

THE OMNIDIRECTIONAL PICKLE AND ----- ELLIOTT #2123
THE TRIDIMENSIONAL CRECHE

It's a few days before Christmas '86, & an American public school has just celebrated Pickle Day instead. The principal explained what is true enough, that team-play focusing on something as concrete & simple as a pickle can be educational (to use his term) "omnidirectionally"--imagination, metacognition (thinking about thinking), metalanguage (yes, thinking about language), you know. Such as it is, it gets no argument from me; I'm for creative teaching-learning with a critical edge, and you've got a leg up if to boot it can be funny. But more than six decades ago, at the age those chn. now are, I was team-doing stuff with the creche in public school (of course when it was a Protestant-dominated public institution, as were at that time most American public institutions). This Thinksheet is not a nostalgic sniffle of an old man come Christmas again. But it is a reflection on (1) the designed deprivation of America's public schools vis-a-vis the religious depth-dimension of their heritage, and (2) the three-dimensional richness of the Christian mind (mindset, mentality, inner culture) that St. Francis could assume when seven cs. ago he invented the creche-manger-crib as bubblegum for the eyeballs of illiterates who couldn't read words (as presentday spiritual illiterates can). (My use here of the whimsical definition of television is deliberate: the creche was private & public, church & streetcorner, Christmas television before television.)

1. What Francis did was to bring the baby Jesus off the churches' walls (murals, mosaics) & windows (stained-glass) and put him--now in 3 dimensions, not only 2--among the people in and outside of the churches. The creche became text in the round, and it was understood--more by feeling, sensing, than by thinking--from the same 3 hermeneutical angles as was the biblical text, Scripture beyond the literal or surface meaning: the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical.

2. What got me into this is that I learned about Pickle Day while reading Flannery O'Connor's MYSTERY AND MANNERS (F,S&G/84/57). No, she doesn't mention PD. I saw PD (yep, TV; CNN during lunch) while taking a break from FO's M&M. Our great American Catholic story-writer, lecturing on "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," struggling with the reality that a great story narrates an intersection of spacetime with eternity (the timeless), puts it this way (72): "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision...able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. It seems to be a paradox that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction." I offer this passage as a way of meditation on the creche, which for us Christians is a compression of complexity into simplicity and of worldstory into earthimage. For yesterday, & today.