

American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics. Paul Giles.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

ONE: Methodological Introduction - Tracing the Transformation of Religion

Catholicism -- "as a residual cultural determinant"-- continues to be significant "as an ideological force within modern American literature, film, and photography." [1]

"... religious ideas can help to determine patterns of thought. [1]

Eliot viewed religion as "part of the consciousness of some writers who had rejected its more explicit premises." [3]

"... routing and instructive patterns of behavior." [3]

Althusser: ideology "functions as a latent force which radically affects human perceptions" - "... his or her mode of implicit thought and behavior which is everyday life." [3]

"interpellation": the human subject is constituted as a 'subject' of a larger ideological matrix. [3]

I.e., "the crucifix was a ubiquitous image in eighteenth-century France, even for those who did not meditate consciously upon its meaning." [3]

"... analyze the internal consistency of Catholic culture and its power to shape thought in the world." [5]

Norman Stone: "... contemporary political arguments can be traced back to religious traditions implicit within societies for hundreds of years..." (i.e., Reformation and Counter-Reformation). [6]

"... a recognition of the ways in which this residual religious force operates is crucial for an understanding of the complexity of modern literature and indeed the modern world." [6]

Geertz: Religious belief as "a prior acceptance of authority which transforms [that] experience." [7]

Catholic anthropology... works toward patterns of analogy and universalizing conformity and ritual." [8]

Transformationist theories: Feuerbach, Marx, James Fraser, Joyce, Weber, Durkheim, Ricoeur, Berger, Luckmann.

Weber: "the transformation of theology into social anthropology." [12-13]

"Because Christianity continues to exert a powerful social and psychological charge even if its theological premises are ignored, any critic who seeks to dismiss religion as irrelevant to contemporary material concerns runs the risk of making an erroneous analysis of the forces currently governing society." [13]

“... cultures of Catholicism usually operate in a much more relaxed and playfully ironic fashion that foreseen in Durkheim’s angst-ridden modernist idiom.” [15]

“... ‘Catholic’ writers and artists, as individuals, have generally tended to be less anxious than Reformists about the status of their own religious beliefs.” – “Protestantism foregrounds the importance of free choice, individual conscience, and individual belief, while Catholicism places more emphasis upon (religious or artistic) tradition which necessarily incorporates and objectifies the individual, with his or her own particular attitude toward that tradition being of secondary importance.” [15]

“... while Protestantism chooses to emphasize conscious belief, Catholicism stresses altogether vaguer conceptions of ‘the Faith.’” [15]

Jonathan Rabam on the significance of Margaret Thatcher’s Methodism informing her economic ideas. [18]

“... the focus here will be upon how different writers and artists refract their religious heritage in different ways: pluralism is all.” – “... to examine how affairs of the spirit are also necessarily grounded in material culture.” [21]

“... moving toward... an explication of some of those structures of thought that have become hidden or latent within modern American writing.” [21]

“... to demonstrate how these patterns of cultured Catholicism recur across texts in a variety of media... and so to reveal how a secularized form of religious consciousness has become implanted within twentieth-century American art.” [21]

“The good writer does not follow rigidly any prescribed pattern of thought, religious or otherwise, but instead reveals a cultural heritage in ‘unexpected combinations’... thereby defying the conceptual reification of theologians and philosophers, and demonstrating how individual sensibilities manifest themselves amid the particular quirks and idiosyncracies of human experience.” [22]

“... Kerouac or Mary McCarthy or indeed Flannery O’Connor can reveal more about the Catholic experience in the United States than many wearisome issues of *The Catholic Digest*.” [23]

“The most interesting writers... always manage to imply a complex world whose ramifications expand beyond the limitations of one individual author’s vantage point.” [24]

They avoid the “deadweight of premature thematic closure.” [24]

“... some complex and interesting ‘Catholic’ writers in American have received less than their critical due because they are alleged not to fit in with this mythical ‘mainstream’ of Protestant romanticism.” [25]

“... it is important to recognize that not all American literature conforms to the premises of the Emersonian tradition.” [25]

“... fictional art can show us where religious sensibility lingers and manifests itself in less obvious, even strange and unpredictable ways.” [25].

