

THE CHICAGO CONVERT:

JAMES T. FARRELL

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## PREFACE

It was my original intention in 1950, when I proposed this study of James T. Farrell, to attain some personal insight into the life of a writer whom I knew had risen to literary prominence from an environment very similar to my own. I felt that by exploiting that propinquity with the proper application I could, perhaps, ascertain what was the psychological force that had enabled him to write with such inspiration as to establish himself as one of the leading contemporary novelists. In so doing, I hoped to learn how to rise above my situation in the way he transcended his.

In the course of my research, I discovered that the advantage Farrell had over me was, paradoxically, that he had been a little poorer than I and considerably more saturated with Catholicism. Although I am of the same type of Irish Catholic ancestry and lived in a neighborhood which abounded with families of the same nationality who were moving south before the negro exodus, I never experienced the intensity of disintegration that prevailed in Farrell's neighborhood twenty blocks to the North.

Although I have not developed into a novelist, I have become rather fully informed about what this man has thought and believed throughout his phenomenal career. My time, thus, has not been wasted. In fact, this thesis should be of value to other students in the future who become interested in the factors which made Farrell successful as a writer. Further, the account here presented of his religious problems and their resolution may well serve as an inspiration to anybody who is troubled by the complexities of modern civilization.

I should like to thank the following people for various kinds of help to me during the time I worked on this manuscript: three Chicago informants, Messrs. Maurice Coady, Ed McKenna, and James Sullivan, who knew Farrell intimately; Drs. Ray Past and Haldeen Braddy, who read my work sympathetically and were generous in their aid; and finally, my wife, Mrs. Eloise Kelly, who along with Dr. Braddy gave me words of encouragement when I grew weary of my labors.

## INTRODUCTION

Readers of creative writing of the present era are constantly being reminded of the fact that there are two main streams in moral thought. One of these is the present religious exploitation of literature as, for example, in the fictional treatments of such writers as Lloyd C. Douglas and Thomas Mann. Another is the expository procedure evidenced in the ambitious works of Bruce Barton and, the more serious ones of Bishop Fulton Sheen. There is, however, one author, James T. Farrell, who confronts the moral and spiritual problems with a tremendously more direct method.

The works of Farrell, since they deal relentlessly with the good and evil of man's behavior, have been usually catalogued by critics as being a part of the supposedly already decadent naturalistic movement of the thirties. The classification thus given him has been somewhat in his disfavor, since the identification of him with the naturalistic movement of that particular era has ignored how sincerely he has acted and written on beliefs which he inherited from his mother and devotedly entertained throughout his life. These ideas, not



having come from the inspiration of his contemporaries, are original with Farrell and a heritage from his family training. To a measurable extent, the designation of him as a naturalist rests, therefore, on a misconception. His actual position is something else entirely.

The real basis of Farrell's work connects him irrevocably with the literature of protest. When he is properly comprehended as a spiritual reformer, he will be seen as a modern author who transcends the "tonic" prescriptions of Lloyd C. Douglas and perhaps even the "humanizing" indoctrination of Bishop Sheen. Viewed in the correct perspective, Farrell is a "Protester" in an unusually deep and significant meaning of the word.

The novels of Farrell constitute, at face value, a social history of the time. Casual readers may be "carried away" by admiration of the accuracy of his delineations of types of American people beset by modern problems--depression and disease, war and worry. Psychologists may comment on the exactness of his descriptions of sexual promiscuity and of "sex" offenders. Historians may commend the clear photography with which he has depicted the veteran returning from World War I, the drunken and chaotic celebration in the streets of Chicago, the frustration of "War Widows," the brutal fights

that break out meaninglessly on the streets of the U.S.A. All this is a part of the panorama of Farrell, but it is a part matching or surpassing the sensuality of John Dos Passos or the "Horror" of William Faulkner, and yet it is not everything.

What hurried critics and reviewers of today continually fail to perceive is that Farrell has a plan comprehending all, has a feeling embracing people high and low alike, has a message meaningful for the characters involved in his revelations and for the readers who are devotees of his novels. Farrell is primarily a moralizing author; hence he belongs to the grand tradition. In point of fact, he is at one with the idea of the brotherhood of man in his belief that all great art is accompanied by a moral purpose.

