterize Father Burner and an image evoked relating to theme. It is the imaginative stir that forces its way through the observed facts. It is the scintillation of artistic imagination.

Innumerable other examples of "imaginative stir" could be cited. A few follow:

> Father broke into the kitchen as into a roomful of assassins, and confronted the glowering hulk of iron that was their stove. ("The Lord's Day")

> The calliope... had roamed the streets, all red and gold and glittering like a hussy among the pious black Fords parked on the square, blaring and showing off... ("Jamesie")

(39) *The Story*, p. 233.

> They met Mr. Pint all salt and sweat... He came among them as one from years at sea, scornful of soft living. ("The Presence of Grace")

> Angular winter daylight forsook the small room... passed through the window into the outside world. The distant horizon which it sought to join was still bright... ("Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does")

These and many other examples could be the subject of minute analysis with identical result. They all prove not only Mr. Powers' excellent and polished prose but his deftness in integrating its poetic force into the story unassumingly. It is for this reason that V. S. Pritchet admires Powers: for being "poetic without poeticising" and for having "a fine sensibility to atmosphere... without straining for literary effect."[40] The phrase "without straining for literary effect" could easily be attributed to Mr. Powers' artistic sense of humor.

Related to this use of suggestive language and also to the manner in which humor compenetrates style, there is yet another striking characteristic to be found in Mr. Powers' fiction. Continuously and variously there emerge subtle allusions, witty phrases, mild satire, or simply cold irony. Behind it all, there is a basic understanding of human nature.

In "He Don't Plan Cotton," Powers, the lover of persons, may tend to present some of the characters in terms of poetry ("weaving themselves down into the dark beauty of the lower keys"), but in "The Eye" he may, as the upholder of man's dignity, protest with violent sarcasm. Usually, however, he prefers the more moderate and subtler method of mild satire. The reviewer of *Time* sees him in "The Presence of Grace" taking a "Waughspish delight in lampooning vulgarity."[41] The story tells the embarrassing moments Father Fabre has to undergo as he appears, unaware of the situation, to condone an illicit union between one of his parishioners, Mrs. Mathers, and her non-Catholic lover and boarder, Mr. Pint, by obligingly dining with them and Mr. Point's daugther, Velma. The comedy hits the high point of hilarity around and old ice-cream freezer operated by hand:

> "I can't be standin' here all day with this cream gettin' soft on me," Mr. Pint said... and sank again to his knees. He resumed cranking...
>
> 'Your good suit,' said Mrs. Mathers. She snatched a *Better Homes and Gardens* from a pile of such magazines and slid it under Mr. Pint's knees.
>
> 'Sir Walter Reilly,' said Velma, looking at Father Fabre to see if he followed her... 'Let me taste it Dad.'
>
> Mr. Pint churned up a chunk of ice and batted it down with the heel of his hand. 'By Dad!' he breathed, a little god invoking himself... Mrs. Mathers left the room, and returned a moment later whispering that she believed in flushing the

(40) "Powers, James Farl," *Twentieth Century Authors*, First Supplement. Stanley J. Kunitz, ed. New York, 1955, p. 791.

(41) March 19, 1956, p. 110.

toilet before she made coffee. That was the quickest way to bring fresh water into the house"[42]

Another aspect of humor may be considered in the use of dialogue. In Powers' fiction, dialogue enlivens the stories with true freshness and spontaneity. Two good examples have already been given, the passage from "The Presence of Grace" just quoted and, in the first chapter, the end of the conversation between Jamesie and his friend Murgatroyd. The second reveals the boy's vivid imagination and candid behavior; the first, to produce its full impact, must be read with the addition of the omitted sentences and paragraphs. For instance, before Velma's allusion to "Sir Walter Reilly," Father Fabre reflects that he "hadn't expected to be the second most important person there." Then later, as he is left alone with Mr. Pint, who intently continues to crank away at the freezer, the reader senses Father Fabre's every word in the dialogue surfeited with embarrassment and interspersed with awkward silences. Vulgarity piles upon vulgarity, and discourtesy upon discourtesy.

