

Ways of Faith

By Rick Ripatrzone

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The Cloister: A Novel, by James Carroll (Nan A. Talese, 384 pp., \$27.95)

"I've done what I should have done, and what I don't know why I didn't do, years ago: I have joined the Catholic Church," Allen Tate wrote in a 1951 letter to Cleanth Brooks. The next year he published the essay "The Man of Letters in the Modern World," which ends by first quoting Jacques Maritain on the "supratemporal destiny" of man and then placing significant responsibility on the role of the critic: "It is the duty of the man of letters to supervise the culture of language, to which the rest of culture is subordinate, and to warn us when our language is ceasing to forward the ends proper to man. The end of social man is communion in time through love, which is beyond time."

Lofty words with a papist tinge — which explains why, a few years later, Tate would complain to his wife (the novelist Caroline Gordon) that he wasn't being examined as a Catholic poet. Poets often elevate the worth of critics; even more so when they play both roles. Tate's worries had to do with his legacy. In 1965, while teaching at the University of Minnesota, he was particularly impressed by the work of a young Catholic named James Carroll. Tate had a good eye: Carroll would go on to two "vocations" — priest and writer — although, as Tate once quipped to him, "You know, you're not going to be able to have them both."

The Cloister, Carroll's twelfth novel, is the story of 38-year-old Father Michael Kavanagh, whose "priesthood was centered more on the Confessional than the Communion rail." Father Michael becomes unmoored early in the novel, owing to two chance encounters. The first occurs in Kavanagh's Manhattan parish, Good Shepherd. One of five priests at the parish, Father Michael chooses the 6 a.m. weekday Mass. He's up at 5 each morning and finds "the jumble of the faith fully convincing only when it [is] dark outside." Among the regulars lined at the Communion rail is a man with silvery blond hair; "there was something supplicant, or defeated, in the posture, which did not square with the well-cut downtown clothing." It is John Malloy, a fellow seminarian from years back, who lowers his head when Father Michael reaches him: "The man's refusal to open his mouth and take the Host seemed personal, a refusal not of God, but of the priest. An indictment?"

We learn that John left the seminary when, according to Michael's mentor, John had "concluded that his feelings for [Michael] were out of bounds." Michael wonders why John has found him

after all these years, but John disappears after Mass. Michael heads into the wet November morning feeling that the “weather — vividly dank and gray, an endless threat of true winter — perfectly matched how [he] had come to feel about himself, a perpetual inner bleakness, yet always short of the true misery he’d have to acknowledge.” Intrigued and a bit afraid, Michael drifts across the city. Unable to find his old friend, he reaches what looks like a medieval monastery: the Cloisters.

Full of gorgeous art, the Cloisters is “not a true monastery, or even an authentic imitation,” but rather a “Rockefeller-funded fantasy structure, a mishmash of belfries, architectural fragments, aged pillars, arched doorways, stairways, arcades” — and in the midst of the descriptive litany, we can feel Carroll’s third-person narrator placing the metaphor in our lap: The Cloisters is a place with all of the artifice of the Church but no real faith. Even the Gregorian chant from a small chapel “was newfangled piped-in music, fake.” But Michael, inspired by the atmosphere, sits on a bench, opens his breviary, and begins to read the day’s Psalm until a museum docent, leading a tour, catches his eye. “No actual prayers allowed?” he questions her — and she smiles, though we catch the real drift. Her name is Rachel Vedette, and when she says she is French, Michael says so is the author of a book he is reading, *Waiting for God*: Simone Weil.

Rachel is unimpressed and calls Weil an anti-Semite. She apologizes for being blunt, and in that moment Michael fully sees her for the first time. She is “gaunt, but brusquely candid” — like Weil. Michael is attracted to her — first as an idea, later as a confidante. After all, they met when he was out searching for something, anything to make sense of his spiritual drift.

A priest wracked with doubt is familiar territory for Carroll. He was ordained in 1969 and served as the Catholic chaplain at Boston University until 1974, when his anti-war sentiment and ambitions as a writer increasingly placed him at odds with the Church. His career has been prolific and diverse. After a dozen novels and eight works of nonfiction, including his National Book Award-winning memoir, he is in subject and sense one of our most consistently Catholic writers — with his focus often on the life and inspiration of Jesus, placed against ecclesiastical fallings.

His characters, including Father Michael, sometimes let loose against the institution of the Church, but we never quite get a sense of bitterness from Carroll. “As a Catholic,” he has said, “I have learned the hard way that there is no failure of which I can accuse my Church that I am not myself in some way guilty of. . . . Every Mass begins with repentance because we miss the mark at times.”

Throughout *The Cloister*, Michael’s faith wavers. He searches for the truth about John’s exit from the seminary and becomes closer to Rachel, whose father was an academic specializing in the medieval lovers Abelard and Héloïse: the monk who was a scholar, the nun who became an

abbess. Her father was particularly interested in how “Abelard gives us a Jew to be respected, a peer figure.” In his *Collationes*, according to Rachel, “the Jew is a kind of hero.” Rachel opens Michael’s eyes to an ecclesiastical history, at the same time revealing her suffering during the German occupation of Paris.

Carroll is a gifted writer of historical fiction, and his medieval scenes involving Abelard and Héloïse are more dramatic than the contemporary half of the novel. Michael seeks to close a chapter from his seminary life and discover his true path. Carroll resists a parallel sequence between Abelard and Héloïse on one hand and Michael and Rachel on the other. The result is a more complex relationship between past and present — think more typology than analogy. The medieval lovers foreshadow how the modern friends also seek freedom from their institutions, although the relationship between Michael and Rachel is more about discovering their true selves than seeking romance.

The Cloister is a novel by an author who has made the Church his subject. As a seminarian at St. Paul’s College, Carroll returned to study with Tate — this time at Sewanee. Even then, Carroll wavered between his vocations and saw the reunion with his mentor as having a particular purpose: “I was coming to declare myself to Allen Tate, to announce my determination to make a life as a writer. He would bless me, calling me out of the priesthood, and out of prophecy, too.”

But when Carroll arrived, Tate was exhausted. He looked as if he’d been crying. “Oh, James,” the poet said, “I could have used you yesterday.” One of Tate’s infant twin sons, Michael, had died in his sleep. Tate called himself a “bad Catholic” and was heartbroken that his parish would not allow a Catholic funeral because of Tate’s divorces. Carroll, not yet a priest, was skeptical that his words might offer Tate consolation, but they did. He heard his mentor’s confession and offered as close to a sacrament as he could muster. *The Cloister*, like Carroll’s life, affirms the old saying: Once a priest, always a priest.