Working as he is obliged to do by his conscience, to do with life as it is--in direct consequence of his insistence on reviewing the problem of good and evil for what it is--he regards life with a cold, jaundiced, obdurate eye. He demonstrates with more accuracy than most authors how economics may destroy a man, a community, a civilization; but for those who read him with alert eyes he at the same time shows that the principles of evil are involved at the beginning of the series of circumstance which culminate

in this futile, impotent way.

There seems reason to believe that a proper understanding of James T. Farrell would involve recognizing him as the principal standard bearer of spiritual values versus the material.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER I

### THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION AND FARRELL'S BELIEF

The interest displayed in religious literature is unquestionably greater today than it has been during any other period in the last two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary authors are now finding a ready market for their religious contributions in both the fiction and non-fiction fields.

The basic reason for this current trend in literature is, of course, directly attributed to the general state of unrest in the world today. The advent of the atomic bomb with its consequential threat to the safety and security of all nations, and with the "overall" possibility that man may soon destroy himself, has created a doubt in the mind of the layman as to the wisdom of following the path of scientific realism. Men are finding that science can release hell on earth besides the material things it promises. As a result of the apparent neglect of the

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<sup>1</sup>Calvert Alexander, S.J., The Catholic Literary Revival, p. ix.

church, men are still reluctant to participate in the actual ritual and are flocking to the book shops in order to satisfy their desires for the suddenly realized need for spiritual guidance. The readers are riding on a crest of world weariness and looking for a sheltered place to anchor their listing hulls.

In the shift from the prevailing wartime destructive purpose to the religious constructive one, the authors of today have come a long way since the "debunking" period of the thirties and early forties was at its height. There have been an increasing number of books during recent years which are concerned with revealing humanity in a fairer light, or with giving overdue attention to the previously neglected religious theme. In greater or less degree the emphasis on the religious theme has been manifested in the work of Evelyn Waugh, C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Hudson, Vincent Sheen, and Thomas Sugrue. Aldous Huxley's books for the past fifteen years--especially The Perennial Philosophy, exhibit how profoundly the basic assumptions of religion have affected Huxley's living and writing. Conclusively apparent in the substantiation of the religious trend, the "all-time best sellers" in English are to be found in the religious field. Always, the Bible heads the list along with

Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Such books as Sheldon's In His Steps also have sold by millions of copies, and it is still true in our day, especially since the war. Peace of Mind is nearing the million mark. Others are well on their way: The Big Fisherman, The Greatest Story Ever Told, The Seven Storey Mountain, and the Screwtape Letters, to name only a few.<sup>2</sup> With this tremendous revelation it would appear that there is more at stake than the "scramble for serenity," or a search for an "ersatz faith."

It has been, of course, no secret that we have been living in what has been so often termed a scientific age, but it has taken some courage for the intellectuals of the Western world to admit that they were living in a world where religion and ethics were not totally abandoned. This realization did not come about by a cycle of changing beliefs but by the much more realistic experience of two world wars and the consequent emergence of totalitarian states in Italy, Germany, and Russia. These have been terrifying examples of the scientific and logical ages demanding absolute power. This shift of power has caused

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<sup>2</sup>Stanley Romaine Hopper, Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature, p. 267.

a lot of people to become disillusioned and even ashamed at the presence of a destructive non-morality which has existed within the very core of a material and scientific age.<sup>3</sup>

The readers, intellectual or otherwise, appear genuinely thankful for any writer who can show some ground for the belief in the existence of occasional good-will among his fellows. They are searching in writing for persons who can find a sincere, consuming interest in men and women and have a genuine love for them. For some time now there has been growing among readers a quiet but stubborn rebellion against a world people exclusively by sadists, nymphomaniacs, chisellers, half-wits, ape-men, and other products of the law of natural selection. At times we are beginning to see that in the course of our lifetime we have now and then met one or two decent, intelligent, fair-dealing human beings and enjoyed their companionship; but not a few novelists during the last twenty years seem to have been denied that privilege. These have been fiercely determined that nobody else, at least as far as their books are concerned, should have that opportunity either. Here

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

in the United States a note of affirmation has been seen in the change which has taken place in our writing. The long procession of novels, prompted by the young author's revolt against his environment, came gradually to a halt. In their place are coming more and more authors who are trying to interpret the feeling which is supposed to be innate in all of us.