After dinner Mrs. Mathers and Mr. Pint doze off, side by side, on the sofa of the living room while Velma carries on conversation with the priest who, by then, begins to realize his *faux pas*. The first subject is on dates ("I see all your movies"). In a rare moment, conversation is taken up by Mr. Pint with some relief for Father Fabre who soon, notwithstanding his intentions, bungles up:

> "Certainly was good ice cream.'
> 'Glad you liked it.'
> After the long winter, gentle spring, the sap running . . .
> 'That's good idea of yours when you make ice cream—bringing an extra shirt, I mean."[43]
> There was a bad silence, the worst of the afternoon, crippling every tongue. Even Velma . . . was quiet. Mr. Pint was positively stony. Finally Mrs. Mathers explained:
> 'Mr. Pint lives here, Father.'
> 'He does?'
> 'Yes, Father.'
> 'I guess I didn't know.'
> 'I guess I didn't tell you.'
> 'No reason why you should've,' he said quickly. 'You do have quite a bit of room here.' He seemed to be perspiring. 'Certainly do get the sun.' He never would have thought it, was there a chance that Mr. Pint . . . was not her lover?"

Every angle of the embarrasment is sharply analyzed: the constraining of speech, the feeling of uneasiness, the upsetting of the mind. In the whirlwind of his confusion, Father Fabre says words without thinking: "No reason why you should've . . . You have quite a bit of room . . . Swell!"

(42) This long passage with the periods indicating the extraction in one instance of some six short paragraphs is taken as found in *Time*, March 19, 1956, p. 110.

(43) Reference is made here to the change of blue shirt, blotched with perspiration during the ice-cream making exertion, for a white one.

There is Mr. Powers, the master of dialogue; a dialogue where the force of expression involves tone, atmosphere, and situation together with the interplay of personalities,[44] a dialogue where the implied reactions are intensely felt by characters and readers alike, a dialogue, in fine, that is always adding, complicating, and enriching the content of the story.

An interesting study of Mr. Powers' art could be simply this aspect of dialogue. In his fiction the core of each dialogue is lit up through the duel that the dialogue entails. Thus one may hear Father Burner quarreling with Father Quinlan, or teasing Father Keefe, or meekly rendering obeisance to his Bishop. In another story it is a bishop who tries to avoid the darts of the annoying conversation of a zealous but tactless priest. Another time one may be surprised to hear an invalid hypnotizing her paid companion into enforced service. The duel may take form of an artful argument between an aging priest and his out-foxed young assistant, or simply end and unfold in silence as in "Dawn" where "two characters gaze at each other, united in mutual hatred and common guilt."[45] The author may, yet, use reticence for the purpose of signifying harmony and love as happens so touchingly at the end of "The Old Bird, A Love story."

Within the topic of Humor, there is yet another characterstic from the standpoint of Powers' artistic vision. When humor is focused on the contradiction of the ideas involved rather than the incongruity of a given situation, then it naturally shifts into irony. Powers' humor does reveal a light ironic touch. The author may be said to be a mild satirist; there is sympathy in his amusement with the characters he describes. His is a wry humor, half grim, half laughing. His most distinctive position in this regard lies midway between sarcasm and sentimentality. He views his characters "without illusions and even more so without cynicism."[46]

In reading a Powers' book of stories, some persons may be tickled to laugh their hearts out, but others may be driven to delve into its meaning. Subtle irony, then, becomes very significant in Powers' art. Seriously laughing, Powers would affirm the existence of a moral consciousness in man. Life is not simply a sardonic joke full of inescapable traps and tricks.

The patient investigations that his short stories represent reveal, through a valid artistic method, the constant tension between the ideal and the actual. The author's images of man are true to life, faithfully recording its surface lightness but implying deeper meanings. Life may be full of tricks and traps, but man is not altogether doomed to defeat, and the losing games of these stories subtilely proclaim the greatness of man. There is always a hidden triumph involved in the conquest of self. Genuine goodness makes its appearance in these stories. It should not be difficult to re-state who, in Powers' opinion, is the good man and how he is equipped to face the hard-heartedness of the world.

(44) "Many writers," says Donald Barr *(loc. cit.)*, "have a good ear for the way people talk, but Powers has an ear for the way persons talk; he makes one hear the mentalities of his characters."

(45) Haldan Whey, "J. F. Powers: The Skewered and the Unskewered," *Jubilee*, vol. 4, May 1956, p. 47.

(46) Davenport, *loc. cit.*, p. 14.

