Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 4, No. 3, 2020
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

James Lee Burke's Theology of Redemption

Janis E. Haswell[1]

[1] Professor Emerita, Department of English, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA

Received: August 9, 2020 Accepted: August 21, 2020 Online Published: August 27, 2020

doi:10.22158/sll.v4n3p119 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v4n3p119

Abstract

In his 23 novels featuring character Dave Robicheaux, James Lee Burke poses a fundamentally moral (and unanswerable) question: how does a good man maintain himself in the face of evil? From Neon Rain *(1987) to* A Private Cathedral *(2020), Burke develops Robicheaux as both a detective and a narrator, reminiscent of the pastoral genre, where shepherds spent their leisurely, idyllic summer days in singing contests. Like the classical shepherds/poets double, Robicheaux is cop/storyteller and seeks to redeem criminals in both capacities. Burke ultimately illustrates how good and evil will always, must always, co-exist both within individuals and society.*

Keywords

James Lee Burke, detective fiction, Dave Robicheaux, Catholic authors, ethics, pastoral

1. Introduction

It may seem nonsensical to speak of the Dave Robicheaux detective novels of James Lee Burke as pastoral. We are familiar with "pastoral" as referring to the care of the church, and we shall see that in the case of Robicheaux, that meaning applies here. But in a literary sense, pastoral specifically refers to shepherds (as a priest shepherds his flock), stemming from the genre or literary convention rooted in ancient Greece and Rome that depicts shepherds in the fields having singing matches (poetry contests) with their friends. I am going to argue that the main character in Burke's novels leads a double life, or more precisely, *is* a double much like the shepherds/poets of Virgil's Eclogues who spend their days in a kind of bucolic poetry slam. Robicheaux is not a poet or a priest. But he is both a detective and a storyteller, and his identity as a narrator is wholly *Catholic*: conscious, deliberate, and salvific.

Dorothy L. Sayers, herself a great Christian writer and translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, has observed that a novelist is never fully expressed in a single work but only in a "great synthesis of all the work" (Sayers, 1956, p. 63). It is a challenge, therefore, to describe the vision of James Lee Burke as articulated in his Robicheaux detective novels—all 23 of them, and counting. I would go further to say

that Sayers provides a fruitful framework for discussing Burke's distinctive fiction.

I have in mind Sayers' study entitled *The Mind of the Maker*, in which she finds a parallel between the Trinity and the aesthetic act. As a writer of detective fiction, Sayers argues that the genre is popular because it persuades us that "love and hatred, poverty and unemployment, finance and international politics, are problems capable of being dealt with and solved in the same manner as the Death in the Library" (p. 175). Detective fiction suggests that conflicts, desperate needs, suffering, political corruption, and greed, seemingly insurmountable, are in fact understandable in the same way that a single act of violence can be.

Sayers details characteristics of detective fiction. First, the detective's problem is always soluble—in fact, it is *entirely* soluble because the author doesn't pose questions that the solution cannot answer. The author rarely addresses issues like why human beings are capable of violence or what the moral ramifications of evil really are. The detective problem is solved ("the butler did it") in the same terms in which it is set ("who done it?"). Put another way, the rule of detective fiction is that the author must exclude from the terms of the problem everything that the solution cannot solve (pp. 180-186).

Neat and tidy. No wonder television series like Law and Order, NCIS, or Criminal Minds are so popular in a society that has otherwise lost track of moral behavior (Note 1). Within Sayers' framework, it should be clear that James Lee Burke is more than a writer of detective fiction. Granted, he can weave a riveting mystery in captivating prose. But his ultimate focus isn't on the crime, the clues, or the labyrinth of slow revelations that allow the crime to be solved. At the heart of these novels is a single question: how does the main character maintain his sense of self, his ability to achieve some good in this world, when he encounters evil. Some critics have argued that Robicheaux, as a Catholic and recovering alcoholic, is a stand-in for Burke himself (also a Catholic and recovering alcoholic). But violence and evil touch every life, to one degree or another, and thus the question posed about Robicheaux applies by extension to each of us. How do we maintain our sense of self, our ability to achieve some good, when we encounter evil?

That encounter with evil is continuous and unrelenting in these novels, and not just because Robicheaux is a Louisiana detective. Violence often threatens his adopted daughter Alafair, and destroys wives Annie and Molly. Violence stalks Robicheaux's best friend and alter-ego, Clete Purcel. Violence consumes the weak and helpless, the stupid and the reckless. Victims are robbed of their dignity, their hope, their identity, their faith in humanity. The world is, simply put, generating, perpetuating, and suffering evil.

2. Burke and the Problem of Evil

Burke focuses not simply on crime but on sin and the Problem of Evil, and so steps beyond the confines of detective fiction as defined by Sayers. He illustrates selfishness, cruelty, violence, degenerate deeds and paralyzing fear at work from the bowels of New Orleans (that "Great Whore of

Babylon") to the hills of rural Montana. What is eminently Catholic about these novels is Burke's examination of those who try to live a moral life in the face of evil, who defend the helpless and innocent, who respect the dignity and freedom of others, and who believe that we are, all of us, redeemable.

