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## JOHN TRACY ELLIS AND THE FIGURE OF THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL

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*Fifty years after John Tracy Ellis challenged the quality and character of Catholic intellectual life, much work remains to be done. This essay explores Ellis's original assertions and places them in an overarching historical context that involves Flannery O'Connor and Thomas Merton.*

In May of 1955, just before the publication of her collection of stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955), Flannery O'Connor was invited to appear on a television talk show. Two weeks before the event, in a letter to Robbie McCauley, she tried to imagine the impending catastrophe, picturing her "glacial glare being sent out to millions of children who are waiting patiently for *The Batman* to come on" (O'Connor, 1979, p. 82). Yet for all of her disdain for the "evil influences" to which she was about to subject herself, and her trepidation concerning the corruption that might ensue, she also managed a characteristic moment of theological speculation. "I already feel like a combination of Msgr. Sheen and Gorgeous George," she wrote. "Everybody who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I'm a hillbilly Thomist" (p. 81). Though it has generally been ignored by her critics, to O'Connor this distinction was quite important.

Judging by the transcript and the available reports, O'Connor's television appearance seems to have turned out almost as badly as she had feared. The show was called Galley Proof, and it was hosted by *New York Times* book editor Paul Breit. O'Connor described it to Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, a few days afterwards, as "mildly ghastly" (1979, p. 85). Recently, Elie (2003) has provided a fuller account, based partly on a video recording. Elie describes the show opening with O'Connor peering off to the side of the set as Breit speaks. Eventually, when she manages to get in a few words, she seems to have "the voice of an older woman" (p. 234). After a brief exchange—"I understand you are living on a farm....I don't see much of it. I'm a writer. I farm from the rocking chair"—Breit begins to narrate the opening scene of O'Connor's (1955) story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," while

three actors portray the main characters—as O’Connor wrote to the Fitzgeralds, “up to the point where the old woman says she’ll give \$17.50 if Mr. Shiftlet will marry the idiot daughter” (1979, p. 85). Of course, O’Connor could have pointed out that this scene has to do with higher things, like a man’s spirit, honeymoons, and the cost of gas:

In the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet’s smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire. After a second he recalled himself and said, “I’m only saying a man’s spirit means more to him than anything else. I would have to take my wife off for the weekend without no regards at all for cost. I got to follow where my spirit says to go.”

“I’ll give you fifteen dollars for a weekend trip,” the old woman said in a crabbed voice. “That’s the best I can do.”

“That wouldn’t hardly pay for more than the gas and the hotel,” he said. “It wouldn’t feed her.”

“Seventeen-fifty,” the old woman said. “That’s all I got so it isn’t any use you trying to milk me. You can take a lunch.” (O’Connor, 1971, pp. 152-153)

But Breit has other musings to deliver. When he interrupted the action, such as it was, he took the opportunity to go on about the Southern literary renaissance, the similarities between the postwar South and 19th century Russia, the transcendent possibilities of fiction, and so on. In the end, after another dramatization of another passage, the actors walked off the stage. Breit pointed out that they had portrayed only part of the story, and he then asked O’Connor if she would like to tell the audience the rest. “No I certainly would not,” she replied, “I don’t think you can paraphrase a story like that. I think there’s only one way to tell it and that’s the way it is told in the story” (as cited in Elie, 2003, p. 235). Surely, the millions of American children, future nihilists and future Thomists alike, were relieved when *The Batman* finally came on.