In Myles of "The Devil Was the Joker" or Didymus of "Lions," one can detect a combination of toughness and gentleness. It is a guilelessness in Myles that develops an exterior hardness(grows wise to the insidious ways of fraud and deceit) while it retains its inner kindness. It is a troubled determination in Didymus to attain perfection that gradually shifts to a deeper understanding of human frailty and thus achieves the sublime harmony of human and divine love. In the Bishop as he appears in "Zeal," the reader senses the basic qualities of tolerance and open-mindedness as conducive to true goodness in man. In Father Fabre of "The Presence of Grace," there is a fundamental humility added to the firm purpose of doing good in the realization of one's own short-sighted vision, the realization that it is better to trust authority than to rely on one's own human limited ability. A buoyant sense of wonder that speaks of a higher victory is obtained when true harmony is paradoxically established through exterior order and interior charity. With reason Frank O'Connor places high literary value on this story saying that "it is a great story because the concealed light that streams about the shadowy, all too human figures has an unearthly brilliance."[47]

All the Powers' stories in their over-all understatement may be said to affirm great truths of artistic intuition. If the laziness, bullying, and gluttony of Father Burner show one side of man, the reader's compassion and well-wishing (wishing Burner to pull himself together and to react manfully against his spiritual lukewarmness) show the reverse impulse in the eternal dialectics of the spirit versus the flesh in man. Wryly, then, the author states his firm belief in a goodness which lies deeper than the spirit of meanness in the heart of man. Amid Powers' hearty laughs there are philosophical whispers.

Someone has stressed the understanding Powers reveals of human nature and the affirmation he makes of human values, through the high quality of the basic irony of his fiction, with a general appraisal which is a fitting understatement: Powers' fiction as a whole could best be thought of as "a burlesque with love."[48] At a time when the general complaint in the field of literature, as well as elsewhere, is the loss of human values,[49] it is comforting to note an attempt to restore them and to restore them with valid literary method. The attempt is made, ironically, through a humoristic approach, not through an outward display of blatantly tackling problems of great moment, but through the modest, although forceful, undertaking of uneventful-looking short stories.

Mr. Powers has marvelously succeeded in creating in his work an aura of personal dignity which truly belongs to man. He has likewise succeeded in presenting an image of a world true to life, a world that one feels is not beyond redemption, a world where human warmth and love is an attainable reality. One further irony can yet be found in Powers' vision of reality which

(47) *Loc. cit.*, p. 22.

(48) The appraisal is made by Time's critic, January 4, 1963, p. 2. It refers to *Morte d'Urban,* Powers' first full-length novel, but the same appraisal could apply to the Powers' stories viewed as a whole.

(49) Cf. Richard Foster, "Comedy before Tragedy," *loc. cit.*, p. 527, also Marya Mannes, "Let's Stop Exalting Punks," *Reader's Digest,* Jan., 1963, pp. 45-48, a condensation from the *Saturday Evening Post,* October 6, 1962.

confronts an "Age of Anxiety," as the contemporary age has been described. This age of anxiety speaks of.:

> " . . . big city towers in which life is lived in compartments and cubicles . . . of complex machines . . . of swift ascents and descents in competitive business . . . [and also] in an ever-fluid society . . . of man's dreaded loss of identity . . . of a desperate need to make contact with his fellowman, with the world, and with whatever is beyond the world."[50]

For the image of this modern man possessed by anxiety the article just cited propounds the allegory of a passenger in an automatic elevator who finds that there should be a 25th floor in the building. "The passenger," thus ends the alegory, "cowers in a corner of his steel box, staring at the shining metal grille through which the voice once spoke. The grille must be worshiped; perhaps the voice will be heard again." Evidently the allegory attempts to picture the isolation of modern man in his experience of a Great Absence, of a "God grown silent."[51]

Powers has not discarded anxiety in his stories. He has rather acknowledged it as an inherent condition of man's doubleness, being bound to earth in the flesh and free and limitless, yearning for heaven, in the spirit. All Powers' stories are impregnated with anxiety and "Lions," the sublimest of them all, happens to be surfeited with it. Didymus' soul can be said to be transfixed with anxiety. But for Powers, God has not grown silent. There are faint voices and his keen ear is perceptible enough to hear them. His art succeeds in the recording of these voices in his stories.

It is surprising to see how these stories that at first appear simply to stress the "sign of contradiction" that is on Catholics (particularly on priests) like a brand, gradually shift to the suggestion that Catholics are not any more troubled than others, and then revert to the original suggestion but in reverse: that "Catholics and especially the clergy can be the least tormented of humanity . . . They believe and, therefore, they are free to get on with living."[52] Powers' work is saturated with allusions and inferences of the acceptance of Christian values; his view on life is in perfect harmony with his faith. The startling fact is that his Catholic vision of reality, far from obtruding his literary art, seems to enrich it with a new dimension and subtly gladdens it with an optimism that enables the author to see deeply into the human heart, into ordinarily unseen realities that integrate, transform, and ennoble man in spite of the pettiness of his human condition.