There is, however, one author, James T. Farrell, who is in a strange and precarious position among his contemporaries, because Farrell has as recently as 1952 published his twenty-third book Yet Other Waters, and its style and content is still the same as in his first work published just twenty years before in 1932. Farrell is still a "protest" writer and a tremendous naturalist and realist, of the type whose works are supposed to be meeting with extreme disfavor. In keeping with the works of his contemporaries, he is in a sense a "protest" writer who shows his dislike and disgust of the way the underprivileged persons are forced to live under the social conditions of the present day. His presentation still deals with the social implications of the life in South Chicago. In direct opposition to the current trend of literature, which finds the salvation of man in his God, Farrell remains the



confirmed atheist. He sees the failure of the Catholic faith to perform its intended function of giving spiritual guidance to the bewildered Irish Catholic families living in the neighborhood of his childhood days. In a manner of speaking, this concern for his fellowman is what the reader is supposed to be looking for, although it is indeed by a roundabout manner. I believe that this fundamental regard for the welfare of his fellowman is just as sincere, if not more so than is the concern of Bishop Sheen, Thomas Kelly, and Evelyn Waugh. He is searching for a spiritual guide, but he cannot find it in God. However, because Farrell is in a sense a victim of his time, his message to the people is not realized. He is considered to be a naturalist, not a moralist. The message that he is trying to convey, the plea to his people to relieve themselves of their plight, is lost in the literary criticism of his period. The author is catalogued as a naturalist and in the process his religious connotation is missed. If Farrell should have come along at another age, I am sure that his writing would have been treated differently, for the critics' view is not an authentic picture of his writing. He cannot be viewed in the light of other authors when one recalls his original

position, since he is not a product of a literary background or of literary association. His naturalism stems from the fact that he entered the field a complete amateur. When one considers that he saw a light from out of the sordidness of his association, it almost seems that he is the South Chicago Apostle. His difficulty, however, comes from his presentation. Instead of writing in a hopeful vein he must do it the only way possible and show the sordidness of the situation. He must record as he sees it the life which he has been chosen to reveal. In his own way, he is only doing what many other authors have done in the course of their literary pursuit, that is to shame the reader into seeing the hopelessness of his existence.

#### FARRELL'S THEME COMPARED WITH HISTORICAL TRADITION

Without the stigmatism which has been put on him by his contemporaries, Farrell might have been classified with such men as Jonathan Swift and Thomas More, their type of presentation being much the same as is Farrell's. When the good Catholic Swift wanted to show his people the plight they were in, he did it by satire.<sup>4</sup> Swift tried to

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<sup>4</sup>Mary M. Colum, From These Roots, p. 139.

shame his readers into a realization by making the appearance of an Englishman in a new environment look ridiculous. In his own time Swift was doing the same thing as his contemporaries, inasmuch as he was writing the type of thing that the readers of that day wanted. He gave them stories of adventure and travel which was then the dominant theme in an England that was so extremely conscious of its expanding empire. Farrell gives his readers the same opportunity that Swift does when the English satirist portrayed the uselessness and futility of the plight of the people. They both want the reader to see the ridiculousness of the flow of life without the proper spiritual guidance. Sir Thomas More, of course, does the same thing when he tells of Utopia.<sup>5</sup> He is presenting the life as it should be without the idiosyncracies of his country's supposed civilization.

Certainly, though, there is a freshness in Farrell's picture. In these times he is able to use an entirely different perspective from his predecessors. It was necessary for Swift and More to disguise their satire by the use of clever analogies in order to escape the persecution that certainly would have come if their intention had been

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<sup>5</sup>F. V. N. Painter, Introduction to English Literature, p. 39.

immediately apparent.

In the modern day it is no longer necessary to resort to this manner of presentation. The author is able to make his caricatures by only slight variations from persons with whom he actually had association. He does not need to use the Lilliputian or Utopian puppets in order to draw a contrast to the proper way of living. His Lilliput, where life is a farce, is his own South Chicago. Farrell is able to show the impossible situation by being a conscientious realist. This stark treatment is a much more effective way to reach the audience than the roundabout way which the older authors had to employ because of necessity. This hypothesis, which appears to place Farrell in a position with such literary luminaries as Swift and More, becomes more apparent in the light of comparisons. Down the ages, in the pendulum swing of predominance as the periods pass, two attitudes are alternate. The writers and the readers in a given era tend to accept unconsciously, or tend to defend and justify, one of these two points of view:

- a- Where the chief concern is with oneself, with the individual, the separate objects and events that constitute the world--with the multiplicity, the variety, of things.
- b- Where there is a recognition of the prime significance of the central core that is

the same in all men, the single spirit,  
the integrating law that binds all things  
in the basic unity.<sup>6</sup>

Emphasis on one or the other of these ways of beholding life marks successive stages in the movement of mankind. And within each age, whichever of these attitudes it prefers, another opposition urges.