Flannery O’Connor’s first appearance for a daytime television audience (Galley Proof aired at 1:30 p.m. in New York) has never been considered a landmark of American Catholic intellectual life. The landmark of 1955, most everyone agrees, is the essay “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” which Ellis first presented in Saint Louis at the annual meeting of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs on May 14, the same week that O’Connor was invited to appear on Galley Proof. A few months later, the essay appeared in the autumn issue of the journal *Thought*. Ellis was professor of Church history at the Catholic University of America, editor of the *Catholic Historical Review*, the author of a monumental biography of Cardinal James Gibbons (Ellis, 1952), a leading interpreter of the Americanist and Modernist controversies, and a major influence on younger

Catholic historians of the post-World War II era. One of the most thoughtful accounts of the ferment surrounding *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Ellis, 1955/1956) is that of Gleason in *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995), a book that has done much, in its own right, to shape discussions of Catholic higher education. By all accounts, including Gleason's, Ellis's essay contributed mightily to an "ongoing debate" on the relative poverty of Catholic intellectual achievement in America—a debate Ellis himself had not only sparked but also, for good measure, labeled "the most exciting" in the history of Catholic higher education (Gleason, 1995, p. 290). While, as Gleason notes, there had been "numerous earlier specimens" in this genre, it was Ellis's contribution that managed to "pop the cork on long-suppressed discontents":

Within six months of its appearance in the autumn issue of *Thought*, some 3500 reprints had been distributed; it had been commented on in the Catholic press, noted by *Newsweek*, read aloud in the refectories of many religious communities, and discussed at meetings of Catholic educators, including two sessions at the NCEA's 1956 convention. Within the same span, Ellis received 196 letters, only five of which expressed outright disagreement with his judgments (and three of those correspondents had read only excerpts or summaries of his critique). In 1956, the essay was reprinted as a small book, to which Bishop John J. Wright of Worcester, Massachusetts, the hierarchy's leading intellectual, added a thoughtful preface. What Bishop Wright called the "great debate" dominated the Catholic scene for the next two or three years, still commanding enough interest to justify the publication of an anthology on the subject in 1961, and recurred sporadically thereafter. (pp. 290-291)

More than 30 years after the event, Ellis would recall more of a mixed response. Mostly, he would remember being surprised at its extent and in some cases the tone of the "hubbub":

I can honestly say that I had no idea that I had stirred such a widespread and animated reaction. I received several hundred letters from all over the nation, the majority in agreement, even if they were not all as strong as the former Jesuit provincial who wrote from New England, "For God's sake, keep on shouting...." But all were by no means in agreement—far from it—and I was roundly scolded by a few for exposing our weakness to the public eye. My own ordinary, the Archbishop of Washington, was uneasy about the fuss that had been raised, and meeting me by accident on the campus said, "You had better let it rest for a while." (1989, p. 69)

Ellis would conclude this reminiscence with a distinctly scholarly sort of bemusement "that some sixty pages of the book edition caused more of a

hubbub than the nearly 1,400 pages of the life of Cardinal Gibbons ever did” (1989, p. 69). For his part, Gleason places *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Ellis, 1955/1956) at a significant moment in the rise of liberal Catholicism between World War II and Vatican II, seeing it as representative of the views of relatively educated American Catholics who had been growing discontent with “separatism, ghettoism, the siege mentality, undue reliance on crude pressure-group tactics, and the pervading smugness and complacency that would later be called ‘triumphalism’” (Gleason, 1995, p. 288). In other words, the time was right.

In many ways, the pervasive influence of Ellis’s essay is understandable. His indictment is sweeping. He finds Catholic intellectual achievement wanting in the liberal arts, the humanities, the sacred sciences, and to his greatest dismay in the sciences. In professional fields conventionally associated with intellectual accomplishment, like medicine and law, the picture is somewhat better, but not very much, and seems to him one more example of potential scholars selling their decidedly American souls. Ellis quotes authorities ranging from Denis Borgan of Cambridge to Arthur Schlesinger of Harvard. His statistical measures include, among other things, scholarly symposia, academic and popular surveys, studies of religious affiliation among those selected for inclusion in publications like *Who’s Who in America* and *American Men of Science*, and the percentages of graduates from Catholic colleges that go on to enroll in graduate programs and schools of law and medicine. Ellis quotes leading educators of his day, most of all Robert M. Hutchins who, during his tenure as president of the University of Chicago, once told the National Catholic Educational Association, “you have imitated the worst features of secular education and ignored most of the good ones” (as cited in Ellis, 1955/1956, p. 43). In Ellis’s view, the popes themselves have nearly despaired in the search for intellectual leadership among American Catholics. In 1936, when Pius XI reconstituted the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, only 6 of the 70 names chosen were American, and only one of these was affiliated with an American Catholic institution. Even in 1955, when Pius XII announced 14 new appointments, only one of these was teaching at an American school—and this was Theodore van Karman, who turns out to be, Ellis notes with palpable disappointment, “a Hungarian-born non-Catholic” working at the California Institute of Technology. Most painfully of all, it seems, Ellis notes that when the American hierarchy prepared to open their own Catholic university, “the native-born Catholics of this country were so devoid of scholarly distinction that the first rector, John J. Keane, was compelled to recruit his original faculty of eight men from among six foreign-born professors and two American-born converts” (1955/1956, p. 24). Ellis certainly gives the impression that he has searched everywhere, and that everyone agrees.

