Prophet Philosopher

The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age (in three volumes),
by Marion Montgomery. LaSalle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden & Co.
Volume Two: Why Poe Drank Liquor (1983)

Marion Montgomery’s trilogy is an ambitious, indeed audacious, assessment of the social, political, literary, religious, and philosophical temper of the Western world since the Renaissance. The work is ambitious in its scope, focusing primarily on three American fiction-writers but also treating, sometimes at length, Western figures from Hesiod to T. S. Eliot, with hundreds in between. The audacity lies both in the scope of the work and in Montgomery’s penetrating, confident judgment of the works and figures he discusses.

Gerhart Niemeyer (in Center Journal, Spring 1983) calls the trilogy “a meditation, a sensitive man’s experiential journey,” noting that Montgomery’s examination of literacy and political ideologies and false consciousness, with the main focus on American aberrations, fills a gap left vacant in studies by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Jonas, Henri de Lubac, and Eric Voegelin. Perhaps the best way to describe the nearly fifteen hundred pages of the study is with the metaphor of a journey, a metaphor Montgomery himself uses to illustrate his approach to his subject: “In the pages that follow, I undertake a long journey in pursuit of the human heart and mind, at considerable hazard to myself and with some danger to the reader who may choose to accompany me” (I, 1).

In the service of truth (not of scholarship, a university, or a thesis), Montgomery takes his readers “considerably beyond the usual limits of literary criticism” (I, 5). He eschews “that strict, objective detachment still generally expected of the critic,” a detachment that ignores the heart’s knowledge, among other things, and hence is a kind of blindness, a detachment from existence (I, 11). Like Flannery O’Connor, whose mind and heart, faith and reason, were informed by Christian orthodoxy, Montgomery sees the world, history, and literature with a fullness of vision, assessing what he sees by the light of his faith.

Ultimately St. Thomas Aquinas is the chief guide in Montgomery’s journey through modernity’s aberrant wasteland, though Montgomery frequently calls upon others to shed light along the way. For example, in Volume Two, which reveals Poe and Heidegger as forerunners of twentieth-century atheistic existentialism, Montgomery utilizes the work of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin: he brings their thought to bear on Heidegger’s philosophy. Along with Aquinas, Strauss, and Voegelin, impressive figures from antiquity to the present accompany Montgomery on this reflective journey through ancient and modern disorders toward order and right reason: Aristotle,

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Examples of these excursions in O'Connor's fiction are Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away*, Julian in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and Huiga in *Good Country People*. Rayber, hopeful of human perfection by means of unaided reason and contemptuous of "superstition" (read religion), is an Enlightenment thinker, the intellectual offspring of Voltaire and the eighteenth century encyclopedists (see chapter XII for Montgomery's discussion of Rayber). Julian and Huiga, enlightened devotees of alienation and nihilism, are children of existentialism (chapter IV). And it is possible to see Hazel Motes as a Nietzschean country boy, as Montgomery does in chapters XXVII and XXVIII.

Montgomery emphasizes that O'Connor's fiction is not regional or "local color" literature. True, she wrote about Southern people and places, and about the fundamentalist Protestant religion of the South, but she was concerned with universal themes, with the heart and head of all men. Original Sin, grace, and manners, to name a few of her concerns, are not peculiar preoccupations of Southern folk, though one must admit, as O'Connor did, that the history of the South, particularly the memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the South's "older religiousness," to use Richard Weaver's phrase, have made Original Sin, grace, and manners more part of the stock-in-trade of the South than of any other region in the United States. Montgomery, herself a Southerner, is keenly aware of the uniqueness of the South's history and religion, but in his examination of the South and Southern fiction—Faulkner's, and especially O'Connor's—he stresses qualities which are common to all men.

More than most authors, Flannery O'Connor shed light on the purpose, subject, and technique of her fiction. Her remarks in *Mystery and Manners* and in *The Habit of Being* (a collection of her letters edited by Sally Fitzgerald) should guide the reader into the marrow of her stories. The latter book was published too late to be of use to Montgomery, but he capitalizes on the guidance available in *Mystery and Manners*. O'Connor...

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The Intercollegiate Review—Fall 1989
nor said the subject of her fiction was "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." But her audience for the most part did not believe in the existence of divine grace and a supernatural devil. Because of the unbelief and ignorance, the uncertainty and indifference of her audience, she shocked them into belief with the grotesque or teased them out of their indifferences with mysteries. Says Montgomery: "Sometimes she takes mischievous delight in outraging a reader so that he may be stirred up about the abiding questions of human existence" (I, 141).

