INTRODUCTION

J. F. Powers

(1917-1999)

The literary output of James Earl Powers has been small, but his wry, humorous, and highly original tales about the toils of Roman Catholic priests in the American Midwest have ensured his own niche in the history of American fiction. Powers was born in Jacksonville, Illinois, on July 8, 1917, attended Northwestern University, and subsequently worked as a book store clerk and as an insurance salesman. In 1943, three of his stories appeared in *The Catholic Worker*. He was married in 1946; he and his wife would have five children. His first collection of short fiction, *Prince of Darkness and Other Stories*, was published in 1947. Thereafter Powers supported his family by writing and occasional teaching; he also received Rockefeller and Guggenheim fellowships.

Powers' career cannot be said to have 'developed' in any traditional literary sense. The themes of *Prince of Darkness and Other Stories* are the same as the themes which run through his 1988 novel *Wheat That Springeth Green:* ecclesiastical politics and jealousies in Catholic Midwestern communities; constant anxieties within the parish about finance, furniture, and church buildings; and the apparent incongruity between a rich Old World religion and is reincarnation amidst the secular badlands of Illinois and Minnesota. The latter is indeed only an apparent incongruity, for one of Powers' themes is the universality of Catholicism, the ways in which its traditions and teachings can reemerge in even the most unlikely places.

There is, then, a strong streak of theological orthodoxy in Powers' work. 'Lions, Harts, Leaping Does,' one of the stories in his first collection, movingly describes the death of Father Didymus, a contemplative priest whose pride in his own prowess with geometrical equations must give way before the final equation of death. Similarly, in the novel *Morte d'Urban*, Father Urban Roche's worldly interests (fast sports cars and persuading Chicago businessmen to share their profits with his own comfortable parish) receive a brusque comeuppance when the bishop banishes Father Roche to a remote monastery in Minnesota. There, Roche's excessive interest in material matters is corrected. His worldly defeat is transformed into a spiritual triumph, a spiritual triumph that is ultimately accepted and welcomed.

It is, however, as a comedian of social manners that Powers is best known to the general reader. Using bathos and irony to reveal how the everyday concerns of priests tend to be no nobler than those of anyone else. Powers makes his stories humanly sympathetic and widely accessible. The title story of *Prince of Darkness and Other Stories* concerns Father Burner's desperate but frustrated desire to secure his own parish. Similarly, two of the best stories in *The Presence of Grace*, 'Death of a Favorite' and 'Defection of a Favorite,' are narrated by a cunning cat, who comments upon the low political intrigues taking place in his native rectory and who eventually casts a deciding vote in this power struggle by choosing to rub himself up against Father Malt's trouser leg.

The novel *Wheat That Springeth Green* also focuses on clashes of personality within the Catholic clergy. Here the novel's leading character, Father Joe Hackett, finds himself having to confront tough-minded mercenary priests such as Father William Stock, otherwise known as Dollar Bill. Keen to ransack his congregation for money at every conceivable opportunity, Father Stock attempts to force the idealistic young Hackett to make a 'special collection' while celebrating his first mass, an event that causes the traumatized Hackett to reexamine his relationship with ecclesiastical authority. *Wheat That Springeth Green*, like the earlier novel *Morte d'Urban*, is made up of a number of memorable scenes such as this, but the way such scenes are strung together in an episodic fashion may suggest that Powers' true strength lies in the short story rather than in the novel. Powers has a great gift for dialogue and for the comic particulars of any given situation, but he seems on less certain ground when trying to develop complex characters over a long stretch of narrative time.

Powers has also written a few stories set outside the church institutions. One of the best of these is "Tinkers," from *Look How the Fish Live*, which shows an American family traveling to Ireland to trace their ancestral roots: eventually, the family experiences nostalgia for their American home, along with a sense of alienation and displacement. Displacement in its more general form is, in fact, one of Powers' central themes. His characters never seem quite at home, never quite fully integrated within the landscapes into which they have been inserted. This displacement reflects the Christian paradox of men caught between two modes of being, the secular and the sacred.

Powers writes from within the Church, and has much to say about the different philosophical positions and internal tensions within American Catholicism during the second half of the twentieth century. As an author, he is generally very well respected--*Morte d'Urban* earned for him the National Book Award--although he is not as well-known as he would have been if he had been more prolific or more interested in self-promotion. His apparent inability to create substantial female characters is another barrier to a wider audience. Some readers enjoy Powers simply as a satirical humorist, and it is certainly true that he is more than simply a "Catholic writer" in the narrow sense of that term. In his assiduously realistic depiction of life in the American Midwest, and in his analysis of the perennial dialogue between human idealism and worldly frustrations, Powers has created his own unique and memorable fictional world.

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