Much to his credit, Ellis is not content merely to survey the wreckage. He also wants to know how it has come to this state. In historical terms, he provides many compelling and interconnected reasons for the shortage of American Catholic intellectuals, including an anti-Catholicism he traces back to the English settlers, an “overeagerness” (1955/1956, p. 18) among American Catholics for apologetics rather than “pure scholarship” (p. 18), the general American “egalitarian spirit and leveling process” (p. 20), the absence of a distinctly American intellectual tradition, the national “lack of serious reading habits” (p. 27), the American fixation on “the ideal of wealth” (p. 28), the intellectual impoverishment of diocesan seminaries and the scholasticates of religious orders, and the pervasive failure of American Catholic leaders, both clerical and lay, “to understand fully, or to appreciate in any practical way, the value of the vocation of the intellectual” (p. 31). Here Ellis is at his best, combining a striking breadth of analysis with a practical wisdom and a sense of urgency. Beyond all the documented statistics and recognized authorities, he understands the intellectual life both as a vocation—a distinctive and intrinsically valuable form of human flourishing—and as a social necessity, a gift that can serve local Catholic communities, the larger Church, and the larger civil society.

Ellis’s analysis is impressively broad in its use of conventional academic measures—what Gleason calls “the standard indices of achievement” (1995, p. 288)—in its sense of American Catholic history and its conception of the institutional Church. But in other respects, it is peculiarly narrow. Its limitations come into clearest focus when Ellis puts aside his voluminous statistics and his unanimous authorities and tries to describe the intellectual life in concrete human terms—that is, when he tries to imagine a figure of the American Catholic intellectual. In fact, there is only one passage devoted to this subject, and only rather indirectly at that. Searching through the first hundred years of the American Church’s organized existence, Ellis manages to find only a very few small groups of exemplary intellectuals. He considers the families of the Maryland “Catholic gentry,” in the years immediately following the American Revolution, who combined their considerable personal wealth with their “ardent Catholic faith” and sent their children to France to “acquire an education that was second to none among Americans of their generation” (1955/1956, p. 21). He briefly mentions the “highly cultivated” French priests—all of whom were “men of a finished education, fine personal libraries, and a deep love of learning”—who came to this country to escape the violent anticlericalism in the aftermath of the French Revolution and briefly “exercised a strong and uplifting influence upon the intellectual life of a small and beleaguered Catholic body” (p. 21). Moving on to the middle of the 19th century, he adds to his list “a small band of con-

verts,” including Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker, all from “prominent families” and mostly educated in elite Protestant schools, who briefly provided hope that the American Church “might witness an Oxford Movement of its own” (p. 22). Finally, he mentions that there have been just a few American families able to sustain intellectual accomplishment through several generations. The one Ellis cites for particular praise is the family of the artist John La Farge, providing an impressive list of the authors, ranging from Plato through Hugo, that La Farge read in the months prior to his 16th birthday; he then quotes the artist’s son, a Jesuit priest, who writes fondly of “devouring” Boswell’s (1946) *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, repeatedly, the “two fat volumes,” at the age of 13 or so (Ellis, 1955/1956, pp. 25-26).