Humor is basic to Mr. Powers' fiction not only because it is found in most of his stories but also, mainly, because it is through humor that he is able to transcend the particular situation in order to reveal the universal condition of man. It is conceded that his most humorous stories deal with priests. Some readers have even misunderstood the author's recurrence to the subject. They have feared he may be simply delighting on the negative

(50) "The Anatomy of Angst," as analyzed by *Time*, March 31, 1961, p. 40.

(51) *Idem.*

(52) Bowen, *loc. cit.*

side, in a mean exposure, of the life of the clergy antagonistic to the church in general. Nothing is farther from the truth than this fear of some readers, as it has already been explained. "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does" should be sufficient to allay any such fears. One may easily see in "Dawn," "Losing Game," and "Zeal" the light-hearted intention of the author, but even in such stories as "The Lord's Day," "The Forks," and "Prince of Darkness" that speak for that "more rigorous type of Christianity"[53] one may detect the author's subtle love for his priests and the frail humanity in them. It is precisely through humor or the inner awareness of the main characters of their own contradiction that these establish their identity with the reader, whether he is a cleric or not, whether he is a Catholic or not, because what the priest really stands for is man in self-contradiction, man frustrated in his efforts to attain his goal. And that is man's condition.

Summing up, various aspects have been considered in this third and last chapter of the present thesis in an attempt to discover Mr. Powers' artistic vision. First of all, there is a surface lightness in most of his stories that may be paradoxically viewed as pointing to the stress of meaning over fact. Upon reflection, all the Powers' stories are seen to mark the importance of other realities than those presented in realistically particularized situations.

Secondly, the atmosphere that prevails in Powers' fiction is one where there exists a tension between the "flesh and the sprit." Although submerged in materiality, man is not altogether abandoned to the downward pull of "gravity"; there exists a liberating lift of the spirit. The "vitality of disorder" bows out to a higher order of "grace" somewhat unexpectedly but genuinely felt. It is an atmosphere which is definitely not of despair but of hope and faith in the perfectibility of man.

Thirdly, in his patient investigations of human nature, Mr. Powers makes use of the priest as a key character. It is through the priest-character that he is able to draw those contrasts which best serve his artistic ends. The priest, ideally conceived as a noble figure, offers an artistic, implied background for the mediocre lives of the priests as depicted in the Powers' stories. The priest-character, viewed in this manner, effectively stresses the ironies and ambiguities of the actual life of man, modern or ancient, who lives, or lived, in contradiction with his ideal. Moreover, hidden harmonies are revealed in the penetration of the moral nature of man by fittingly selecting a character who, by temperament or training, is best suited to perceive those spiritual realities Powers consistently endeavors to discover in his fiction.

The fourth section of this chapter deals with the author's moral view in his work. What Powers sees as an artist is a world where good and evil coexist in the same person in a strange and inextricable way. With fundamental optimism he views his characters as truly personable, capable of becoming aware of evil in others and in themselves, capable of changing for the better. As illustrated in "Zeal," this possibility of man's moral progress is not simply stated but felt and experienced, in a valid artistic revelation, as the true condition of man. All Powers' stories seem to point in the same direction. "How the Fish Live" has been carefully analyzed and then compared with "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does." Both stories are seen to explore the

(53) Shannon, in *Catholic World,* 175, September 1952, p. 432.

same moral problem but from different angles. The spiritual view of man, alone, does not conform with reality; the naturalistic, or material view of man, by itself, is far less capable to explain man as a whole. Both elements —spiritual and material—enter fully, without extravagance but also without pusillanimity, in Powers' artistic conception of the whole of man. The principle, or moral view, underlying Powers' fiction manifests itself mainly under two aspects: Endurance and Effort. Man must become aware of his limitation and, under those limitations, he must work for his own betterment.