Robicheaux embodies both the light and the dark of human nature. He is clearly a flawed character, carrying burdens of guilt from his childhood and the Viet Nam War, unable to control a deep and dark anger that often leads him to violence. This makes Robicheaux a flawed narrator, so the reading experience is a precarious one. But I believe Burke wants his readers to accept the fact that life consists of meeting, listening to, and depending on others. We discern the truth, formulate decisions, and even come to an understanding of ourselves, through the avenues we have—flawed fictional characters and by extension, flawed authors and readers.

From his very first Robicheaux novel, *The Neon Rain* (1987), Burke establishes patterns in the main character's thinking that run through the subsequent novels. For example, in Robicheaux's mind, police work and the justice system are fatally flawed. The system favors the rich and neglects the poor. If criminals are caught, it occurs in the act of violence itself. Otherwise the law rarely catches them after the fact. If there is an arrest, it is not because the police are smart but because criminals are stupid, or one of them rats on the other. "Prison" is a condition, not a place, where social failure is at its worst. Few criminals are rejuvenated, only kept isolated from the rest of us as if their invisibility might take evil out of our lives. In fact, the word "criminal" carries emotional rather than legal signification. Images on a Wanted poster depict faces of evil but do not mirror our own faces, or so we tell ourselves. Gradually, Robicheaux becomes tired "of daily convincing myself that what I did for a living made a difference" (*Purple Cain Road*, 2000, p. 236) (Note 2). It is a struggle, without a doubt, not to become jaundiced and embittered, but to reaffirm, with each case, the virtue of justice and the mission to protect the innocent. That affirmation, fledgling and precarious and faltering as it is, is a moral choice—the flag in a moral universe. And moments of moral choice are front and center in Robicheaux's consciousness.

Ultimately, Robicheaux is no defeatist. In fact, he is a sort of folk philosopher who frames his rationale with baseball analogies. Nobody cares about yesterday's box score. You don't have to be a long-ball hitter all the time. The best pitch in baseball is the change of pace. If you keep bearing down on the batter, the score will take care of itself. There is a sort of moral in these analogies, as we shall see.

While he is one of the "good guys," the detective fears that he will be contaminated by the perpetrators he searches for. How can he anticipate the next crime if he doesn't understand the degenerate mind? But once he enters such a mind, how long before he becomes what he knows, or operates in its contorted, moral universe in order to right the wrong?

This is the moral arena that Burke studies throughout the Robicheaux series. How does good survive

in a fallen world? What is the line between those without a conscience, with eyes devoid of "either feeling or meaning" (*The Neon Rain*, 1987, p. 109) and those forced to stand guard against them? Robicheaux's life consists of hour-by-hour choices that are moral in their nature and ramifications. His ultimate challenge is not to give in to the power of evil nor let evil make him into its own image.

One of James Lee Burke's greatest gifts as a writer is how he further complicates the plight of his main character. The weight of moral choice is serious enough, as is the fear of contamination/transformation into the very criminal he tracks down. But now factor in this: the human will is not all-powerful in Burke's novels. There are elements outside of an individual's control. For instance, characters talk about the "script"—a sort of plot or course of action rooted either in one's own self [Robicheaux's "alcoholic, self-destructive incubus" (*The Neon Rain*, 1987, p. 81)], or shaped by something else (historical and economic circumstances) or someone else (the evil, the weak, the vulnerable). Crime (a.k.a. sin) is rooted in the age-old script of money, sex, and power. Perpetrators can determine events so that options in the detective's personal and professional lives become increasingly narrow. And violence is one of the ways in which sinners can write themselves into the script of their victims' lives.

The past is another determining factor in how moral choices are made. Robicheaux characterizes his own past as "nightmarish" and "alcoholic" (*The Neon Rain*, 1987, p. 136). This includes his childhood with his alcoholic, violent, haunted father, Aldous (victim of an oil-rig explosion) and his reckless mother Alafair Mae Guillory, who threw over her husband and son for a monster of a man who became her pimp. Paramount as well is his service in Viet Nam, with the trauma of being wounded by a bouncing betty and subsequent scenes that haunt him, waking and sleeping.

Is the past only a decaying memory? Is it a ball and chain that keeps pulling Robicheaux down into the deep pit of guilt and grief? Paradoxically, Robicheaux insists on romanticizing the landscape of his childhood. The spell of nostalgia never strays far, and Robicheaux idealizes the Louisiana of his youth as Acadiana—a haven, a poem, an eternal song—before politicians and corporations sold out its citizens and natural beauty for the oil deposits in the ground. The past may be yesterday's box score, but memories of (for instance) fishing with his father is "inextricably part of my soul and who I was" (*The New Iberian Blues*, 2019, p. 299). Indeed, he holds moments from his youth as "forever inviolate, never to be shared or explained, and like the images on a Grecian urn, never subject to time or decay" (*Crusader's Cross*, 2005, p. 325). Still, in more honest moments, Robicheaux must own the poverty, corruption, and racial hatred that saturated Louisiana in the 1950s and 60s even as he guards and defends his idealized memory like a work of art.

But why, if such memory is a fabrication? Robicheaux makes clear at the outset why the past is so important. "It is the only measure of identity we have" (*The Neon Rain*, 1987, p. 155). For good or ill, the way to *know* ourselves is to know what we have done—not what we have felt or thought or believed or told ourselves, but our past actions. "We are the sum total of what we have done and where

we have been" (*Black Cherry Blues*, 1989, p. 176) (Note 3). Thus we must keep the past alive in order to remember who we are.