Needless to say, there is no mention in this passage of any good country people, no reference to hillbilly Thomists, and no speculation along the lines of Mr. Shiftlet’s as he considers his impending marriage. In other words, Ellis’s examples are consistently and decidedly class-bound. Of the La Farge family, he writes, “That is the kind of background from which true intellectuals are born” (1955/1956, p. 26). He then adds, understandably enough, “how many Catholic families are there of whom that could be said?” (p. 26). Ellis’s intellectuals are empowered by their personal wealth and distinguished most of all by their libraries. But the most critical factor in his analysis of the American Catholic intellectual blight is the absence of any cohesive scholarly tradition. Since he can find nothing more in his search through American history than occasional glimmers of such a tradition, in a wealthy family here or a local gentry there, he is left trying to imagine a social dynamic in which these select few might elevate the surrounding mass of uneducated and in many cases illiterate Catholics. In purely social terms—that is, apart from his later consideration of Catholic higher education—all he can suggest is a sort of trickle down model—or in more religiously suggestive terms, a leavening model—by which the “cultivated” elite might be able to exert its “uplifting influence” (p. 21).

Yet it does not seem that the limitations of his analysis derive from any significant class bias. While he appreciates children who stay in the library happily re-reading Boswell, he also seems genuinely and thoughtfully sympathetic with the struggles of a predominately immigrant Church. For Ellis, the fundamental problem is that, time and time again, he sees the brief flickers of intellectual achievement overcome by more urgent human needs. For example, he considers the intellectual promise of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when a fairly significant number of European-educated Americans seemed about to establish a “lasting intellectual tradition” that could draw upon their European Catholic heritage and, at the same time, somehow take a distinctively American form: But then “the arrival of the great mass of

immigrants dissipated the early hope for intellectual distinction which faded away before the all-important task of saving souls” (1955/1956, pp. 21-22). Ellis understands the enormity and the urgency of this task—he notes that the American Catholic Church absorbed roughly 9,317,000 immigrants in the century beginning in the 1820s—and he understands in very specific terms the demands this influx placed upon the Church leadership, which had to provide rudimentary religious instruction, churches for Mass, and facilities for parish life—all of which left “little time, funds, or leisure for a more highly cultivated training” (p. 18). He understands, too, the prejudices these immigrants had to confront in the larger society, and some of the prejudices they developed, at times, in response. He had just explored many of the issues related to Catholic immigration at greater length in his book *American Catholicism* (Ellis, 1956/1969). In this longer work, he particularly addressed the complex attitudes of Catholic immigrants toward race and slavery. He ended his chapter dealing most extensively with immigration by concluding, rather familiarly, that “the failure of American Catholics to achieve distinction in the world of scholarship and learning still remains the most striking weakness of what is otherwise, perhaps, the strongest branch of the universal Church” (1956/1969, p. 119).

It is unlikely that Ellis is incorrect on any of his main points, though his central idea does achieve a peculiar emphasis when it appears at the end of a passage primarily concerned with immigration and race. Rather, the problem with his effort to give the lie to prejudice—like most such efforts—is that it remains locked within the terms, often inherently self-defeating terms, of the dominant discourse. While Ellis seems to understand and sympathize with his Catholic immigrants, body and soul, his capacity for sympathy is always rational, even statistical, rather than imaginative. In contemporary academic terms, we would generally describe this kind of limitation as disciplinary. His figure of the intellectual is bound not only by social class but also by the terms and the horizon of his profession.