“... to apprehend those silent areas where religion flies free of rigid conceptual pigeonholes and begins exerting pressure in a more intangible fashion seems a more interesting and valuable task.” [26]

Giles seeks to avoid the two potential hazards of overgeneralization and reductivism. [26]

“Evidently, it is necessary here to beware that individual texts are not violently wrenched or distorted to fit some abstract, synoptic account of ‘Catholic’ cultural patterns.” [26]

But Giles notes “the centrality of analogy to Catholic modes of thought.” [27]

“... the Catholic doctrine of *analogia entis*, with its insistence upon substantive links between heaven and earth, reveals itself through the elaborate networks of intercession that bind the Catholic faithful to an invisible world through emphasis upon saints, departed souls, transubstantiation, and so on.” (cf. Peter Berger) [27]

David Tracy: “... a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference.” [28]

“... this predilection for analogy reveals itself, often in obscure ways, within the form and style of modern ‘Catholic’ literary works.” [28]

“... aspects of creative similitude.” [28]

“... to conceive of a long tradition of American Catholic fiction, where texts analogically intersect and shed light upon each other, compositely forming a critique of some of the dominant modes and patterns within the American literary consciousness.” [28]

“... analogy as... a trope of fictional style.” [28]

“... because American Catholicism is a minority culture, there is less temptation toward any form of proselytizing or delusion that the Catholic discourse in the United States is the only language available.” [29]

“... Catholics exert pressure toward the recognition of similarity, analogy, universalism.” [29]

“The purpose is rather to analyze texts in terms of a wider cultural pattern, to indicate how cultural materials affect artistic composition in ways the author would probably not recognize, and hence to elaborate the unconscious sediment of artistic production.” [30]

PART ONE: OLD ICONS IN A NEW LAND

TWO: Stereotypes, Inheritances, and Immigrants

Catholic empires bounded the U.S. from the start; thus, Spanish and French influences. But also “a great deal of residual hostility toward Catholicism” especially in New England. [35]

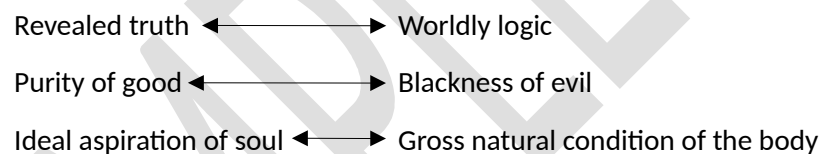
The Puritan interpretation of American history in terms of biblical typology “is something quite alien to American Catholic modes of thought.” [36]

“For Aquinas, the world was a concrete and natural entity, not a typological narrative.” – “... the natural world would offer proof of God’s existence, but the erratic events of worldly history could not.” [36]

“... certain tendencies in the American Puritan manner that distinguish it from Catholic alternatives.” [37]

- Focus on the individual’s relationship with God, eliminating intermediaries; [38]
- Demand for free movement toward belief, rather than obedience to authority; [38]
- Grace involving upheaval, “whereas Catholics saw grace as inhering naturally within the material world;” [38]
- “... apocalyptic temper so alien to a Catholic experience;” [38]
- “... ontological division between spirit and matter that Puritan discourse could hope to bridge only by the violent energy of a conversion experience or by the tortuous rhetoric of apocalypse.” [38]

Essential fissure between spirit and matter: [39]



“... what radically changed both the internal structure of American Catholicism and external attitudes toward the Church was immigration.” [40]

American Catholicism as an urban phenomenon, contrasted with the Puritan pastoral imperatives; a religion of the masses, rather than of any social elite. [41]

Tocqueville’s companion, Gustave de Beaumont, “contrasted Protestant and Catholic congregations by remarking that while the Protestants generally originated from the same social rank or class, the Catholic parishes received indiscriminately persons of all conditions in society.” [41]

Tocqueville: “Protestantism... was designed to foster independence, whereas Catholicism stressed human equality.” -- “Reducing all the human race to the same standard, it confounds all the distinctions of society at the foot of the same altar.” [41]

Social class as a purely secular category. [41]

“... social superiority does not in any sense betoken ethical or spiritual superiority.” [42]

“... the Catholic tendency to ignore liberalization programs signifies a more general lack of faith in the American dream of an earthly paradise.” [43]

Something a spirit of *contemptus mundi* permeated nineteenth-century American Catholicism: "The idea of human progress, like the idea of social class, was seen as a chimera liable to deflect attention away from more eternal goals." [43]

Critics perceived Catholics as "enmeshed in un-American pessimism," and "expressed doubts about the undemocratic constitution of the church itself." [44]

"... uneasiness about sinister if not subversive foreign influences." [44]

Catholics were also "thought to be devious and dishonest, in contrast to the Puritan paradigm of a straightforward plain-dealing people." [45]

Henry James's favorite antitheses: Old World / New World – corruption vs. innocence.