And maintaining that sense of self is vital in a world of evil. "You've got to remember who you are so you don't become like the people around you," Robicheaux reflects. "Each night you tell yourself over and over you got a special place inside you where you live" (*Pegasus Descending*, 2006, p. 191) (Note 4). But all too often Robicheaux must meet violence with violence and become what he loathes. In this way, evil threatens to undo him and devour his very soul. By the end of *The Neon Rain*, Robicheaux may have confronted and dispatched the villain, but there is no quieting of the heart, no dispelling of fundamental doubts about himself. Has good truly triumphed, or is that victory momentary or marginal? Is his sacrifice acceptable, worthy in the sight of God? How *does* a good man function in a violent world?

These issues are raised in the next 22 novels and, to a certain degree, never solved. We witness the experiences and narratives of a reflective agent who cannot free himself from the gravitational pull of his past.

3. Burke and Free Will

Still, I use the word "agent" deliberately, in counterpoint to Robicheaux's understanding of the world in terms of Stephen Crane's distinction between people who are "nouns" (the power players) and people who are "adverbs"—those who might impact the action, but only in limited ways (*The Neon Rain*, 1987, p. 114). Adverbs include the low lifes, the prostitutes, the drug dealers, the pimps, the addicted, the poor, those unloved straight out of the womb. Adverbs are used by nouns, and, at a particularly low point, Robicheaux muses that many of us are only punctuation marks. But such despair proves illuminating as he comes to understand that using people, discarding others for one's own selfish purposes and fears, is the core of moral evil.

Ironically, the real nouns in Burke's world are nameless. The government and mega-corporations export greed and violence and political insanity all over the world. The Viet Nam War signifies military and covert action around the globe, wherein "the technology of napalm and the M-16 and AK-47 meat-cutters" were used on people who harvested rice with their hands (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 50). Appalling avarice and cruelty could be found in the "butcher shop" of El Salvador where, as Orwell said, the "bloody hand" of empire is at work (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 120) (Note 5). But the same hand works in Robicheaux's own back yard, pillaged and tortured by oil and chemical companies. Desecration and suffering are not accidental nor are they necessary, but rather the direct result of corporate avarice, the self-serving manipulation of politicians and the indifference of those who know better. Sin has made the entire world a "free-fire zone" with no rules of engagement (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, pp. 199-200, 144).

Robicheaux as agent will only deepen and become more complicated with each novel. On occasion

he will retreat to his nemesis alcohol or go on a dry drunk. In *Heaven's Prisoners*, he reflects: "I was not simply a drunk; I was drawn to a violent and aberrant world the way a vampire bat seeks a black recess within the earth" (1988, p. 70). On numerous occasions Robicheaux himself descends into a sort of zombie state in which he becomes the perpetrator of violence. He describes that moment as if he is a spectator or a puppet:

> I heard a sound like a popsicle stick snapping behind my eyes and saw a rush of color in my mind, like amorphous red and black clouds turning in dark water, and as though it had a life of its own my right fist hooked into his face and caught him squarely in the eye socket (*A Morning for Flamingos*, 1990, p. 253) (Note 6).

Justice may have been meted out, but in a way "that perpetuates the evil of the transgressors and breathes new life into the descendants of Cain" (*Creole Belle*, 2012, p. 505). The regret and shame he feels after such episodes is deep and bitter. He wonders if there is a second creature inside his skin—an evil twin—that always is ready to vent rage upon the world. But readers sense a filament of defensiveness, or desperation, in his lashing out, because deep down he fears that he would be unable, ultimately, "to affect the destiny of those whom I could not afford to lose" (*A Stained White Radiance*, 1992, p. 75).

Juxtaposed to his inclinations to violence is Robichaeux's habit of thinking in terms of scriptural images and spiritual masters. Despite his insistence that his religious ethos is "a battered one" (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 200), woven into his narratives like gold filigree are references to St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* and St. Augustine, whose advice to *never use the truth to injure* becomes a kind of mantra for Robicheaux. Rain is the natural world's ablution. A murder victim looks like the head of John the Baptist on a metal tray. Human criminality marks our identity as descendants of Cain. The loss of his wives wraps his heart with thorns. When he fingers the bullets holes in his bedroom wall where wife Annie was killed, he feels like he is "probing the wounds in Our Lord's hands" (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 230). The tormented find themselves in their own Garden of Gethsemane ["a tough gig" (*Pegasus Descending*, 2006, p. 342)] (Note 7) and in extreme cases, their own Golgatha (*Light of the World*, 2013, p. 404) (Note 8). In short, Robichaeux's Catholic faith offers to him a key to understanding the fallen world around him. But his faith also provides him with words and images—a vocabulary—that express the pathos and mystery of human suffering. And such images reveal a feature of Robicheaux's character that he doesn't draw our attention to: a spiritual awareness that saturates his perception. So despite his insistence that he doesn't enjoy "a great degree of self-knowledge other than the fact that I was a drunk" (*Dixie City Jam*, 1994, p. 71), his level of honesty is a comfort as well as a warning.