That is why this essay begins with the image of Flannery O’Connor on daytime television. We might conclude that she failed almost completely in her attempt to illustrate for the American public the distinction between a “hillbilly nihilist” and a “hillbilly Thomist.” Still, granted that she was being at least slightly disingenuous when she made this distinction in her letter to McCauley, it is nonetheless one of the most remarkable qualities of her wit that she is able to communicate several truths at the same time and still be very funny. To put it another way, she was making the point that she did not mind being considered a hillbilly—in fact she seemed to see a certain subversive advantage in the role of literary hillbilly—as long as this image allowed her to be clear about her religious beliefs. In fact, if she were going

to allow herself to be presented as a figure of the intellectual, in such a strangely public forum, it might be just as well to be seen as, if not a hillbilly, at least a good country person.

Perhaps she could have clarified the Thomistic part if she had taken up Breit's offer to explain the later events of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (O'Connor, 1971). But it should hardly seem surprising that she did not. As a writer of her generation—particularly as one who had been trained in the University of Iowa's Master of Fine Arts program and who had befriended leading proponents of new criticism like Robert Lowell, Caroline Gordon, and Allan Tate—she was just as well versed in the heresy of paraphrase as she was in more specifically Catholic heresies. So, she was only slightly more responsive to another, ultimately more interesting moment in the interview. Breit was rather curious about the sort of people who inhabit O'Connor's stories. Perhaps he knew enough to worry that his dramatization was missing something. Perhaps he was genuinely wondering about the sort of people who lived around the farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, where O'Connor and her mother had moved in a few years earlier as she began her efforts to recover from the effects of lupus (Cash, 2002). Sounding more naïve than he would have seemed to have been, Breit asked O'Connor about her characters: "What about some of these fascinating characters? Do you know them at all? Have you seen people like that?" (as cited in Elie, 2003, p. 235). Her brief response is notable for her hesitancy to provide a simple answer and, at the same time, her refusal to distance herself from the actual people who, presumably, played some part in the creation of Mr. Shiftlet: "Well, no, not really. I've seen many people like that, I think, and I've seen myself, I think. Putting all that together you get these people" (as cited in Elie, 2003, p. 235).

The main point is that O'Connor, herself, provided a figure of the American Catholic intellectual that was just about equally alien to the daytime television audience and to Ellis. Of course, it is highly ironic that O'Connor emerged as a major American writer—perhaps the first major American writer whose work was deeply informed by specifically Catholic belief—at almost precisely the same moment that Ellis first presented his famous indictment of American Catholic intellectual life. And what makes this coincidence even more striking is that, as it turns out, these two significant figures in 20th-century Catholicism seemed to exist in parallel universes. O'Connor was a diligent, almost constant, reader of *Thought* at the time Ellis's essay appeared. She refers to the journal often in her letters: At one point, she plans to write to Fordham to request back issues; she praises it for its avoidance of the standard "American-clerical tone" (1979, p. 131); she describes it to the Fitzgeralds as "very valuable" (p. 132); she mentions it as



an exception to the general trend among American Catholic writers to produce “pamphlets for the back of the Church (to be avoided at all costs) and installing heating systems” (p. 231); she repeatedly lends issues to several of her friends, especially an issue containing “a piece in it on Kierkegaard and St. Thomas” (p. 273); she repeatedly recommends it to writer-friends as a place to publish their work. But if O’Connor noticed Ellis’s essay, she does not seem to have ever mentioned it.

