

Nightmare of Grace:

A Note on *Morte D'Urban*

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On the strength of two volumes of short stories the American Catholic writer J. F. Powers seemed conspicuously free of characteristic qualities of our three Catholic novelists. Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Muriel Spark. Whatever the literary merit of the novels of these three writers their work contains in different kinds of degrees the same basic quality of nightmare; their atmospheres are heavy with the macabre, the ugly, the violent, the symbolic, their plots are full of decadence and despair, and their involvement with Catholicism has a great deal of the Gothic about it. Now Mr Powers has written a novel it is possible to judge him tackling the same problems in the novel form, and *Morte D'Urban* reveals the same quiet detailed observation of spiritual life in America, a life that simmers and then explodes with nightmare. As the titles of his short story volumes show, *A Prince of Darkness* and *The Presence of Grace*, Powers is as much concerned as, say Graham Greene, with the heroic life of the Christian, and equally concerned with what makes a hero. *Morte D'Urban* with its immediate appeal to Malory seemed a puzzling but impressive novel in which the hero becomes heroic in spite of himself, and, one is tempted to say, in spite of the reader. The epigraph to the novel is a quotation from J. M. Barrie:

The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another. . . .

Hence the story of Urban, citified man, seemed to me to finish with his salvation for reasons excluded from the explicit narration of the novel, only gradually realized in terms of qualities praised in that explicit narration; in short a very ironic, compassionate, literate novel on the spiritual life which I thought I had understood.

A recent article by Saul Bellow in *Encounter*¹ served to revive the sense of puzzlement and challenge the sense of understanding. Mr Bellow has just discussed James Jones's *The Thin Red Line* and speaks of

¹Saul Bellow, *Some Notes on Recent American Fiction*, *Encounter*, November, 1963, pp.22-29.

Morte D'Urban as a very different sort of novel, 'in a peaceful sphere far removed from the explosions and disembowelings of Guadalcanal'; this in itself is very much like saying that the novels of Jane Austen are peaceful because they do not cover the Napoleonic Wars, but certainly the context of battle is lacking in the sense of Guadalcanal. Urban, Mr Bellow continues, 'a sociable and civilized priest' is transferred 'for reasons not clearly understood' from Chicago to Duesterhaus, Minnesota, where Mr Powers portrays 'the American and average character of activities whose ultimate aim is religious', with the head of the Foundation as a typical 'Mid-western American who has to run a place efficiently'. By contrast the religion of Fr Urban:

is expressed in steadiness and patience, in endurance, not in fiery strength. His resistance to the prolonged barrenness and vacant busyness of this thoroughly American Order is made in a spirit of mild and decent martyrdom.

And, Mr Bellow concludes:

A martyr's crown seems to be waiting Urban as the book ends.

After this summary, Mr Bellow added a few comments on the general nature of the novel. He points out that there is curiously little talk of souls in this book about a priest, that spiritually its quality is very thin:

Here great things will only be dimly apprehended even by the most willing servant of God. Still this seems to me unsatisfactory. . . .and I am not sure that I can bring myself to admire such meekness. A man might well be meek in his own interests, but furious at such abuses of the soul and eager to show what is positive and powerful in his faith. The lack of such power makes faith itself shadowy, more like obscure tenacity than spiritual conviction. In this sense Mr Powers' book is disappointing.

I did not remember *Morte D'Urban* like this; puzzling, subtle, even frightening but not disappointing and not in these terms, and the root of the disagreement seemed to rest upon the theological centre of the book which Mr Bellow did not find there at all. What is a hero in this context, and how is salvation achieved for Urban by the end of the book seem to be the questions that divide my understanding of the book from that of Mr Bellow. More valuably than ever in Graham Greene, Mr Powers has presented us finally with a shabby hero, a potential Prince of the Church cut down to a nonentity if one overlooks the spiritual undercurrent of the novel; in fact Urban intended to write one story but writes another. Was the fault then that Powers has written too Catholic a book or was my reading of the novel too

determinedly Catholic? I turned back to the novel with these questions in mind.