O'Connor's fiction can be read with pleasure and fascination without an understanding of ancient and modern theology and philosophy. It is not necessary to comprehend her symbols and allusions to appreciate her stories: she is a superb story-teller. But if one needs or desires a guide to her fiction, if one wants to get at the deeper treasures and see how her fiction reflects the world, Montgomery, who has a sharp eye for both the physical detail and the metaphysical activity in her romances, is an excellent guide.

Poe's Dark Vision

All three volumes of the trilogy examine man's attitude toward and address to being and Being. The overall theme of the work, says Montgomery, is the question, "What is Being?" (II, 324). The second volume scrutinizes Poe's ontology, his address to finite and infinite being. Poe preferred dreams—or dreams within dreams—to reality, nothingness to being. His diction, poetry, and literary philosophy influenced nineteenth and twentieth century fiction-writers, poets, and philosophers. His influence on some of the Symbolist poets of France (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry) is probably the most remarkable case in point. One can see that he was a forerunner of modern "advanced" thinking by noting his themes, his obsessions: alienation, darkness, death, vacuity, horror, and annihilation. Allen Tate, citing Poe's cosmology in Eureka, wondered "why the modern proponents of the Big Bang hypothesis of creation have not condescended to acknowledge Poe as a forerunner" (II, 175).

From Poe's work Montgomery gathers that Poe not only saw a dark and dismal world but desired to be consumed utterly by his dark vision. Through the dark regions of his imagination, or—to apply Coleridge's distinction between the imagination and the Fancy, as Montgomery does throughout the trilogy—through the dimmer regions of his fancy, Poe sought the infinite, the absolute.

To his mind, the journey led to "inevitable annihilation" or to "nothingness" (II, 124). In order to get to this fancied nothingness, Poe skipped over being and the creation. He had to take what Montgomery likens to a large leap of faith, a leap over several not-easily-ignored elements of existence: the world of matter as it is perceived by the senses; all personality, even consciousness, except his own; and man's ordinary understanding of words—those brittle handles with which we attempt, with varying degrees of success, to grasp being and approach Being.

In Montgomery's work Poe's views of language, the mind, and matter are variously related to secular and religious existentialism and to other modern ways of looking at and explaining the world. Montgomery compares Poe with Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, even with men whose writings served to set the stage for modern thought: Descartes, Kant, Bacon, and Locke, to name a few. To under-
stand Poe. Montgomery suggests, is to understand the modern world and why much is amiss in that world. In our confused, alienated, and decadent world, we see—in frightening, perhaps unparalleled stages—the destruction of being in abortion, death camps, and terrorism, the desecration of being in sodomy and militant feminism, the desacralization of being in materialism, positivism, secular humanism, and behaviorism, and a general seeking of power over being in political, scientific, and advertising experiments. Montgomery and his guides expose many of these distortions of being, distortions which spring from “the gnostic desire for power over being.” Borrowing terms from Eric Voegelin, Montgomery describes the gnostic spirit’s attack on being, its attempt to remake the world:

Power over being is spirit willfully divorced from creation, isolated from the metaxy of reality, the In-Between, so that it may be focused by concentration, like a laser beam, upon the remnant of reality supposed to remain after the divestment. That remnant is to be transposed by force...the gnostic must now allow an attempt at ordinate love of creation, the reincarnation of the particular spirit and the world. For that would be to abandon power over being. That would be to become what Voegelin says the true philosopher must, a lover of being in all its manifestations, not its “director.” (II, 25-26)

Man has taken many wrong turns since the Creation, the first one being that proud turning away from God which led Adam and Eve out of Eden. Montgomery traces intellectual disorders back to their origin; he seeks to find out where thought went astray. One major wrong turn in our history, he declares, along with Josef Pieper, Jacques Maritain, and Etienne Gilson, occurred in the late thirteenth century when faith and reason were separated by debaters at the University of Paris, despite St. Thomas’ attempts at mediation (II, 52-54). Another wrong turn occurring in the next century (and opposed by St. Thomas’ Realism) was William of Ockham’s Nominalism, which denied “the reality of the spiritual world,” diminishing the spiritual to mere names (II, 18). These wrong turns have become cultural inheritances which, in the popularly “educated” imagination, utterly separate our world from transcendent values and spiritual realities. Divorces of this magnitude will produce a preoccupation with alienation and annihilation, such as we see in Poe.