#### FARRELL IN TODAY'S PICTURE

Now, as the pendulum swings toward the regard for the single spirit, Farrell still carries on the urge of the opposition, and clings to his concern with the individual. It appears as though he is going to be as constant as was the great naturalist of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens, in the revelation of his moral issue. Other authors may change their themes, but not James T. Farrell. When it first became apparent in the late thirties that naturalism in fiction had sunk to the depths of its own revelation, the writers of serious fiction revealed themselves as unfaltering partisans of Marxian materialism who insisted upon being antagonistic to imaginative writing. Critics of fiction then turned away from Farrell and his

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<sup>6</sup>Joseph T. Shipley, Trends in Literature, p. 12.

contemporaries in order to give attention to the sources of newly-awakened inspiration in the novels of such writers as Henry James,<sup>7</sup> the "Rediscovered" Herman Melville, and Franz Kafka. The latter two writers of fiction were rediscovered as carriers of a Biblical and Hebraic heritage and what first was admired in Kafka as realism - and the same interpretation attended early reading of James Joyce's Ulysses - became transformed into a glimmering version of Kafka's religious purpose with its relationship between man and the inaccessibility of God. It was then rediscovered that Melville's contribution to our literature was transcendental in its import. Another author who has won the respect of the critics through a change in attitude is William Faulkner. When Faulkner began writing his novels, they were regarded as realistic, and among them were Sanctuary and As I Lay Dying. Today, through his book of short stories, Go Down, Moses, and his Intruder In The Dust, he is being regarded as a moralist.

Through the process of apparent change in the attitude

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<sup>7</sup>It is of some interest to note that Henry James had gone through three stages of interpretation: first, as a psychological novelist, then, as a critic of society, and, third, as a moralist, scrupulous in his attention to Christian ethics.

of these contemporaries and the afore-mentioned rash of followers of the trend, Farrell, in his opinions, has remained adamant. In his own individual way of treating the moral question as he sees it he has constantly retained his individuality. He could not be persuaded to digress from his original idea because of the critics' search for a theme as did James, Faulkner, Joyce, Kafka, and Melville.<sup>8</sup> And in this revelation lies the crux of the literary worth of the man whom some claim to be our greatest novelist today.

Farrell's writing as a young man came directly from one source of inspiration, and that was that the God which he had been raised to believe in without question was not fulfilling his obligation. When he first came to the realization, he felt that he had to tell the story to the world and he set about to do just that. Without any previous literary inclinations or aspirations, he began to tell the story of the failure, as he saw it, in his own words. Immediately, he began prolifically to record the obviousness of a situation. He was not looking at the plight of the world from a lofty literary perch as do many

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<sup>8</sup>Hopper, op. cit., p. 44.

authors who are doing a mercenary sort of social work when they tell of the horrible life that they have discovered to exist in our so-called civilization, but he was writing because it was his calling. He was writing about a life of which he was an integral part. His attitude was extremely subjective. In the beginning he was writing to explain a plight from which he felt there was no possible escape. Contrary to what would appear to be a young man writing in the best tradition of his period, and naturally along the lines of his contemporaries, Farrell's theme was not a studied effort which fit the time, but rather was a spontaneous effort which was designed to open his soul to his readers.

It is possible that Farrell may have gained his perspective of life from his reading as a young man, but it was not from the reading of contemporary writers of fiction. He mentions in one of his novels that he was greatly influenced by the perusal of the biographies of notable men. When he read of the deeds and experiences of great men he began to draw a comparison between himself and those individuals, and in what he saw came the revelation. He began to see that it was hopeless to believe that he, or anyone else for that matter, could rise from the helplessness of his Fifty-eighth Street environment to the pinnacle attained by the great