Clearly the problem, however we interpret Urban's dealings with it in *Morte D'Urban*, is how far can a practical American in an intensely materialistic age and country engage himself *successfully* in the good life. What constitutes service to God and what service to Mammon, or put another way, how far do ends justify means when the ends are so ambivalently motivated? The novel opens characteristically (as we gradually realise) with Father Urban preaching one of his successful fund-raising sermons, and in one paragraph he ranges over the accountability of priests, including the Fr Provincial, the bees which are the basis of their industry (symbolic of mechanical if highly organised and productive labour) and a demand for money. It constitutes a kind of prose epigraph in which the three strands of the problem are woven: the accountability of the priesthood to God through their superiors, the need for obedient industry, and the need for money, but the tone of the epigraph also adds the further perspective of Urban's success, and the tone of that success. At the beginning of the novel the sermon he preaches which attracts Billy Cosgrove is one which includes Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, Clement of Blois, Louis of France, Edward of England and Charles of the Holy Roman Empire 'who, you might say, owned and operated Europe' but wanted only the company of monks. This mixture is the mixture of Urban himself, and suggests what he hopes to achieve in the world. His meeting with Billy Cosgrove is described as a 'lucky' one and since it is at the beginning of the novel we perhaps miss the irony in that word. From the very beginning however we are up against the problem of leading the good life and fighting the good fight in a materialistic society in which Fr Urban's intentions seem and probably are good and heroic, and in which his taste and sensibility are undeniably attractive. Yet from the beginning too, if we miss the irony of that 'lucky' there are danger signs: the companions Fr Urban leaves to join Billy and his tipsy friends are novices 'of the better sort', Fr Urban is ashamed of the Novitiate building in which he receives Billy, and he allows Billy to use his clerical collar to get rid of a traffic cop. Fr Urban always travels first class, is annoyed with the furnishing of the new building when Billy gives them it, wants a better sort of convert, is, in fact, in an Order doomed to mediocrity of tone and mismanagement by its superiors both of which he seeks to change (he freely admits to mistakes—two of his better sort of novices turn out to be homosexuals and one a

homicide); he does the work of a dozen men:

And he still found time and energy to make friends, as enjoined by Scripture, with the mammon of iniquity.

As a man Urban is attractive, but as a priest he is a doubtful character, and it is not narrow piety which is suspicious of a priest who makes such good friends with Mammon.

The action of the book begins with the sending of this successful priest (who dines at Billy's expense in the best restaurant on champagne and shish kebab) to Duesterhaus where his talents will be wasted and there is a deficiency of good restaurants. It seems, and Billy Cosgrove is one of the first to agree, a conspicuous case of bad management, but when Mr Bellow says 'transferred for reasons not clearly understood' he has pointed up not the defect but the virtue of the device. Father Urban can understand why Jack is being sent there, but not himself. The motto of the Order is, we go where the Lord willeth, but Fr Urban characteristically doubts the Fr Provincial's ability to interpret the Lord's will correctly. That correct interpretation is something Urban and reader have to learn. Fr Urban's intentions are good; he is devoted to the glory of the Order of which he is the most successful member, and the opposition party are undeniably not moving with the times (*they* furnish the new apartments like a nuns' parlour at the turn of the century, still produce poisonous pamphlets and unpopular pious works). Yet the question remains can you be such a successful friend of Mammon and remain a servant of God? Might not Duesterhaus be God's way of saving Urban from himself? This is perhaps a limited theological view; Powers makes Urban very attractive indeed and the oleographed piety of Fr Boniface's world (seen only through Urban's eyes) very ugly, but this is surely *the* problem of the life of grace in this day and age. Thus the chapter on his translation to Duesterhaus begins with the end of a successful mission at St Paul of which we are shown only the concluding party—a pretty lively affair. The transition from this to Duesterhaus and the country round it is, as Mr Bellow rightly observes, drawn with flat, dispassionate prose. Such a country is to citified man a desolation and in desolation of that sort things can happen to citified man—women, insanity, decay. The order has a house which Fr Wilfrid characterises as a grand place but which Urban (and the reader) finds ugly, poor (indigence to Fr Urban=incompetence) and cold: a source of personal discomfort and discredit to the Order. Hand-in-hand throughout the novel Fr Urban's personal comfort and the aims of the Order are closely linked, making his attitude ambivalent if reasonable.

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As Urban surveys the scene at Duesterhaus, Powers shows us the twin influences which formed him—Mgr Morez (for whom Christianity always meant 'little Tarcisius with the Blessed Sacrament concealed in his breast pursued by government troops') and Fr Placidus (who always stayed at the best hotel instead of the presbytery and went to the Opera); the twin motives of Urban's own character. His first duty at Duesterhaus is to pose for a phony gardening photograph for the Order's magazine, after which there is no further use for his handsome presence and he has to sublimate his talents in painting the building (a job Fr Wilfrid makes a mess of); this induces an equivocal attitude of abnegation:

Seeing what he saw, and knowing what he knew, and doing nothing about it—it wasn't easy, not for him. In this way, though, if there was any purpose in his present situation, it would be revealed to them all, for better or worse. He was only one of the hands. Let the captain sail the ship. Malice might play a part in such an attitude—a desire to see the ship go down with all aboard, himself included—but wasn't it, except for that, the right attitude for one in his position? It is, however, a large exception for a priest.