The fifth section deals with Humor. In Powers' artistic vision, humor introduces a key-note that carries with it overtones as well as undertones. On the surface this humor appears as a light-hearted exposition of trivial incidents. On a closer examination, humor is seen to penetrate the very style of Powers' work. The compactly-built, detail-heavy paragraphs of his stories are seen to dilate and lighten up with the scintillating leaps of the imagination. These leaps surge from the wise distinction between the relevant and the merely curious incidents, and from the appropriate choice of numerous allusions, discreet comments, stimulating metaphors, and brilliant similes. In his humorous style, Powers reveals his basic understanding of human nature which translates itself in subdued satire which avoids the extremes of sentimentalism and sarcasm. Sometimes the author may view his characters through the eyes of poetry but most often he views them with a mischievous eye of comical mirth, which is not altogether devoid of compassion. He does not laugh at his characters but with them.

A further overtone of Powers' humor may be seen in the dialogue that intersperses his stories. The dialogue enlivens them with the freshness and spontaneity of authentic personalities. It is a dialogue where the personal sagacity or ingenuousness, bitterness or anger, meddlesomeness or sedateness, buoyancy or brooding, embarrassment or vulgarity of the different characters that come into play are deftly put forward with the competitiveness, tension, suspense, and fascination of a genuine duel.

The undertone of Mr. Powers' humor lies mainly in its ironic touch. Practically all of his stories may be viewed as artistic understatements: the exterior, light-hearted approach of uneventful-looking narratives wryly point to a forceful affirmation of human values. It is in its confrontation with the modern "age of anxiety" that Powers' fiction acquires significance. This modern age testifies to an experience of a Great Absence, of a "God grown silent." It is a general feeling of void that leads to despair. Powers' work subtilely proclaims the greatness of man, in that the hidden triumph involved in the possible conquest of self is treated with the intensity of an actual experience. In his wry humor, Powers has succeeded in creating an aura of personal dignity which truly belongs to man. He has likewise succeeded in recording faint voices from the depths of the human heart which reveal that God still speaks to man through the created universe and through man's moral consciousness.

Humor is basic to Powers' fiction not simply because it pervades his stories but because it is through humor, or the inner awareness of the main characters of their own contradiction, that these establish their identity with the reader in their frustrated efforts to attain their goal. Instead of the "irony of the priest's high calling and the triviality of much of his life,"[54] the

(54) Riley Hughes, What is Made of Lives," *America*, 77, June 7, 1947, p. 300.

full significance of the ironic humor in Powers' art seems to be that the whole human society feels an inner void because it does not live up to its inner priestly calling.

One over-all observation could yet be added to the conclusion of this chapter. And this observation is that Powers' artistic vision shines through certain images in his stories. These images seem to hide his intuitions of life concealed behind ordinary experiences. No single image can possibly convey Powers' idea of life completely, but the controlling images of his various stories may be said to form an artistic whole.

That his art does not stand for the blind alley of despair, but rather the secret door of hope—not the back alleys of despondency but the well-lighted streets of joy leading home—is brought out exuberantly in "Jamesie." "Losing Game" points to a door that lets in friendship and love into the human heart as salve and balm for all the wounds suffered in the losing games of life. Life may be like the door Renner opens, that leads away from the stuffiness of the barroom, from a chocking atmosphere to the freshness of pure air needed to clear one's lungs.

If the image of life in Powers' fiction is not a mountain pass leading out from a vale of tears, it may well represent a long road one must tread with a firm conviction that the promised land can be reached if one tries hard enough as Myles does. The important thing is "to be on one's feet and trying." ("Zeal.") Or could life's image be rather like a "silent tramping in the snow" counterpointed with a sweetly audible, little laughter? ("He Don't Plant Cotton.")

Life, according to Mr. Powers can yet be like day and night. Like day when it is dominated by the heat of red-cheeked anger and other passions ("The Lord's Day"). Like night when cool reason may free it, but not guide it, in pitch-darkness. Man's reason needs yet the moon's blue glow of grace and faith to see distinctly through "the feathery confusion of snowflakes smothering the whole dirty roaring guilty (world) in innocence and silence and beauty."[55]

In a concluding paragraph one may summarily re-state that Mr. Powers reveals his artistic vision through his fiction in various subtle ways. The surface lightness of the stories conveys, paradoxically, the stress of "meaning over fact" and the serious purpose of the author in his exploration of the meaning of life, through seeming trivialities. The tension between the "spirit and the flesh" propitiates, with the creation of a suitable atmosphere, for the narrow search into the moral, ambivalent nature of man. The priest-character, by reason of implied temperament and training, serves excellently as a key instrument for the presentation of "slices of life" which in their accummulative effect underscore the spiritual values of man. Finally, the key-note of Powers' fiction is humor. This humor contains light-hearted overtones of buoyant optimism and low-keyed undertones of mild irony. Powers' artistic vision contains the realistic touch of the acceptance of human limitations, but it also contains a basic confidence which urges man on to greater efforts. This compassionate and, at the same time, hopeful view of man is likewise brilliantly brought out in the various symbolic images that repeatedly appear in his stories.