In *Light of the World*, Robicheaux confides that as a detective, he solves certain kinds of mysteries á la Dorothy Sayers: the background of the victim, the identity of the criminal, perhaps the motivation behind an act of violence. But there are deeper mysteries, such as creation, original sin, the origins of

personality and the dynamics of the human soul (Note 9). The highest riddle of all, declares Robicheaux, is the nature of evil. Are criminals genetically defective or evil by choice? "Were some people made different in the womb, born without a conscience, intent on destroying everything that was good in the world?" (2013, p. 3) (Note 10). It might seem so. But we all fall from the same tree, Robicheaux reflects. Or put another way, evil human beings are as human as good ones. Unfortunately, we deceive ourselves by employing a degenerating vocabulary to describe criminals and losers: "sociopaths, pukes, colostomy bags, lowlifes, miscreants, buckets of shit, mutts, recidivists, meltdowns, maggots, gorillas in the mist"…as if they are different from us (*Cadillac Jukebox*, 1996, pp. 251-252). That being said, the "good guys" in the series— Helen Soileau, Clete Purcel, Alafair, Annie, Bootsie, Molly, and Robicheaux himself—have all been abused, traumatized, rejected. They could well imagine themselves victims and be tempted to the other side. But they defy, to the point of death, the efforts of others to corrupt them, to entrench a divide among them or scatter them through fear.

Does evil originate with villainous individuals alone? Or are we in denial about our collective guilt as a society and so use individuals as our scapegoats? Robicheaux believes that no vice exists without social sanction at some level. "Industry kills the earth because there is always somebody for sale" (*Burning Angel*, 1995, p. 97). The number of rich and powerful characters responsible for despicable acts would be a lengthy litany indeed, not to mention the southern landed gentry who are descendants of members of the White Camellians and the KKK. Thus we are faced with one of the most paradoxical of Catholic truths: evil stems from individual moral choices. But greed, cruelty, prejudice, injustice, and exploitation all operate horizontally. Evil is never an abstraction (*Creole Bell*, 2012, p. 295 and *Light of the World*, 2013, p. 218). It can't be depersonalized. And its handmaiden—violence—demeans and dehumanizes, shocks and repels, leaving victims scarred for life and witnesses sick and shaken (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 115). There are severe social and personal consequences of evil. There are *always* victims, especially people of color, especially women, especially the poor and disenfranchised. Sin dehumanizes everyone—perpetrators and victims alike.

Ultimately, Robicheaux concludes: "I've seen enough of it in people not to look for a source outside of ourselves" (*Sunset Limited*, 1998, p. 102). Here is the third source of evil, but it has many guises. As Shakespeare says in *King Lear*: "The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman" (*Cadillac Jukebox*, 1996, p. 96) (Note 11). So are his acolytes, especially those in New Orleans where landed rich and corrupt politicians wear suits and look respectable.

To demonstrate other-worldly evil, Burke creates a series of arch-criminals. Consider Legion Guidry in *Jolie Blon's Bounce*, who "comes from someplace the rest of us don't." To emphasize his point, Robicheaux adds, "That's a theological statement" (2002, p. 182). Within this villain is "an enormous evil presence" from the very Abyss itself (p. 277). In *Light of the World*, Asa Surrette is cruel to the bone. In him, evil has found a willing vessel, but there is greater cunning here "than the machinations of one individual" (2013, p. 330). There is Mark Shondell in *A Private Cathedral*, who like some angry

child wants to make a graveyard of the world simply because he is angry or because he doesn't fit in. He supports a politician dedicated to enticing right-wing bigots into dismantling the country. Shondell is homegrown and revered (a "man of destiny"), in league with the devil—someone who would personally fire up the ovens at Auschwitz (2020, pp. 146, 278, 284). The culmination of this list must be Gideon Richetti in *A Private Cathedral* (Note 12), who first appears hooded in a cowl, with "a pair of elongated eyes, a harelip, and a nose that resembled the nostrils on a snake" (2020, p. 102). His hands are covered with scales, his nails are pointed; he is a being of mythic dimensions, like the one that slithered from a tree in a Mesopotamian garden (p. 169). Satan incarnate, it appears, who can read minds and conjure the worst of human nightmares.

Certainly such evil power can instill despair. Robicheaux realizes that the war between good and evil "was so vast and unknowable in nature and origin that my ephemeral efforts meant absolutely nothing" (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 16). Paradoxically, attributing human evil (at least in part) to a diabolical, disembodied, supernatural presence saves Robicheaux from losing faith in human beings entirely. Or put another way, there are agents of evil that cannot be redeemed, but human beings are not among them.

Burke is careful to develop his main character not only in conflict with truly evil people, but also in tandem with Clete Purcel, perhaps the most self-destructive character in the series. Purcel and Robicheaux self-identify as the "Bobbsey Twins of Homicide." They are two sides of the same coin—enticed by alcohol and women, drawn to the weak, prone to solving problems with violence. They often operate "under a black flag" (Note 13). And yet Robicheaux wonders if Purcel isn't a Promethean figure, even an angel among us (*Robicheaux*, 2018, p. 322 and *A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 28).

Good and evil coexist in the same person…a great mystery…which is to say, for Burke the Problem of Evil is directly linked to the mystery of the human person. That extreme of the criminal mind—the professional hit man—regards another human being as "just a bucket of guts sewn up in a sack of skin" (*Burning Angel*, 1995, p. 104), detritus easily destroyed and discarded. But Robicheaux knows better. There is, first of all, something immaterial about the human person that survives the body. One of the most singular features in Robicheaux's worldview is his faith in unseen realities and his ability to see and hear the spirits of the dead.