"Catholicism becomes almost inescapably associated with Old World patterns of Machiavelli's corruption and guileful behavior." [45]

Eighteenth century stereotype of Catholics: "poor, lazy, ignorant, undemocratic, devious, psychologically intemperate, sexually perverse, and often drunk." [46]

Cf. Whitman and Thoreau, who contrasted Catholicism and self-reliance. [46]

Thoreau's romanticism "can be seen to emerge in a direct line from the Puritan temper of the early settlers." [47]

"... a Puritans were agreed upon the need to distance themselves from the mediating systems established by Rome and hence to purify the relationship between individual man and his God." [47]

American pastoral myth as symbol of this project in "the language of romantic individualism." [47]

But this myth "is antipathetic to a Catholic sensibility, which tends more to foreground conceptions of philosophical analogy, human similitude, and social order." [48]

"As rural life occupied no especially privileged place within the American Catholic consciousness, its description caused no particular sense of loss." [48]

"WASP groups have always fondly imagined themselves in imminent danger of being usurped by industrial development, immigration, war, or whatever, just as Catholic groups have happily invented the fiction of their own marginalization and inefficacy." [49]

This self-definition by opposition served purposes for both Protestants and Catholics. [50]

The "Catholic myth of passive impotence, then, was the inverted correlative of that Protestant myth of active epics." [50]

"... each myth depends on the other." [50]

“The emphasis within traditional Catholic thought on a preexistent, objective world has ensured a profound incompatibility between Catholic aesthetics and the romantic view that art might involve some new type of knowledge.” [51]

“The radical divergence between these different aesthetic and philosophical positions sets the framework for the quandaries and ambiguities of the American Catholic intellectual tradition.” [51]

Giles contends that this American Catholic intellectual tradition has been obscured because it rejects “the traditional American equation of intellectualism as ‘questioning’ or ‘nonconformity.’” [52]

“... seeing institutions as per se corrupt and a threat to the life of the mind.” [52]

THREE: Transcendentalism and ‘Catholicity’ – Orestes Brownson

While Thoreau was hostile to the systems of Catholicism, Emerson “was – in abstract terms, at least – attracted by a notion of how individuality might intersect with some form of universal design.” [54]

But for Emerson, “those correspondences and analogies that might bind the universe into an ideal form were made up of invisible threads, not visible phenomena.” [54]

Newman would later insist that “the root of all controversies between Catholicism and Protestantism’ lies in ‘whether it is of the essence of the church to be visible.’” [54]

“Emerson’s style of transcendent vision bears more relation to the absent God of Protestant hermeneutics than to the sacramental materialism of Catholic thought.” [54]

“Emerson’s discourse fits with tradition of American Protestant poetics that revolves upon an axis of conceptual dualisms: realist versus idealist, logical versus transcendent, visible versus invisible.” [55]

The Protestant tradition “posits a fallen and fragmented material world that can (possibly) be reconciled into an idealized, abstract unity only through the medium of some extraordinary prophetic power.” [55]

“For Winthrop, Emerson and Whitman: “since God has withdrawn from the experiential world, the only possible way to bridge the vast chasm between matter and spirit is through the offices of prophecy.” [55]

In Catholic discourse, “the analogical potential of any given object as not dependent upon the gaze of some prophetic seer who might be able to endow it with an ideal status.” [55]

“Analogy... is a brute material fact.” [55]

“... Catholic poetics characteristically make analogy much more of a visible and material affair.” [56]

E.g., “Kerouac is not so interested in elucidating the abstract shape of an overall idealist design as he is in revealing what he takes to be the ‘grace’ inherent within this mundane object” (e.g., bus stations). [56]

“... transubstantiative power...” resides in the actual material objects, not within some ideal structure. [56]

Brownson challenged the “pattern of Emersonian idealism.” [56]

He opted for visible rather than invisible analogies.” [57]

His doctrine of communion “asserted that man needs to communicate with the objective world of family, society, nation, in order fully to realize his latent humanity.” [57]

Church = “in some sense a continuation of the Incarnation.” [57]

He rejected “the exclusively subjectivist proclivities of romanticism and transcendentalism.” [58]