(55) The quotation itself is from "The Old Bird, A Love Story" where the word "city" has been replaced by "world." The general allusion, however, refers to "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does."

CONCLUSIONS

Mr. James Farl Powers' art has been studied closely under three main headings: Characterization, Technique, and Artistic Vision. On each one of these the present thesis has substantiated his competence.

Characterization in many story writers may be a matter of an incident or two sufficient to create an illusion in the reader. With Mr. Powers, however, characterization is something which goes much deeper than the surface incident. His power of suggestiveness is great and with a few strokes he can paint a character. But ordinarily, the person selected as the protagonist carries the story in a characterization that is outstanding for its abundance of relevant details and situations, as well as for its penetrating insight. The rare and difficult achievement that is involved in character delineation appears as a specialty in Mr. Powers. *The New Yorker* says knowingly of him: "He has few rivals at creating characters with more than superficial reality."[1]

Mr. Powers has peopled his fictional world with a wide range of human types or individuals: a fraudulent salesman, a guileless ex-seminarian, jazz-playing entertainers, pool-room loafers, young and old people, an invalid and her nursing companion, new-comers with shady background and social ambitions, and, above all, priests of various characteristics living mostly in rural or suburban areas. The touch of the master is in every major characterization. Father Burner in "Prince of Darkness," Father Didymus in "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does," Myles and Mac in "The Devil Was the Joker" appear destined to give imperishable fame to the writer that conceived them and brought them into fictional life.

The author's special talent in the creation of characters is also manifested in the very name of the characters he creates. Often these names help the reader's memory in identifying them with their particular story. Some names help etymologically: Fathers Early and Eudex, Lefty (the gauche, anti-hero pitcher). Others do it ironically: Clara, Grace, Roy (nothing royal about this abject flatterer). Still other names are suggestive: McMaster (mock master), Udovic (the "you-do-it" priest). The name of Mr. Pint is picturesque, that of Mr. Newman is metaphoric. Father Didymus bears a historical reference to the Doubting Apostle. Every one of the characters is seen with specific interests and peculiar problems.

Like the true artist he is, Mr. Powers' main concern is the study of human nature. His art comprises disappointments and disillusionments, the lamentations of true sorrow and the joys of song and smile. One story may depict puzzlement before the injustice of a cold world; another may expose cruelty in an enervating invalid. The author may take a humorous peek into a

(1) Vol. 23, May 10, 1947, p. 20.

losing game where authority and old age are being questioned by youth. Or he may patiently observe a long skirmish where fraud and innocence, opportunism and integrity, degradation and self-control, wordly cunning and godly wisdom meet on ironically unequal terms. Mr. Powers' art may yet take a tender view of love in old age or make a profound analysis of an old man's troubled efforts to scale the heights of spiritual perfection. Through his penetrating insight into human nature, his admirable deftness in the presentation of what is life-like, and his wide range of characters—these investigations reveal Mr. Powers as a genuinely artistic creator, a master in Characterization.

In the chapter on Technique the various elements of story writing and their interrelation have been analyzed. It has been shown how Mr. Powers selects for his stories situations and incidents which, by the shrewd use he makes of them, display characteristics of adventure, surprise, intrigue, suspense, and self-assertiveness. These characteristics are peculiar to plot. It should be said, however, that, following the practices of contemporary short-story writing, Powers tends to avoid plot conceived as an exterior conflict. He prefers the subtle way of suggesting inner aspects of human nature to the mind of the reader. Plot, then, in all the Powers stories, tends to be hidden illusively in apparently uneventful incidents.

Structurally, these stories are outstanding for the way they achieve artistic unity. The author's method of focusing on a central character is cleverly and effectively carried out. The figures of Fathers Burner, Didymus, Udovic, Eudex, and Fabre, the boy in "The Trouble," Jamesie, Renner, Teresa, old Mr. Newman, She (the Nun-Superior in "The Lord's Day"),—all make their presence pervasive in their particular story and embody its meaning.