> I've often subscribed to the notion that perhaps history is not sequential; that all people, from all of history, live out their lives simultaneously, in different dimensions perhaps, occupying the same pieces of geography, unseen by one another, as if we are all part of one spiritual conception (*Burning Angel*, 1995, p. 38) (Note 14).

The dead are out there, in contact with the living. His brothers in arms from Viet Nam speak to him, most often in baptismal rain. His father's voice comes over the phone lines. His dead wife Annie advises him. He walks the same ground as slave-traders Jim Bowie and Jean Lafitte, along with the

Confederate dead—tattered and exhausted men in butternut (Note 15).

The dead co-exist with us *in place*—but also, it seems, *in time*. The most startling and direct examples can be found in *A Private Cathedral* (2020) with the characters of Leslie Rosenberg, reformed addict and whore, and Gideon Richetti, revelator and time traveler. The case of Leslie is an account of a post-mortal agent—an angel, perhaps—who is working toward redemption. In a previous life, she was burned to death for being a witch, an experience she only remembers in dreams of "an earlier time" (p. 207). In this incarnation, she has survived a nightmarish life of addiction, prostitution, and rape. When she and Robicheaux find each other, it is unclear what transpires. All Robicheaux remembers is entering a dream, or perhaps passing through "a door into a separate reality," and hearing a woman's voice whispering: "'*I've been waiting for you a long time. I was born to be with you. Oh, oh, oh*'" (p. 173; italics in original).

The character of Gideon Richetti surfaced in time over a wide swath of history. He is accompanied by a prison galleon associated with the Middle Passage during the days of slavery (Note 16). He executed Jews in the 16th century, was filmed at a fascist rally in Naples in 1927, and later photographed at a V-J Day celebration on Bourbon Street. How is such a thing possible if the temporal order is linear? Are we outside of time, Robicheaux wonders. Is there another time dimension that "existed simultaneously with our own" (p. 353)? Or are we living particles inside infinity (p. 349)? Indeed, Gideon's presence takes Robicheaux back so far in time that he refers to his story as a "medieval tale" (p.247) (Note 17).

If time is relative, there is one practical and compelling consequence. When Robicheaux is called to examine the corpse of a victim of violence, he prays that God will retroactively ease the pain for those who suffer a violent death, "to be with them in mind and body, to numb their senses" in their last moments (*Black Cherry Blues*, 1989, p. 183).

Our knowledge of human behavior will never be adequate. "We seldom know each other," Robicheaux reflects, "and can only guess at the lives that wait to be lived in every human being" (*Burning Angel*, 1995, p. 339). In his best moments, the detective conducts himself as a knight errant, a crusader, a light bearer, even a Christ-figure who (as wife Molly tells him) takes on "'other people's suffering without their ever asking'" (*The Tin Roof Blowdown*, 2007, p. 132). But the true innocents of the world, the real gladiators, those deserving protection and rescue, "are so humble in their origins and unremarkable in appearance that when we stand next to them in a grocery-store line we never guess how brightly their souls can burn in the dark" (*Swan Peak*, 2008, p. 395).

The past has shaped us, true, but Robicheaux realizes that our identity is also defined, shaped by, shown to us, through others. He will never know with any certainty who he is, although he will adamantly defend his autonomy, protecting that private place, his unique personhood. But he has more questions than answers about his value as a person, the extent of his goodness, his ability to protect those he loves. He acknowledges "a destructive capability" (*Sunset Limited*, 1998, p. 257) that fills him

with shame, and so seeks absolution in the sacrament of Reconciliation for failures, for inadequacies, for grief or injury he has caused.

Seeing himself in the eyes of those who love him is a corrective to the gravitational pull of sin. Love bestows value to life. Love is redemptive. “I still believe that we become the reflection we see in the eyes of others, so it’s important that someone tell us we’re all right” (*Black Cherry Blues*, 1989, p. 227) (Note 18). In the bottom of the ninth, Robicheaux reflects, we will count up the people we love and add their names to good places and good deeds (*Light of the World*, 2013, p. 443). And in terms of that Higher Power spoken of in his AA groups, Robicheaux confesses: “Long ago I made my troth with the Man Upstairs and asked that my sacrifice be acceptable in His sight” (*The New Iberian Blues*, 2019, p. 392).

4. Burke and the Hope of Redemption

The most loving and loyal people never have the aura of saints. Robicheaux’s abiding hope is that even the worst of us have something good within (*In the Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead*, 1993, p. 246). Thus it is imperative for Robicheaux to extend another chance, offer a gesture to the weak, the fallen, even the corrupt, and so affirm their dignity as agents, as persons.

Ultimately, hope is not rooted in human goodness but in the possibility of redemption. Purcel’s daughter Gretchen (herself a paid assassin) observes that *The Godfather* movies and *The Sopranos* television series may both be about crime, but they are fundamentally different in purpose and theme. *The Godfather* is about redemption; *The Sopranos* is not, since Tony is not interested in saving his soul (*Light of the World*, 2013, p. 302). But James Lee Burke is fixated on the process of redemption. Consider Robicheaux’s mother, who begins ambiguously and emerges redeemed. Her abandonment of her family haunts her son, an action confounded by the fact that the man she flees with is far from deserving of her love. Eventually, her son finds out the truth of how she died—in her final moments, courageous and sure of her identity as a Robicheaux. Her story reiterates what her son realizes: “You offer what you have, perhaps even bless it with a prayer, and maybe somewhere down the line affection grows into faith and replaces memory” (*Black Cherry Blues*, 1989, p. 41).

