

and thus the ability to make an architect's reputation. "Public clients were notorious for ignoring the user, whether it was the tenant in a high-rise public housing bloc, or a child in a windowless schoolroom, and for spending [other people's] money on architectural experiments. . . . Such clients have encouraged architectural styles that are often bleak and whose minimalism runs in the face of

common taste. It is a didactic architecture of private symbols and quirky theories, that favors aesthetics over function, exterior expression over interior convenience, and design purity over clients' demands." Why would a developer—or anybody else who cares about the comfort and happiness of a building's inhabitants—hire architects with an agenda like that?

A Crisis for Catholic Writers?

"The Last Catholic Writer in America?" by Paul Elie, in *Books & Culture* (Nov.–Dec. 2001), P.O. Box 37060, Boone, Iowa 50037–0060.

This essay is not really about the "last Catholic writer in America"—there isn't a "last." Today, "if you are a Catholic writer," Elie observes, "it is as though you are the only person left who takes this stuff seriously—the only writer who cares about religion, and the only Catholic who has any literary taste. You are the last Catholic writer in America, and you are afraid the species is dying out."

In some ways, things were not that different for the previous generation of great American Catholic writers: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day. Much of the talk of Catholicism's "communal character" was "just a theological stereotype. One of the four past greats once wrote, "Today, each writer speaks for himself, even though he may not be sure that his work is important enough to justify his doing so."

Yet many things are different, notes Elie. Today, "the authors of the best Catholic writing may not be known to us as Catholics," Elie writes. "They may not be Catholics at all." He thinks of the novelist Denis Johnson and the short-story writer Richard Bausch, neither of whom is Catholic though both have written about the struggle for faith and the need for redemption in a way that Flannery O'Connor surely would have understood, though she might not have comprehended "the mismatch between the religious impulse and the church's resources for dealing with it."

O'Connor's faith was as natural to her as the air she breathed. In a curious twist, she did not write about Catholics but about Protestants because, she once explained, Protestants had "more interesting fanatics." Elie claims "that the Catholic writer today has less in common with O'Connor than with the primitives and grotesques she wrote about."

EXCERPT

Giving Life a Theme

The great themes of literature have always been such valuable things as courage, freedom, and love; human failings like pride, greed, and revenge; and a few others—usually tragic aspects of character and experience, most notably death. Almost all great works can be linked to one or many of these themes. The frequency with which the theme is courage may give a clue as to why we read. Given the themelessness of real life, works of art concentrate and illustrate for us what experience may not provide; they may talk about what we dimly sense but do not articulate in mundane daily life.

—Diane Johnson, novelist, in *The Southern Review* (Autumn 2001)

He cites the young evangelist in *Wise Blood* (1952): “He doesn’t believe in Christ but still thinks the church has betrayed Christ’s message. If he had written a book, it would be taught [today] in the divinity schools.”

O’Connor’s evangelist says simply, “Either Jesus was God or he was a liar.” This kind of black-or-white position does not comport easily with our age of grays. “So it happens,” says Elie, “that the Catholic writ-

ing of our time is not written out of faith, but out of an aspiration. . . . The writer would like for the Catholic religion to be true, indeed yearns for it to be revealed as such. . . . If it can be made believable in writing, maybe it really can be believed in.”

Elie himself is an editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. His book on O’Connor, Percy, Merton, and Day will be published next year.

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

“Intellectual Property” by Frederick Turner, in *American Arts Quarterly* (Fall 2001), P.O. Box 1654, Cooper Station, New York, N.Y. 10276.

One great irony in the recent furor over Napster—the Internet-based company that allowed users to freely exchange copyrighted musical works—is that the fight to enjoin the company was led by Metallica, a heavy metal rock group that succeeded during the 1980s largely by encouraging fans to make “bootleg” recordings of their live performances and share them with others.

Turner, a professor of arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, sees a crucial difference between Napster and Metallica. Even though the group freely bestowed its “art”—the music it created—on its fans, it retained “a kind of ghostly ownership” of the music. This ethereal presence hovers over every transmission of art, including art that is purchased. According to Turner, if the buyer is willing to acknowledge that presence—in essence, honoring the maker of the art as its creator—the work will “continue to appreciate in value.”

Another example may make this conundrum clearer. No one would purchase a signed painting by Pablo Picasso, scratch out the painter’s signature, and replace it with his own name. Why? Because along with the painting’s purchase came “a gift that the artist gave,” a “gift not entirely the artist’s own in the first place.” The artist’s signature carries the artist’s “giftedness,” which “came to him as the legacy of his genes and of the artistic tradition in which he worked.” It is this “compound spiritual presence” that makes the painting valuable, and that value—a “gift that keeps on giving” to both the purchaser and his heirs—disappears with the erasing of the signature.

In Turner’s view, Napster invited trouble by desecrating what he calls this “shrine of the gift.” But similarly flawed, he believes, is the action of Bill Gates, “who has reportedly bought the reproduction rights to a large fraction of the world’s works of art.” What Gates has purchased “is a real economic asset, but it is also a sort of zombie, bereft of its connection with its maker and with the maker’s own makers.”

The choices for artists are profoundly murky. Allow greater access to their work, and become like poetry, which, says Turner, has struggled “unsuccessfully with the problems of copyright for over 400 years, and is a poverty-stricken profession as a result.” Or adopt elaborate strategies to ensure the uniqueness of the art—as modernists and postmodernists did, which leads to “disgusting styles or content, bottling oneself up in spiritual contemplation, [or] using transient and fragile materials.” Somewhere in the middle lies the complicated solution to what must become a new kind of transaction between artist and owner, which has “something to do with reproduction—in both senses,” in a new world where “a valuable object can be perfectly reproduced.”

Turner sees hopeful signs in the emergence of the new classicists in the late 20th century—artists such as the painter Audrey Flack and the late sculptor Frederick Hart—who consciously “customize their work for their buyers, so that any work cannot be alienated from maker and purchaser and the relationship between them.” This is the only way, Turner believes, that artists can truly “embody intellectual property in market property.”