Montgomery believes Thomism would do much to lead modern man back to the right track, to steer him away from the Manichean and gnostic spirit of the age. To see the world as St. Thomas did, or as that “prophetic poet” and Thomist Flannery O’Connor saw it, leads not to the abyss, the end of Poe’s journeying, but to the ground of our being—the great I AM THAT I AM. Attention to Thomism will not resolve all the mysteries with which Poe wrestled, but it will assist in bringing faith and reason, nature and grace, and man and God closer together.

Hawthorne’s Haunted Condition

In the third volume Montgomery continues the journey, giving much of his attention to New England’s Puritans (John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, for examples) and to Puritan thought gone awry in Benjamin Franklin’s moral calculus and business ethic, in Unitarianism, and, strange to say, in Walt Whitman—“an early prophet of extended Protestantism” (III, 235)—and in Emerson, one of America’s most famous anti-Christian, gnostic heroes. In feisty theological discussions Montgomery turns the tables on the Puritans, accusing them of the very heresies with which they lambasted Catholics and Anglicans. Hawthorne is the central figure in this volume, and there are chapters devoted to the development of the grotesque in Western literature. John Locke’s influence on America’s social and political thought, Henry James’s concern with manners, Eric Gill’s views of art, craftsmanship, and the community, and Nathanael West’s cynical despair.
Looking at the sage of Conford with Hawthorne's and his own eyes, Montgomery finds Emerson "a locus in whom is collected and from whom disseminated more widely than we might think, those floating spores of Enlightenment thought we yet daily breathe to our continuing discomfort" (III, 24). Montgomery questions the wisdom of Emerson's disregard of history, tradition, memory, consistency, historical Christianity, evil, and sin: he is uneasy with Emerson's celebration of the present, of impulse, of possibility, of self-salvation, of self-delication, and of the great soul's power over nature and other souls. T. S. Eliot had misgivings concerning Emerson's "great man" philosophy:

The lengthened shadow of a man
Is history, said Emerson
Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.

Montgomery, too, has misgivings. He notes that Emerson seemed to be blind to the possibility of other unsavory "great men":

We must note that Emerson, in praising institutions as the establishments of individual men, cites Jesus, Luther, Wesley as such men. Within the climate of such thought as Emerson establishes, however, we must note as well that a Stalin or a Hitler find justification, as shocking as such additions to Emerson's list of 'great men' may appear. (III, 35)

Montgomery's examination of Emerson reveals the dangers of the sage's deviations from common sense and Christianity. This is an examination the academy and the popular mind would do well to attend to.

Hawthorne emerges from this study a much healthier patient than Emerson. He identified and sympathized with his brother man, whether that man were an old apple dealer or a runny-nosed English orphan. He feared egocentrism and Faustian ambitions (old sins now grown epidemic), he was keenly aware of such world-old facts as suffering, evil, and man's fallibility; and he viewed pride as the chief sin of mankind: "Hawthorne," Montgomery observes, restored to us a recognition of pride as the father of human spiritual death. Pride is perverted love in his view, as it is in Dante's categories—a love turned from its proper ways inward upon the self" (III, 258). Hawthorne was sensible of certain world-old facts and said "Not in thunder," as Melville so aptly put it, to the kind of thinking characterized by Emerson's blind, thoughtless, optimistic Transcendentalism.

Yet Montgomery believes Hawthorne's Puritan heritage and his Christ-haunted rather than Christ-centered condition made him a melancholy romancer who did not achieve the status of a full-orbed "prophetic poet" (III, 261). Even so, Hawthorne has a much more wholesome vision and poetic than, say, James and Poe. Because he was more sensible of spiritual realities than Henry James was, Montgomery, following T. S. Eliot, regards "Hawthorne as [a] more fundamental realist than James" (III, 264). And Hawthorne's imaginative writings are more substantial than Poe's fanciful productions because Hawthorne respects spiritual realities and gives attention to those historical realities of time and place. Montgomery frequently remarks Flannery O'Connor's affinity with Hawthorne, noting that both fiction-writers are realists of distances: their writings bear witness to two worlds, one of time and the other of eternity.