Burke does not designate redemption only for the Robicheaux family. In this regard, the break-through novel is *Swan Peak* with the character of Troyce Nix. By adopting long sections of third-person narrative, action totally apart from Robicheaux’s consciousness, Burke tells the sordid story of Nix (a gumball in a contract prison) and Jimmy Dale Greenwood (an inmate in that prison). Nix sexually abuses Greenwood to the point where the prisoner attacks him and leaves him for dead. The reader might well conclude that Nix is the primary villain of the novel. But in the end he saves Robicheaux and Purcel from certain death, and then helps Greenwood escape to safety. He is, in Robicheaux’s words, “the surprise in the cracker jack box” (*Swan Peak*, 2008, p. 400), illustrating that in many cases, the seemingly unredeemable can in fact be angels in disguise.

An even more surprising transformation involves Gideon Richetti. Initially serpentine in appearance, Gideon gradually appears more and more human, with hands and not claws, skin and not scales. "'I have free will and I misused it,'" Gideon confesses (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 243). His redemption depends upon being forgiven by someone he has injured (in the most recent case, Clete Purcel, in a previous life, Leslie Rosenberg) so that he can reclaim his soul (p. 299).

The subject of redemption marks the unique Catholic character of Burke's fiction. How many times within each novel does Robicheaux confront suspects, face-to-face? Too numerous to count. This is, in fact, his *modus operandi* as a detective. Sometimes he confronts them out of anger, or to shield a friend or family member, or to elicit a confession. But his motivation is more complicated. Robicheaux isn't there simply to accuse them, but to allow them an opportunity to retract, repent, change course, confess. In this sense, "it is always the first inning" (*Pegasus Descending*, 2006, p. 14). Perhaps this is why Helen Soileau tells him that if he weren't a cop, he would be a priest—a shepherd of souls.

The need to confess brings us to Robicheaux as storyteller. From the earliest novels, there is implied a motivation for him relating his experiences to and for others. "Our story is ongoing," he tells us in *Heaven's Prisoners* (1988, p. 292). A later novel begins as a story of Robicheaux's own fear, of how physical injury led him to doubt himself as "something weak and loathsome and undeserving of breath" (*A Morning for Flamingos*, 1990, p. 292). But that story metamorphoses into one about the bravery of others. At the end of *Cadillac Jukebox*, Robicheaux thinks of the latest saga as part of "the unfinished story of ourselves" (1996, p. 297). Life experiences can be communicated to others, crafted into a coherent story, and in the *telling* make more sense than they do while they are lived. Thus reliving a police case or personal trauma is an act of survival for Robicheaux, an attempt to recount and recollect, to make sense of episodes with one of the few rational tools he has: by ordering them into a story.

Gradually, Robicheaux becomes a more self-conscious narrator, addressing the reader directly and commenting on his storytelling. In *Creole Belle*, he explicitly signals the reader about his narrative direction ("From this point on in my narrative….") along with the limits of his ability to retell the action: "I would like to describe the next few minutes in a precise fashion, but I cannot" (2012, pp. 431, p. 491). To begin *Light of the World*, he tells the reader: "This is a tale that maybe I shouldn't share. But it's not one I want to keep inside me, either" (2013, p. 3). He entreats the reader to forgive him for his obsession with the past. "My own story isn't important. The story of the human condition is" (p. 182). In *The New Iberian Blues*, he anticipates his reader's curiosity: "If a person is interested in the kind of war scene my patrol stumbled upon, I can add a few details to satisfy his curiosity" (2019, p. 421). At the same time, Robicheaux understands the limits of his own word craft: "The next images are difficult to reconstruct" (p. 436). He also apologizes to the reader: "Pardon me if my remarks are too personal or if they violate good taste" (p. 304). In *A Private Cathedral* (2020), such addresses to readers are more plentiful. "I cannot tell you with exactitude," he regrets (p. 152). "The events that followed are hard to put into words" (p. 213). But Robicheaux seems intent upon honesty and accuracy, despite the fact the

words are failing him. “The events I have described so far were frightening because they seemed born from a separate dimension and, more disturbing, they had no connection to the world as we know it” (p. 193). At the end of the novel, he shares his rock-bottom insight: “I have to pause at this juncture and say something of a personal nature. Death’s a motherfucker” (p. 309).

Why is it important for Robicheaux to turn his experiences into words? His accounts are certainly confessional in tone. But in addition, storytelling comes naturally to this college graduate, certified (surprisingly) to teach English. “I believe that ritual and metaphor exist for a reason,” he insists (*Heaven’s Prisoners*, 1988, p. 31). And he can certainly turn a phrase (Note 19). Stories take us outside of time. They give a second life to experiences, recall elements of our past, leave a permanent record of the lessons we have learned.

But Robicheaux’s narrative motivation runs more deeply. For one, he can extricate himself from the fate of his parents—noble and courageous in their own way, but inarticulate people who could not tell one another adequately of either their pain or the yearnings of their hearts (*Purple Cain Road*, 2000, p. 284). But more importantly, as a storyteller Robicheaux can redeem others in a way he is unable to do as a detective. In telling the stories of his parents, of Annie and Bootsie and Molly, of Purcel (the bravest and most wounded man he knows), and all the innocent victims of violent crime, Robicheaux is giving them a second life and thereby redeeming them with words. Saving them with a story.