Time and place are also considered as elements that contribute to artistic unity. Several time units are used by Powers with equal dexterity, from a few hours to a year. The classic period of a day from morning till night, however, seems by preference to agree more with his sense of form. Place or setting in his stories is not used for sentimental purposes, but realistically, with a vividness that anchors his characters to a "real" world. Setting is mainly reduced to domestic scenes according to the demands of the story itself.

It is in theme, or the relationship between concrete detail and over-all meaning, that one must seek Mr. Powers' achievement in regard to the essential unity of his stories. His ability to absorve theme in the story is well established, whether he tackles the theme ferociously, as in "The Eye," or states it in the title, as in "An Old Bird, A Love Story," or, as most often is the case, treats it with subtlety. In every instance the incidents are logically ordered towards a desired climax without distorting character through lack of motivation. "Losing Game" has been analyzed as an illustration of how Mr. Powers manages to maintain such a close relationship between matter and form, concrete facts and root-idea, situation and theme, that the story consistently produces the "shock of delight" peculiar to artistic achievement.

Point of View in all these Powers' stories is put to use with great skill, whether it is a first person narrative or otherwise, whether it is told by a sympathetic witness or a biased narrator. The author knows how to alternate panoramic views with scenic "close-ups" for proper dramatic effects. He

solves flawlessly his problems of "psychic distance," exploring the human mind as he sees fit for the ends of the story.

Balance and Harmony have been fully considered in connection with the story "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does." Atmosphere, setting, point of view, character, plot, and theme are analyzed in their interrelations with each other and their bearing to the story as a whole. The story highly speaks for itself about the author's artistic sense of form and proportion. He handles all of those different elements with such a deftness that they all contribute harmoniously to the total impact of the story. He makes atmosphere and setting merge dramatically into the very plot through the indirect use of symbolism; he uses point of view gauging accurately the best distances required for his subjects; he fittingly relates characters, situations, and incidents to theme; he marks his style with a simplicity that includes dilating symbolism, with an objectiveness that truly creates fictional reality, with a healthy humor and vigorously human dialogue. There exists a delicately balanced integration of all these fictional elements into the story. Not one of them is felt to be stressed at the expense of the others. Structurally, they all intermingle, inextricably and unobtrusively, to form an organic whole. The over-all effect, characteristic of a true work of art, is pleasurable balance and harmony.

Briefly, Mr. Powers' technique in short-story writing is startling in its unobtrusiveness. It manifests itself in various ways. Elusive plots penetrate the stories with intriguing situations, full of invention and unexpectedness; central characters enliven, unify, and incarnate an "actual" experience; there is an expert handling of the various points of view; setting and atmosphere merge into the very plot of the story through the subtle use of symbolism. Over and above these various ways, the author evinces an uncanny ability to absorb theme in the story, an intuitive perception of form and proportion resulting in perfect balance and harmony, and a style that is firm in its ojectiveness, suggestive in its simplicity, clever in its humor, and vigorous in its dialogue. In fine, Mr. Powers shows the technique of authentic craftsmanship.

In the chapter that deals with Artistic Vision, it was shown how the concrete, seemingly inconsequential incidents of the stories yield serious interpretations which prove the high quality of the art. It was shown how his stories serve to elucidate Mr. Powers' own perception, attitude, and interpretation of life. His general view is one of hope and confidence. His recurrent theme is the inner struggle of man, the contradiction between his judgments and his actions. The selection of the priest as they key character underscores the author's intention to affirm the moral values of man and to state his belief in man's perfectibility and dignity. The stories "Zeal," "The Devil Was the Joker," "Jamesie," "The Trouble," and others have been explained as illustrations. The story "Look How the Fish Live" has been compared to "Lions, Harts, and Leaping Does," and both have been found exploring the same fundamental moral sensibility in man, although approaching it from different viewpoints. These two stories clarify Mr. Powers' moral posture in his art: on the one side there is an awareness of human limitations, on the other, there is personal effort within one's limitations.

Humor also enters in artistic vision. It is through the wry humor that impregnates these stories that Mr. Powers is particularly able to show his

deep-seated compassion for man in spite of an apparently detached coldness. The author's laughs are not contemptuous but the result of an affectionate teasing of members of one's own family. It is Mr. Powers, the man, who sees his fellow-brother in every man, who senses his possible greatness, who realizes his limitations, who believes in his fundamental goodnes.