In a key chapter of Why Hawthorne Was Melancholy, "The Loss of Middle Earth," Montgomery comments on the disappearance of transcendent vision in the Western

The Intercollegiate Review—Fall 1989
imagination, a disappearance which prompts the realist of distances to write his vision in boldface type. We note this boldface type in Hawthorne's allegories and in O'Connor's freaks and grotesques. What country do Hawthorne and O'Connor call us back to in their outlandish romances? Why, to Middle Earth:

The prophetic poet . . . feels forced to the extremes of his art by an awareness that his audience has been gradually dispossessed of that country of the imagination within which wonder and awe and complex delight are the high responses that may rescue one at last from intramundane entrapment . . . Of old, that country of Middle Earth was one where the poet could sojourn more or less comfortably with his elected audience, whether in popular ballads or old romances like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight or in intellectual romances that rescued Middle Earth explicitly to the transcendent, such as The Divine Comedy. It had been an undoubted country, one in which mind and heart; reason and feeling, were companionable, a country existing somewhere between the ineffable transcendent and that natural world which the senses constantly spoke. But it became a country dissolved under the empirical and rational purges of being, till it seemed quite faded into a "light of common day" to such saddened eyes as William Wordsworth's as he emerged from the eighteenth century. (III, 391-92)

Montgomery's Philosophic Habit

In The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age, Marion Montgomery is a prophetic critic calling his readers back to known but forgotten truths, namely that man still lives in Middle Earth; that spiritual concerns are compatible with realism in literature; that reason and imagination are gifts which should be ordainedly exercised in life, faith, and art; that ideas have consequences; that intellectual errors should be traced to their root in time and place; that being should be celebrated rather than subjugated; that this world is not so far away from its Father, and nature from grace, as many suppose; that piety and openness toward creation are the proper responses to existence. These truths have been obscured by that Satanic provincialism, rooted in pride, which asserts that the mind is its own place, and the self the "creator of what it discovers"—all for the sake of restructuring "reality to the mind's desire" (III, 13, 71).

Montgomery is an acute observer of existence (of the past, of books, men and events), and he has reflected on what he has seen. He has the poet's gift of seeing likenesses in unlike things: Ralph Nader as "our decade's Billy Sunday" (III, 217). Puritans and Positivists as "kissing cousins in the family of Western thought" (III, 278), and the home-grown rationalists, prophets, and existentialists in O'Connor's fictional country as local reflections of European thinkers. He combines the philosophic habit of mind with the fiction-writer's attention to detail. This enables him to see that everywhere the concrete, the particular, the regional illustrate
the general, the universal, the cosmopolitan. Since Montgomery is concerned with seeing the world as a whole, his work has something to do with the front porch, the local bar, the academy, the marketplace, the senate, as well as with literary and philosophical works and ideas.

One reviewer has called Montgomery's work preaching. Well, in certain respects it is, but it is preaching of the reflective sort, centered by Christian orthodoxy and expressed with inclination, with judgments arising from authority and wide-ranging experiences. Montgomery has the strong convictions of a prophet and yet a careful scholar's humility in the presence of multifaceted, complex subjects. He actively follows arguments wherever they lead, refusing to presumptuously force a pat thesis upon either his subject or his readers. This inquisitive trait accounts for the length of the work and explains the significance of the title of Gerhart Niemeyer's Center Journal review: "Why Marion Montgomery Has to Ramble."

Montgomery's style is sometimes difficult (long sentences with numerous subordinators and careful distinctions), and so are many of the ideas treated in the work. Except for the lengthy bibliography, there is no formal documentation. A glossary of frequently used literary, theological, and philosophical terms would be useful to readers unfamiliar with these disciplines. Despite these difficulties, The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age will repay reading by yielding insight into the men, books, and events which have shaped modern Western thought and culture.

In Leisure: The Basis of Culture, Josef Pieper observes that philosophy has always been connected to wonder and to hope, has always sprung from humility, not pride. It is, he notes, the loving search for wisdom, an act and exercise of piety, born of wonder of the creation. This, of course, is philosophy at its best. One can find this kind of philosophy in Marion Montgomery's trilogy.

151, together with the University Press of America, is now publishing Marion Montgomery's Virtue and Modern Shadows of Turner, to be available in January 1990.

Illustrations

P. 48 The Art Hall (erected 1869), Cincinnati Wesleyan College for Young Women, c. 1876. All illustrations are from various books of the Dover Pictorial Archive Series.