Through a pastoral-like structure (shepherds as poets, detective as storyteller), Burke has extended to his main character a crucial function. The first-person perspective isn’t simply a structural design allowing readers into the mind and heart of an otherwise private and conflicted character. The doubling of this detective/storyteller advances Burke’s theme of redemption. Robicheaux is healing a fallen world through words. And the theme of redemption, in turn, implies an answer to a larger question about humanity’s purpose: “Is there a design in the events of our lives? Or do things just happen, much like a junkyard falling down a staircase?” (*The Tin Roof Blowdown*, 2007, p. 112). What Burke demonstrates is that there isn’t just a script but a design, working slowly unto good, through very flawed people who stubbornly and bravely extend to sinners a chance for contrition and change. And during this slow, uncertain process, good and evil will coexist, *must* coexist, for mercy, understanding, and forgiveness to emerge. This is especially true for Robicheaux himself. It isn’t that the good is entirely inside of him and evil attacks from the outside. Rather, good and evil co-exist *within* him, together, at the same time.

The New Iberian Blues is labeled by the narrator as a “Manichean tale,” a story about good and evil, light and darkness. They will always coexist on this earth, the wheat with the chaff, the sheep with the goats. In fact, in Burke’s last two novels, the motif of light and darkness, black and white, captures not simply the tension between the two, but their mutual co-existence. Oftentimes the power of evil seems nearly complete, as if the world is “all that blackness out there” (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 99) (Note 20). Flames of hell itself seem to illuminate the faces of Mark Shondell and Gideon Richetti. But

the more common image is a blend of light and dark, like the sunlight on one side of a face, shadow on the other. In the closing lines of *The New Iberian Blues* (2019), Robicheaux reflects on Desmond Cormier's gallery of black and white photographs:

> I believe Desmond passed on to me his obsession with light and shadow. I cannot watch the sun course through the heavens and settle into a molten ball without feelings a weakness in my heart, as though God does slay Himself with every leaf that flies and that indeed there is no greater theft than that of time (p. 446).

If the great moral dimensions of human existence are black and white, light and darkness, good and evil, then our detective/storyteller is advising us to think more in terms of balance than conflict. Reminiscent of James Joyce's closing lines of "The Dead" (Note 21), Robicheaux reflects that the same stars shine on all of us. "All the players are out there, the children of light and the children of darkness, the blessed and the malformed…the stars enveloped the entirety of the planet" (*Swan Peak*, 2008, p. 307).

In the end, Robicheaux makes peace with his mortality. Through the course of *A Private Cathedral*, the character works through "the long night of the soul" to a degree of metaphysical clarity (2020, p. 2) so that in the closing lines of the novel, he renounces the need "to probe the shadows of the heart or the evil that men do" (p. 367). It is time to lay down his sword and shield (and pen) and "study war no more" (p. 367). He does not curse his mortality but leaves us with a blessing:

> *May the road rise up to meet you.*
> *May the wind be always at your back.*
> *May the sun shine warm upon your face,*
> *The rains fall soft upon your fields, and until we meet again,*
> *May God hold you in the palm of His hand* (p. 367; italics in the original).

References

Burke, James Lee. (1987). *The Neon Rain*. (1987). New York: Pocket Books.

Burke, James Lee. (1988). *Heaven's Prisoners*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Burke, James Lee. (1989). *Black Cherry Blues*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Burke, James Lee. (1990). *A Morning for Flamingos*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Burke, James Lee. (1992). *A Stained White Radiance.* New York: Hyperion.

Burke, James Lee. (1993). *In the Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead*. New York: Hyperion.

Burke, James Lee. (1994). *Dixie City Jam.* New York, Hyperion.

Burke, James Lee. (1995). *Burning Angel*. New York: Hyperion.

Burke, James Lee. (1996). *Cadillac Jukebox.* New York: Hyperion.

Burke, James Lee. (1998). *Sunset Limited*. New York: Doubleday.

Burke, James Lee. (2000). *Purple Cain Road*. New York, Doubleday.

Burke, James Lee. (2002). *Jolie Blon's Bounce*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2005). *Crusader's Cross*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2006). *Pegasus Descending*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2007). *The Tin Roof Blowdown*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2008). *Swan Peak*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2010). *The Glass Rainbow*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2012). *Creole Bell*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2013). *Light of the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2018). *Robicheaux*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2019). *The New Iberian Blues*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Burke, James Lee. (2020). *A Private Cathedral*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Joyce, James. (1996). The Dead. *The Dubliners*. New York: Penguin Books. (Original work published in 1914).

Sayers, Dorothy. (1956). *The Mind of the Maker*. New York: Meridian Books.

Notes

Note 1. And Burke would add in the voice of Dave Robicheaux, "The reason we watch contrived television dramas about law enforcement is that often the real story is so depressing, nobody would believe it" (*Creole Belle*, 2012, p. 93). In *A Private Cathedral*, Robicheaux warns, "Anyone who buys in to the average television portrayal of law enforcement deserves any misfortune that happens to him" (2020, p. 165).