There is, further, an over-all irony in Powers' work confronting the modern "age of anxiety." Without denying the fact that the people of this century are haunted by anxiety, Mr. Powers refuses to give in to despair. He does not feel the Great Absence of a "God grown silent"; he rather takes Him for granted and goes on with his art, actually discovering signs and intimations of divinity within man himself. He is the author who seems to have harmonized his faith perfectly with his art. He has treated his characters both with deep-seated compassion and detached reverence, respecting their personalities. He has written with fearlessness and understanding. He has written about two cities, two kingdoms, two worlds, and their influence upon each other: the temporal world with its confusing materialism and the spiritual world with its idealistic principles, each encroaching on the other in an eternal see-saw. He may at times faintly appear intent upon vilification, when inwardly one feels his belief in the possible regeneration of man.

Art for Mr. Powers is not, certainly, simply a matter of technique. His art is solidly based on a particular philosophy of life, a philosophy that holds a particular regard toward reality. He writes in a manner that takes it for granted that religious belief does not obscure artistic vision. His Catholicism is not a hindrance, but rather an asset to his art. In his search for the nature of things, he makes the admirable discovery of grace pervading man and endowing him with true goodness. If the theologian wants culture be put to the service of faith, the Catholic artist, like Powers, finds that faith does not impede his natural discovery of the world, but rather illumines it with a supernatural glow in such a way as to give to his work of art an extra quality which, far from destroying its worth, enhances it with a new value and a new life.

In a concluding statement this thesis can be said to prove that Mr. Powers has marked his stories with depth in characterization, skill in technique, and spirituality in vision. The three characteristics combine in Powers to produce a consummate artist.

January 3, 1961
412 First Avenue South
St Cloud, Minnesota

Dear Mr. Villalobos:

-I have your letter, and will try to help you find what criticism there has been of my work. A couple of years ago there was an issue of CRITIQUE devoted to my work (and Flannery O'Connor's). Several articles and a fairly complete listing of reviews of my work, plus bibliography to date. I'll look up the price and address of this publication and add it before miling off this letter:
VOL 2 NO. 2 - CRITIQUE, Box 4068 University Station Minneapolis, Minn., U.S.A. 90¢
-Since my last book (THE PRESENCE OF GRACE) was published in 1956, I have had stories published in magazines:

"The Green Banana," The New Yorker, Nov. ?, 1956
"Look How the Fish Live," The Reporter, Oct ?, 1957
"A Couple of Nights Before Christmas," The New Yorker, Dec. ?, 1957
"Wrens and Starlings," The New Yorker, May 21, 1960
"God Writes a Bad Hand," The New Yorker, Oct. 15, 1960
"Are These Our Children?" The Nation, Dec. 10, 1960

The above stories published in the New Yorker are all story-chapters, as I call them, from my forthcoming novel.
-CATHOLICS IN CONVERSATION, a book edited by Donald McDonald, pub'd by Lippincott last fall, contains a tape-recorded interview with me that may be of interest to you. There is an article on me in that standard volume on writers, the first supplement, edited by Stanley Kunitz (at the moment I can't think of the title). Otherwise I don't know of anything that isn't mentioned in the CRITIQUE issue I mention above. At least I can't think of anything else now.
-I don't know that books on short story technique and interpretation will help you much. The best book on the short story is Sean O'Faolain's (in my opinion), and the anthology edited by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate (published by Scribner's). You must remember that you can't track down the subject of the short story and cage it with words that will really contain it alive. Read the good writers, like James Joyce, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain. There are othefs, of course, but I have learned from all these. Also Ring Lardner, F. Scott Fitzgerald.
-I'm afraid I haven't time to write any more. Sincerely yours..

J.F. Powers

Mr. Carlos Villalobos
St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas

J. F. Powers

P.S. In the current issue of The Nation there is an article on comedy and tragedy by Richard Foster in which I am mentioned as a practitioner of the former — an interesting article, I think.

PUBLISHED SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS OF J. F. POWERS

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"The Lord's Day"

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"The Forks"

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"The Valiant Woman"

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"The Old Bird, A Love Story"

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Contents:

"Dawn"

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"Zeal"

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(*) Except for the entries of the years 1960-1963, this whole section is taken from George Wedge's "Two Bibliographies: Flannery O'Connor - J.F. Powers," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction,* vol. II, Nº 2, Fall, 1958, pp. 66-69. Printed with the editors' permission.

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