O’Connor was quite impressed, however, with the journal’s editor, William F. Lynch, whom she described as “one of the most learned priests in this country” (1979, p. 119). In particular, she repeatedly referred to a series of essays on “Theology and the Imagination” that Lynch (1954a, 1954b, 1954c) published in *Thought* in the year and a half preceding the issue that included *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Ellis, 1955/1956). In addition to his work with *Thought*, Lynch was a faculty member at Georgetown and just beginning to establish himself as a major intellectual presence when, in 1956, a “mental breakdown” forced him to put aside many of his responsibilities (Arbery, 1960/2004, p. ix). Before long, he would focus more on his writing, and he incorporated the essays from *Thought* into his most significant work of literary theory, *Christ and Apollo* (Lynch, 1960/2004), which appeared in 1960, one of three substantial books he published within a couple of years. In her letters, O’Connor describes these essays as being “about the manichean (sp?) vs. the anagogical or Christian imagination” (1979, p. 132). Actually, for Lynch the anagogical was just one category in a highly complex description of the Christian or imagination. Though he derived this particular category rather directly from medieval Biblical exegesis, he also incorporated it into a highly complex theory that also drew upon contemporary ontological criticism and genre criticism. What seems to have mattered most for O’Connor, though, is that Lynch refused to separate the anagogical from the “literal sense of things.” He asserted that the “complete insight” that a reader can achieve through the anagogic sense—which he understood as an apprehension of “the world of eternity and Christ in glory”—“is not a jump to a Manichean moment” (1960/2004, p. 259). That is, he claimed that this sort of ultimate insight does not deny or contradict literal meaning or ordinary surroundings, even though it might “take generations of exploration of these our literal scenes to find out where it is” (p. 259). So, in Lynch’s scheme of things, even Mr. Shiftlet could turn out to have a divinity about him and a capacity for redemption, and neither of these would make him seem to us any less creepy. Lynch’s writing about literature is always complex and often dense; it is both learned and iconoclastic; it is metaphysical without being Manichean; it can sometimes seem socially reactionary; in an odd way, it is also humane and world-

ly. Notably, one of his later books, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (1965), which is partly a meditation on his own recovery from mental disability, re-investigates the literary imagination in relation to contemporary psychiatry, describing both as methods of moving “through fantasy and unreality to reality”—and incorporating both into a theology of hope (p. 14).

Lynch’s literary theory is not the sort of thing O’Connor would have been likely to find in the back of the Church. Her strong affinity for his writing implies not only that he was a seminal, but still unappreciated, influence on her writing, but also that he provides a radical alternative to the prevailing literary theories of the day. This affinity also demonstrates just how indifferent O’Connor usually was to the conventional academic measures that so preoccupied Ellis and his readers.

Consider again that May and June of 1955. At the same time, give or take a few days, that Ellis was pronouncing the failure of the American Catholic intellectual life, and the same time, give or take a few days, that O’Connor was trying to imagine herself on television, Thomas Merton was reaching a state of crisis. From the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani, he was writing a series of letters in the hope of gaining permission to become a hermit. Gethsemani was receiving an extraordinary influx of novices, many of them drawn by reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Merton, 1948). Merton was thinking of giving up writing altogether and seeking to secure a transfer to a Camaldolese house in Frascati, Italy, where he would be able to devote the rest of his life to solitude (Furlong, 1980). At the same time, give or take a few days, Dorothy Day was planning her first organized act of civil disobedience. On June 15, she would be 1 of 30 peace activists, including seven Catholic Workers, arrested outside of Manhattan’s City Hall for refusing to take shelter in a designated area during a civil defense drill. On that occasion, she read a statement which said

We make this demonstration, not only to voice our opposition to war, not only to refuse to participate in psychological warfare, which this air raid drill is, but also as an act of public penance for having been the first people in the world to drop the atomic bomb, to make the hydrogen bomb. (as cited in Elie, 2003, p. 236)

So, at virtually the same moment, these American Catholic intellectuals were deliberately re-constructing their lives in radical and very different ways. And what was perhaps most radical about it all was their ability to re-imagine their relationship to American communities well outside the academy.

The moral of this story—as we reconsider *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Ellis, 1955/1956) just over 50 years after its first appear-