Note 2. While these next few pages are based on the themes originating in the first novel of the series, I have enlarged the discussion with quotations from later novels to emphasize the consistency of themes, making this a synchronic rather than diachronic study.

Note 3. See also *Pegasus Descending*, 2006, p. 246 and *Robicheaux*, 2018, p. 385.

Note 4. See also *The Glass Rainbow*: "If there is any human tragedy, there is only one, and it occurs when we forget who we are and remain silent while a stranger takes up residence inside our skin" (2010, p. 118).

Note 5. See also *Creole Belle*, 2012, p. 243.

Note 6. Variations can be found in seven later novels. See for instance *In the Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead*, 1993, p. 90.

Note 7. Gethsemane is a constant image throughout these novels. In Robicheaux's words, Gethsemane is "a very special place you cannot tell others about, lest you frighten them or embarrass yourself. You've seen the great reality and have accepted it for what it is, and in so doing, you have been set free. But by anyone's measure, the dues you pay are not for everyone….It's a motherfucker, and you never want to have it twice" (*The New Iberian Blues*, 2019, p. 422).

Note 8. In contrast to Gethsemane, Golgatha is rarely referenced, since it signifies the ultimate manner of suffering. It is used, for instance, to describe Leslie Rosenberg's past in *A Private Cathedral* (2020, p. 139).

Note 9. In Burke's most recent novel, Robicheaux observes that every aspect of the universe is a mystery, "no more understandable by the scientist than by the metaphysician. And the greatest mystery in creation is the spiritual and healing transformation of a woman when she gives herself to you. It's a gift you cannot repay, a memory that never dies" (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 302).

Note 10. Or as Burke states in *Crusader's Cross*: put on earth are those who "make a conscious choice to erase God's thumbprint from their souls" (2005, p. 57).

Note 11. Repeated in *Crusader's Cross*, (2005), *The Tin Roof Blowdown* (2007), *Swan Peak* (2008), and *A Private Cathedral* (2020).

Note 12. Burke relates that "Gideon" means a great warrior (as in the Book of *Judges*) but also a feller or hewer or "one who has a stump in place of a hand" or "one who cuts down" (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, p. 123). He is a person of both deformity and wrath, the "revelator" who reveals to people what they really are (p. 348).

Note 13. What an ambiguous image. The black flag could refer to renegade Confederate troops that operated outside the rules of war, intent on never surrendering or accepting surrender. They showed no quarter, took no prisoners, offered no mercy. But it also can refer to the practice of pirates, who under a black flag would signal that if an opponent surrendered, it would be "given quarter," or extended merciful treatment.

Note 14. See also *The Glass Rainbow*: historical events "occur simultaneously, like a dream inside the mind of God. Perhaps only men see events sequentially…." (2010, p 138).

Note 15. In *In the Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead*, Robicheaux has visions of General John Bell Hood, who warns him that there are "insidious men abroad in the land" (1993, p. 161). The General is not simply a voice out of the past; he is the voice of the past.

Note 16. Robicheaux and Purcel both dream of this galleon with black sails prior to meeting Gideon, then later when they are in the proximity of evil (*A Private Cathedral*, 2020, pp. 52, 157, 195, 320, 323, 325).

Note 17. It is clear that *A Private Cathedral* (2020) marks the most direct articulation—the culmination—of this sense of time, when particular, finite moments fold into events and characters from the past. The setting of the novel is in fact timeless. The story begins as a memory of a summer evening "many years ago" (p. 3), then advances to days before 9/11. Bootsie has died "a while back" (p. 170) and Robicheaux has not yet met Molly. His daughter Alafair is away, so our main character stands alone, isolated except for Clete. As Robicheaux becomes increasingly caught up in the machinations of the Shondell and Balangie families, musician Johnny tries to warn him and Clete away: "'We're not in the place you think we are….It's not the date you think it is, either'" (p. 90). With the novel being a

retrospection, then, one might argue that there is less tension in the culminating confrontation between Mark Shondell and his minions verses Robicheaux and Purcel. Readers know the heroes will not die, since some twenty years of detection will follow this event. Or do we? It is possible, in light of the suspension of time and the return of souls like Leslie and Gideon, that Robicheaux and Purcel meet their end, only to return in later novels as angels from the other side.

Note 18. See also *A Morning For Flamingos*: "my thoughts about myself would always be question marks; my only identity would remain the reflection that I saw in the eyes of others" (1990, p. 56).

Note 19. Consider this line from an early novel: "The unblemished place where God once grasped our souls becomes permanently stained. A bird lifts its span of wings and flies forever out of the heart" (*Heaven's Prisoners*, 1988, p. 256).

Note 20. In the epilogue of *A Private Cathedral* (2020), Robicheaux looks back over time from the vantage point of present day. "Our best thinking," he ruminates, "has been a disaster from birth to the grave" (p. 365). He describes Purcel's despair at the events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017, and the great evils of racism, nativism, and division (pp. 296, 366). It will be time-traveler Gideon who warns Purcel that the politician working with Shondell all those years ago is now "in your midst" (p. 367). He is "the rich-boy gutter rat" with ties to the Russians, who was headed for the White House under Shondell's guidance, and now (in 2020) is presumably there (p. 301). "'But you should not worry about him,'" Gideon continues. "'He will be destroyed by his own machinations'" (p. 367).

Note 21. "…The snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce, 1996, p. 224).