

THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER

Some years ago the Vanderbilt University Press published an anthology under the title *Reality and Myth*. A young critic, Ashley Brown, contributed an essay to the anthology called "The Novel as Christian Comedy." Very little notice has been taken of this essay but I think it is based on an insight which is of great importance to all fiction writers and serious readers of fiction.

In his essay Mr. Brown maintained—what is no news to scholars of Dante—that in *The Divine Comedy* Dante was the first writer to synthesize certain fictional techniques which were, so to speak, in the air. Dante was, indeed, the first writer of his time to combine these techniques in order to achieve effects he desired. But he was not the first writer to use them. For us of the western world they were first used (in a way that approaches perfection) by the Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Their plays survive because their characters are archetypal. There may be at this moment in Detroit or San Francisco or Norfolk, Virginia, a young woman who hates her husband enough to conspire with her lover to murder him. But she cannot claim to be original. In our western world Clytemnestra, the wife of the Greek hero, Agamemnon, was the first woman to commit a crime that so fired the imagination of a whole race that to this day she remains the archetype—that is to say, "the first model for such a character."

I cite the great tragedians to make *my* point. But Mr. Brown illustrated *his* point by reference to characters in a novel I had just published, *The Malefactors*. A psychiatrist in that novel, he reasoned, played the same archetypal role that Virgil plays in *The Divine Comedy*. A woman in the book was, he felt, a Matilda who, in *The Divine Comedy*, goes singing and plucking "the flowers by which her path was painted everywhere." I was delighted to hear this—the vanity of authors (as you may have