The novel proceeds with a slow build-up of what we gradually perceive to be ironic detail, so thick that it is difficult to trace briefly and significantly; it is the accumulation of this kind of ironic detail as much as the direct plot line which eventually persuades one of ambivalence; that two stories are being told not one. Fr Urban attends the Poinsettia Smorgasbord where his interesting chat returns to the problem of proper authority (and a pious trouble-maker is shot down; piety always is troublesome for Fr Urban); he has a battle over a real or artificial Christmas tree and the placing of the Child Jesus in the crib, and wins over Fr Wilfrid; but it is perhaps Jack's sacrifice on the checker-board which shows greater spiritual insight, a fact which Urban perceives. Indeed this is probably his first real perception of what could have been done, and how.

The first opportunity for public success and public credit for the Order occurs when he is invited to look after St Monica's, an attractive Church, but Fr Wilfrid seems so unwilling to spare him—to keep him as a 'common workman' that Fr Urban wonders 'if he might be acting under instructions from Chicago to keep the star of the Order blacked out'; at any rate the challenging gift of a television set (Fr Urban sees himself as the Billy Graham of the Order), a private electric fire (which Urban's carelessness causes to fuse the Foundation's electricity) and

Urban's stated policy of giving 'Wilf no serious trouble, but also to lay no golden eggs for him' produce their reward. He is transferred temporarily to St Monica's and the wider world of ecclesiastical policy and public service. In the absence of the pastor (travelling for health reasons) Fr Urban livens things up with a campaign characterised by his enemies as an era of bread and circuses. The death of the pastor leaves the great question: will the Church appoint the obvious man—Fr Urban. But the Bishop does not appoint Urban (who comes from a teaching Order), offers him another job (which Urban refuses) and sends retreatants to the Hill. Meanwhile the son of a rich if wilful parishioner, Dickie Thwaites, has interested Urban in the idea of a series of cheap religious paperbacks and Urban involved in an accident (he has the use of a friend's little English sports car) has solved that problem by acquiring a golf course for the Foundation. The Order surprisingly accepts both the golf course and the publishing venture which will start with a retelling of the story of King Arthur given a Catholic twist and making Lancelot the real hero.

It might seem that Urban has not done too badly; he is worrying about Sylvia Bean (whose little sports car he uses), the Thwaites (who are rich), Dickie Thwaites's publishing venture, and the laying out of a golf course. But when he goes to give a mission at Ostergothenburg he resents the lack of hospitality (he is taken to eat in a dreary downtown café); that there is no interesting party or entertainment; that he is not treated as a celebrity by the resident priests. The climax comes when he is playing golf with the Bishop (who resents his professional game). The Bishop is thinking of taking over the Order's property and the situation is only saved when Urban is hit on the head by the Bishop's golf ball. Mr Bellow says 'even at play Fr Urban is serving his Church' and the clergy attribute the ball to God, but Fr Urban rather cherishes the idea of himself as a responsible agent of God whilst admitting that the desired effect was achieved which it might not have been: the Order keeps its property.

He spends his convalescence with the rich parishioner Mrs Thwaites on whom he makes little impression; she has in her garden a lake with an island on which is built a tower; since this island is called Belleisle we can properly see this as a reference to the Joyus Isle surrounded by a broad water where Lancelot (the greatest name of any knight) assumed the title of the knight who has trespassed and lived with the Lady Elaine (thus producing Galahad who was to occupy the siege perilous). The ball in one sense was an act of God; it slows Urban down, gives him

time to think, to worry about the Thwaites's maid, and it introduces the rapid dissolution of both *status quo* and accepted values of the novel. Billy Cosgrove arrives to take him on a fishing trip; on the way they call at the Hill where Billy is shown Brother Harold's iconographical painting and where the symbol of stag and water is explained: 'not only baptism but the other sacraments, and therefore, you might say, the Church'.

Billy is not impressed; and Urban begins to have doubts about him:

Two days and nights of close association with Billy had left Father Urban feeling anything but complacent about their relationship. More had to be done for Billy in a spiritual way than Father Urban had been doing. Fortunately, the sins of the flesh weren't the worst kind. Billy's character, however, wasn't quite what Father Urban had believed it to be. A few spoons seemed to be missing.

It is still almost as much a matter of Billy addressing him as an ordinary man as Billy living with a woman; and when Urban belatedly feels that there is too much talk of dying for the faith and that one should live for the faith, the parallel he has in mind is with Lanfranc who got two abbeys out of William the Conqueror because of his relationship with Matilda; he still hopes to make Billy pay for his sins. Yet when the crisis breaks Urban acts instinctively (though the lesson in iconography is still with us); when Billy wants to kill the swimming deer for its antlers Fr Urban turns the boat rapidly and Billy falls into the water. When he gets out he shoves Fr Urban into the lake and leaves him there. Fr Urban never sees Billy again; for Billy is not as afraid of the Church represented by an Urban as William was of the Church represented by Lanfranc. The times require more of a priest than Lanfranc's age did.