“He insisted that great writers emerge naturally out of their community” – *contra* Emerson’s notion of the scholar as “a solitary soul.” [58]

“... strange hybrid of American individualism and religious conformity.” [59]

Brownson’s concern was for “‘all men, especially of the poorer and more numerous classes,’ and he found the universalist sympathies of ‘Catholicity’ to be more in keeping with this broad aim than either transcendental exclusivism or Unitarian elitism.” [60]

For Brownson, “only the democratic impulse of Catholicity, which neglects social distinctions and treats all human beings equally, could respond to the democratic energies of the new American Republic.” [60]

“... the grace of the Catholic Church knows no temporal boundaries.” [60]

“The enduring theme of his later works is how ‘Catholicity’ is entirely compatible with human individuality, worldly reason, and social progress.” [62]

Brownson: “The Catholic faith is the reconciler of all opposites” – authority/liberty, grace/nature, faith/reason – “because in all these cases one side of the equation operates in a quite distinct sphere of activity from the other.” [63]

“... human beings are autonomous and independent when it comes to affairs of this earth.” [63]

Brownson found the same error in the Confederacy that he found in Protestantism. [64]

He sought to reconcile Protestant individualism with Catholic communion – which led to conflict with Jansenist American Catholic clerics. [64]

“Catholic” as “universal, all-embracing.” [65]

Giles sees Dulles’s book as bearing “marked similarities to Brownson’s philosophy.” [65]

Brownson's overall significance in American Catholic fiction "lies precisely in the way he reinterprets the Old World through a New World perspective." [67]

"... emphasis on the importance of community: -- as Aquinas had viewed salvation as a communal enterprise. [67]

With Tate, Lowell, Porter and Percy, Brownson "is concerned with the ways in which the teachings of Catholicism stand as a challenge to the limitations of secular and 'Protestant' thought." [69]

All these writers are converts, for whom Catholicism "constitutes (as it were) a superego rather than an id." [69]

There is another American Catholic tradition (Santayana, Fitzgerald, Farrell, O'Hara, Barthelme) "wherein religion operates as a more subliminal force dictating patterns of thought and behavior." [70]

Brownson acknowledged that "Catholic literature should emerge 'freely and spontaneously' as the expression of a broadly based, habitual Catholic atmosphere." [70]

Brownson's own novels, though, fall short - they remain essentially romantic and transcendentalist, with himself being "always the hero of his own narratives." [70]

The Spirit-Rapper, e.g., "is populated not with people or places of substance but with such predictably thin conceits as..." [71]

"... Brownson's invective originates only in his own mind and is then simply projected upon the external lineaments of his stock fictional types." [71]

In Brownson's inflexibility "there is also something more puritanical than Catholic." [72]

Guittou: the essence of Protestantism lies in its purity. [72]

Catholicism "accepts a provisional combination of the pure and impure" - "It is afraid of disturbing the indwelling presence of the good by detaching it too soon from the less good, and even the evil, which are bound up with it." [73]

Brownson's fiction lacks "that sense of provisionality and compromise." [73]

Brownson's rationalistic mind demanded "the matching of the idea with historical reality." [73]

Brownson's value lies "in that it shows up the limitations of Emerson's universalist pretensions and reveals the narrow ideological basis of the transcendentalist movement." [73]

FOUR: Nineteenth-Century Myths of Catholic Europe

Brownson and Hecker's Catholicity was not intimately connected with any geographical place, as it was for most immigrant Catholics. [76]

Many nineteenth-century American Protestant writers were obsessed with Catholic Europe. [76]

"... both attraction and repulsion...": "aesthetic thrills but also, potentially, a dangerous moral escapism." [77]

A pervasive and “clear-cut division between America and Europe” – “Puritan America opposing the ardent charms of southern Europe.” [84]

“The crucial distinction here is between a Catholic universal vision, where every part of the world interpenetrates every other part, as opposed to a more atomistic (or allegorical) Puritan idiom where reason is divorced from transcendent truth and so can create only its own closed circle.” [85]

“For Aquinas, no part of the world can be closed off from any other part. In the sectarian outlook of Calvin, however, language is split off from divine being, just as the city of man exists in a state of fundamental disjunction from the city of God.” [85]

“While the language of Aquinas works to bring things together, the language of Calvin works to keep things distinctly apart.” [85]

INCOMPLETE