The fictional five: of life and death, eloquence and silence

by KENNETH JOHN ATCHITY

Death and rebirth, the insufficiency of speech and the security of silence, time and solitude—these are themes shared by the nominees for the Times 1980 Book Prize in the fiction category. All five novels explore the interlacing patterns of human life, what one author calls "the weirdness," another "the tapestry." They show us the richness of our experience in the shadow of instantaneous death, reminding us of the Spanish saying: "Life is short but wide." They also reaffirm the ancient observation that what matters is not so much things as what we think of things.

Chances are, as I'm writing and you're reading, Joyce Carol Oates is at her typewriter. **Bellefleur** (Dutton) is, by my count, her 33rd book—an immense narrative spanning six generations of an imaginary Adirondack family. Until its destruction, Bellefleur Manor dominated "the southeastern shore of remote Lake Noir, some 35 miles north of the Nautaga River . . . The place, children say, is *not* haunted." But the reader knows better. The curse that destroys the family "had something to do with silence," or something to do with the Bellefleurs being "so hopelessly, and at times so passionately, divided on all subjects," or what "pretty little Yolande" exclaims after hearing the expurgated story of her father's oldest brother Raoul: "The curse on us is that we can't love right." Naming the curse is no easier than characterizing an entire family, and the challenge intrigues us to the very end of Oates' prodigious saga. She makes this mighty family of clairvoyants and aviators, moguls and hermits, vampires and androgynes so believable we shirk from referring to them as such stereotypes. She records with an authority that makes the implausible believable and the surreal realistic—reversing the narrative method of Garcia Marquez and restoring the epic novel to the American tradition.

Smiley's People (Knopf) is John Le Carre's ninth book, presenting, like his others, "a world of perpetual doubt" in which "reassurances never come amiss." Le Carre peoples the cityscapes of England, Paris and Hamburg, and the Swiss countryside, with an underworld of isolated characters who seem like night-mirror images of our unreflecting waking selves: Alexandra, isolated by her insanity, "whose mind too often spoke words which her mouth did not transmit"; isolated by her terror, the desperate and determined Ostrakova; and, of course, Smiley, the "retired" agent recalled for one last performance in a play whose script is known only to him. Smiley is Le Carre's specialty, the lonely hero, isolated from action by age—and whose reflections on the inhuman condition of the absurd underworld shapes the frantic world of events and conversations into perspectives as jolting as they are unfamiliar:

"He was standing in what the old man would have called his kitchen: the windowsill with the gas ring on it, the tiny homemade food-store with holes drilled for ventilation. We men who cook for ourselves are half-creatures, he thought as he scanned the two shelves, tugged out the saucepan and the frying pan, poked among the cayenne and paprika. Anywhere else in the house—even in bed—you can cut yourself off, read your books, deceive yourself that solitude is best. But in the kitchen the signs of incompleteness are too strident. Half of one black loaf. Half of one coarse sausage. Half an onion. Half a pint of milk. Half a lemon. Half a packet of black tea. Half a life."

John Kennedy Toole, author of **A Confederacy of Dunces** (Louisiana State University), committed suicide in 1969, partly because, according to reports, his extraordinary book was ignored by publishers. We owe this masterpiece of melodramatic comic satire to the persistence of Toole's feisty mother and the openmindedness of Walker Percy (upon whom she thrust the manuscript). Gloria Reilly, the New Orleans hot-dog vendor and erstwhile scholar of Boethius, is a 20-some-year-old virgin who spent 10 years in college harassing professors. Gloria is really Ignatius, Miss Trixie's nearsightedness notwithstanding, and Ignatius has problems no one could imagine. He hates television so much he can barely tear himself away from it, boos loudly during bad movies at the Prytania. His "pyloric valve" closes at the least reminder of the inappropriateness of the modern world for the philosophy of his medieval mentor and his New York activist girlfriend. Ignatius records the inappropriateness in his Big Chief tablets, whose abstract contents he inflicts upon his high-stepping and long-suffering mother Irene. As Toole drags us in the squalid wake of his hero from Constantinople Street to Charity Hospital, the minor New Orleans characters resonate from a comic vision that might have rivaled the masters. Jones, the black janitor who accepts $20 a week to avoid jail, is attacked by his bordello boss: " 'Stop knocking that broom against the bar,' she screamed. 'Goddamit to hell, you making me nervous.' 'You want quiet sweeping,' " Jones replies, " 'you get you a old lady. I sweep yawng.' "

There is little laughter to brighten the visible darkness of William Golding's first novel in 12 years, **Darkness Visible** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

While "Lord of the Flies" was limited and focused by its island setting, this deeply troubling and superbly written novel moves from England to Australia and back again, accepting no terrestrial boundaries for the world in which "Septimius" Windrave/Windrove/Windgrave lives. "Matty," as he is called by those who shun his disfigured presence, has no idea of his origins or his name: "For all that the most painstaking inquiries could find, he might have been born from the sheer agony of a burning city." He asks the spirits—their leader wears a red hat—who visit him at night, what he asks himself: "Am I only different from them in face?" Their answer—the only answer he can believe in because it is his answer, too—compels him to return to the fiery darkness, to face it rather than seek escape, to find there his proper fate in the heroic gesture that brings his questing soul to rest. Golding makes character seem to start from the observed detail of everyday life, recalling, in his marvelous description of the ironmonger's shop, the tangible spirit of unforgettable place that immediately makes Dickens' characters lifelong inhabitants of our cultural memory. Golding's vision goes beyond the realistic, into the brooding spirit of Hardy, or of John Fowles at his best.

Will Barrett is an ordinary millionaire who lives in Linwood, N.C., and whose project is "the first scientific experiment in history to settle once and for all the question of God's existence." Walker Percy's **The Second Coming** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is written with a lyric eloquence that mingles intensity and leisure as it brings into focus two characters, Will and Allison, who represent between them as much of our own contemporary consciousness as Bloom represented of Dublin's. When Will meets Allie in her forest greenhouse, she helps him to his feet after one of his unaccountable seizures. He understands her instantly, even though "she sounded like a wolf child who had learned to speak from old Victrola records." Allie's problem is moving an iron stove into her refuge; Will's problem is that he "remembered everything"—even the slightest detail, back to the heart of his personal darkness in the Georgia woods with his father and the shotgun whose bullets he can bring himself to count only decades later. "Words surely have meanings," Allie thinks, "and there is my trouble." Who is to be the master, us or them? Both are insane, both taste love and happiness in the language they create between them in Allie's forest garden. Their first meeting shapes from the methods of their madness one of the most affecting moments in contemporary literature: " 'I fell down.'/'I know that. But why?'/'I don't know. Lately I tend to fall down.'/'That's all right. I tend to pick things up. I'm a hoister.' "

"Perhaps the secret of talking," Percy's hero wonders, "is to have something to say."

These five authors write eloquently because they have much to say: that the human spirit is at its most heroic on the edge of an abyss, that the author's role is to take us to the edge so that we can see the spirit in its true dimensions; that the spirit—like the novel—is not a dying swan but a phoenix.

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