Urban swims to the shore where he is picked up by Mrs Thwaite's daughter who takes him to Belleisle and the tower on the island, but when Fr Urban rejects her advances she too abandons him and he has to swim to shore for a second time. When Mgr Renton picks him up he has not merely laid aside his clerical collar, he has lost it!

The remainder of the novel deals with Urban's illness (a combination of cold from exposure and the fatal golf ball) and his election as Provincial of the Order. In this quiet time he discusses the edition of Malory which Jack has now taken over, and particularly two points, Lancelot's suspect relationship with the Lady Elaine and the crucial relationship with Guenever:

This would have to be dealt with somehow, for it was this relationship that led to war between King Arthur and Sir Lancelot (a war fortunately nipped in the bud by the Pope), to the dissolution of the fellowship of the Round Table, to King Arthur's death, to Sir Gawaine's death, to Guenever's entering a nunnery (as a nun), and to the vocation of Sir (later Father) Lancelot.

For the children's edition 'sinful love' is amended to 'high treason' (a correct but rather sophisticated emendation) and Jack hurries gratefully on to the holiness of Father Lancelot, when the 'noblest knight of the World' took 'such abstinence that he waxed full lean'. It is no accident that the next lines, concerning Father Urban, begin: You've lost some weight.

As Lancelot after the crisis, so Urban has exchanged the public honour and success for a quieter, more private holiness.² He has crossed two potential benefactors of the Order, and after his Election (achieved without any lobbying on Urban's part) he disappoints the Order by being a most uncharacteristic Father Provincial. When Billy takes away the new building he simply transfers to the Novitiate; when they lose the Radio Programme, he is unperturbed; he appoints the men he had previously opposed (including Fr Boniface), and he cuts down the avenue of elms (concealing the fact that Fr Boniface should have had it done but was, surprising revelation at this point, too soft-hearted to do it); and the book ends with his illness slowly crippling him, thinking of the Hill at Duesterhaus as his home.

Mr Bellow's criticism is that this ending is disappointing but like the end to the life of Lancelot it is not so much disappointing as challenging. The fatal golf-ball was only one of the many reminders to Urban that living for the Faith meant more than being the brightest star of the Order. His new character is presaged in the liturgy of his Election taken from St Bernard of Clairvaux. This ceremony begins with a prayer that he be released from the condition of being 'depressed by the flesh, a prisoner to sin, blinded by ignorance, in bondage to creatures and things'; he is warned that a familiar master breeds

²A problem remains; the parallel with Lancelot is somewhat shaken by the title of the book, *Morte D'Urban*; Lancelot is the hero (i.e. the central figure) of the Malory sequence who finally brings about the *Morte D'Arthur*; it is tempting to try and work out why the book is called then *Morte D'Urban*; is Urban both Arthur and Lancelot? This remains one of the puzzles of the novel for me. I would record here my gratitude to Dr Elspeth Kennedy and Dr W. R. J. Barron for their patience in talking about Malory with me; my conclusions naturally remain obstinately my own.

contemptuous servants, and of the dangers in pockets (not in themselves evil but to be avoided as occasions of sin) and reminded that the three corners of Truth are Reason (by which we examine ourselves), Love (by which we sympathise with others) and Purity (by which we are lifted to invisible heights), of the need for prayer and of obedience to superiors; no more than any other man's life and failings, Urban's is summed up here. But the Election (in its double sense) is pertinent in the context of the novel in these terms. Urban's life ends with apparent failure to grasp opportunities and an unlooked-for and undistinguished martyrdom.

Problems still remain; the excitement of the novel stems from the fact that it tackles the problem of making friends with the mammon of iniquity. When Urban is considering the business of living for the Faith and the Church's part in history he thinks of the mistakes made (as he feels) by Clement with Henry VII and later by Pius IX who threw in his hand in a fit of righteousness:

and the Church was still trying to get back into the game. A bad mistake that, since it had left the other players at each other's mercy—and thus, had prepared the way for World War I, the Russian Revolution, Mussolini and Hitler, World War II, and now the Bomb. This perhaps ascribes too much influence to the Church; immediately afterwards he thwarts Billy and suffers the consequences not merely personally but with the whole Order; but he is motivated not simply from charity but because he felt cheap, 'like a poor slum kid who was being treated to a few days of "camp";' thus even this moment of truth is personally, socially motivated. The withdrawal from success is perhaps a spiritual success, but does it resolve the difficulty? Was Urban entirely wrong to wish to establish the teaching Order of the Clementines as an important, effective part of the religious life of America? It is part of the nightmare of grace that we go where God willeth, but the interpretation of that Will is never easy; disappointment at the end of *Morte D'Urban* is a valid response to the question asked there, but it would have been Urban's response at the beginning of the novel.