ance—is not that Ellis’s argument is incorrect, as far as it goes. Most of us concerned about the future of Catholic education are probably glad to think of the many ways, according to the usual measures, that Catholic colleges and universities have made progress. O’Brien (1994) has noted, with reference to Ellis’s essay, that even by the late 1960s there was good evidence that “in terms of numbers graduating from college, attending graduate schools, and entering the learned professions, Catholics had attained at least parity with other Americans” (p. 100). Rather, the moral of the story is that Ellis’s argument is both correct and, at the same time, symptomatic of a drastic failure of the imagination. To be fair, as O’Brien also points out, “quantity was not quite what Ellis had in mind; he hoped that Catholic intellectual achievement would be really Catholic” (p. 101). At key moments in his essay, Ellis bemoans the separation of Catholic immigrants from the intellectual traditions, at least some of the European ones, they left behind. In the end, when he tries to rally his intellectual troops in a more hortatory tone, he reminds them that they “are in possession of the oldest, wisest, and most sublime tradition of learning that the world has ever known” (Ellis, 1955/1956, p. 59). Even if almost all of Ellis’s measures are pervasively secular, many even mathematical, he does envision the future of Catholic intellectual life and Catholic education as really Catholic.

Still, Ellis’s nostalgia for a monumentalized tradition, along with the class-bound insularly academic nature of his figure of the intellectual, renders him blind to the wild unpredictability of the circumstances in which genius usually emerges, as well as the capacity of genius to construct the conditions in which it can sustain itself.

Nonetheless, this convergence of Ellis’s essay and O’Connor’s emergence as a public writer—and Merton’s and Day’s moments of intellectual redefinition—has serious implications for Catholic higher education, the only community, after all, that ever would have given any sustained attention to Ellis’s thesis. For the moment, consider just one of these implications, one which is particularly symptomatic: Ellis’s recommendation for the planning of Catholic higher education on a national scale. For Ellis, the competition among different Catholic schools, which he finds most apparent in the development of graduate programs, amounts to “a betrayal of one another”:

By that I mean the development within the last two decades of numerous and competing graduate schools, none of which is adequately endowed, and few of which have the trained personnel, the equipment in libraries and laboratories, and the professional wage scales to warrant their ambitious undertakings. The result is a perpetuation of mediocrity and the draining away from each other of the strength that is necessary if really superior achievements are to be attained. I am speaking here, incidentally, only of the graduate schools, and not of the competi-

tion—amounting in certain places to internecine warfare—among the more than 200 Catholic colleges of the land. In both categories, however, the situation is serious....There is, and has been for years, a desperate need for some kind of planning for Catholic higher education on a national scale. (1955/1956, p. 44)

From the larger context of this passage, it seems that Ellis sees national planning as a good idea for both graduate and undergraduate education. It is far less clear just how much he seems to think this planning would follow some sort of hierarchical model—either through the hierarchy of the Church or the administrative hierarchies of the institutions themselves. Regardless, though this suggestion has certain merits—as it values cooperation over competition, sharing of resources, and maybe even the emergence of a national community of Catholic educators—it seems symptomatic of the limitations of Ellis's figure of the Catholic intellectual. Maybe it is going too far to say that national planning is incapable of recognizing truly innovative genius, but maybe not.

The better answer is not merely to recognize writers like O'Connor, Merton, and Day in the usual official ways—say, by including their works in the canon and the curriculum of the Catholic university, which many have already done. The better answer is to take seriously the premises of their lives and works—and those of many others—in the articulation of a distinctly American Catholic intellectual tradition. Ironically enough, one of the main difficulties in taking this approach is that these writers are all suspicious of, even deeply resistant to, any merely academic definitions of the intellectual life. Any tradition that would take them seriously would have to be characterized by, among other things, a vivid moral imagination, a radical assertion of the continuity of life and art, and a fully inclusive vision of the human community. If there is to be any hope that such a tradition might really shape the future of American Catholic universities, it would be far more likely to do so locally, where schools might actually shape their intellectual communities in their own terms. It would have to happen through institutional diversity rather than standardization.

Any movement in Catholic education along these lines would be a radical departure from current national trends, in which most Catholic universities—especially those that have been succeeding most fully in Ellis's terms and are able to create the conditions for intellectual accomplishment across the academic disciplines—are at serious risk of becoming lifestyle enclaves for the children of the suburban upper-middle class. Maybe the best answer will eventually account, somehow, for both Ellis's standard indices and the radical figures of the intellectual life that were coming into being, without his knowledge, as he spoke.

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