
OBSERVATIONS

Believing in Flannery O'Connor

Terry Teachout

IN 1952, the landscape of American fiction was dominated by a group of literary celebrities who had published their first novels after or near the end of World War II. James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger, Gore Vidal: these were the up-and-comers about whom everyone was talking in the days when serious fiction still mattered to the educated public, the ones who were expected to do great things.

But while all of them are remembered today, none save Bellow came anywhere near living up to his promise. And though the most consequential American book of 1952 was undoubtedly Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the year's most significant literary debut turns out in retrospect to have been a slender, poorly reviewed novel about a half-crazed itinerant evangelist who preached

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the gospel of the Church Without Christ, a book whose all-but-unknown author was a young woman whose home was not New York but a small town in rural Georgia.

It took a number of years for Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* to be recognized as a modern classic, but once recognition came, it was decisive. Today O'Connor, who died in 1964 at the age of 39, is generally acknowledged as one of the foremost American fiction writers of the 20th century. Not only has she emerged as a key figure in post-war American letters; she is by far the most critically acclaimed of the many Catholic writers who came to prominence in this country after World War II, as well as one of the most widely read novelists, short-story writers, or poets to have been born in the American South. As Brad Gooch points out in *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*¹ the first full-length biography of O'Connor, the Library of America's 1988 volume of her collected works "outsold [William] Faulkner's, published three years earlier."²

That an author who published only two short novels and twenty stories (not counting student work)

in her lifetime should now be the subject of such posthumous acclaim is the stuff reevaluations are made of. Might some of the attention now being paid to O'Connor and her modest *oeuvre* arise from the fact that she died so young? Or could it be that certain of her admirers are going out of their way to praise a writer who—unlike the once-big literary guns of the 50's—was a woman?

Tempting though such mean-spirited speculation may be, it is misguided. O'Connor's laconic, formidably tough-minded novels and stories are fully as good as their reputation, and vastly better than anything published by Baldwin, Capote, Mailer, Salinger, or Vidal. After she died, Thomas Merton wrote that "when I read Flannery O'Connor, I do not think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather of someone like Sophocles." Though O'Connor herself would surely have scoffed at such praise, she is among a bare handful of American writers, mod-

¹ Little, Brown, 416 pp., \$30.00.

² *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* contains all of O'Connor's published fiction and a generous sampling of her essays and letters (Library of America, \$35).

ern or otherwise, of whom such a thing might plausibly be said.

But her reputation rests in part on a persistent misunderstanding. Unlike most of the other major American novelists of the 20th century, O'Connor wrote not as a more or less secular humanist but as a believer, a rigorously orthodox Roman Catholic. Her fiction was permeated with religious language and symbolism, and its underlying intent was in many cases specifically spiritual. Yet most of O'Connor's early critics failed to grasp her intentions, and even now many younger readers are ignorant of the true meaning of her work.

BRAD GOOCH's excellent book is likely to clear up this misunderstanding once and for all. *Flannery: A Life* is attractively written, thorough but not obtrusively detailed and—most important—wholly to the point. Unlike much of what has been published about O'Connor in recent years, it is the work of a biographer whose goal is not to advocate or justify but simply to tell the story of O'Connor's too-short life and (insofar as possible) show how it was mirrored in her fiction.

As Gooch makes clear, O'Connor's religious beliefs were central to her art. She was a "cradle Catholic," one of the very few novelists of her generation to have been born into the church rather than converting to Catholicism as an adult, and she appears never to have weathered any crisis of faith. What inspired her to write fiction, however, was not her own reasonably straightforward relationship to the Catholic Church so much as the church's more complex relationship to the world around her.

Roman Catholicism has long been viewed with suspicion in the South, where evangelical Protestantism in all its myriad varieties is woven into the fabric of a culture that is, in O'Connor's oft-quoted phrase, "Christ-haunted." O'Connor, on the other hand, was both a Catholic and an intellectual, a pair

of traits that set her as far apart from the common life of rural Georgia as did the chronic illness that forced her to lead the reclusive existence of a semi-invalid.³

Yet O'Connor, to her credit, took the homespun beliefs of her fellow Southerners with the utmost seriousness. Even more surprisingly, she regarded them with exceptional imaginative sympathy, seeking to portray in her fiction the sometimes bizarre ways in which spiritual enthusiasm manifested itself in the lives of people who, lacking an orthodoxy to guide them, were forced to re-create the forms of religion from scratch. As she explained in a 1959 letter:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically.

Her sympathy, she added, arose from the fact that "I accept the same fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption and judgment that they do."

Hence the ambiguity of *Wise Blood*, a concisely picaresque novel about Hazel Motes, an uneducated Southerner who longs to free himself from the Christianity in which he was raised but "cannot get rid of his sense of debt and his inner vision of Christ" (as O'Connor put it) and ends by blinding himself in order to better "see" his inner vision of divine grace. What gives *Wise Blood* its characteristic tone is that O'Connor plays Motes's desperate struggle for laughs—but without ever making the mistake of viewing it, or him, with contempt.

O'CONNOR, AS *Wise Blood* proves, was no run-of-the-mill religious novelist. In addition to having a deeply philosophical turn of mind,

she was a thoroughgoing modernist who adhered no less devoutly to the Jamesian precept to "dramatize, dramatize!" Moreover, her youthful reading of Jacques Maritain, the Catholic philosopher who argued in *Art and Scholasticism* (1930) that "the pure artist considered in the abstract as such . . . is something completely unmoral," had persuaded her that the serious Catholic fiction writer had no moral obligation to be preachy.

Between them, these two inclinations led O'Connor to write stories in which religious faith (or its absence) and its effects on her characters were portrayed with little or no explanatory authorial comment. Because these stories are in the broadest sense comic—and because they portray a culture of which most educated Americans of the 50's knew little or nothing—it was inevitable that they would be misunderstood by many of their first readers, who wrongly pigeonholed their author as a purveyor of the same Southern gothicism and grotesquery that they had previously encountered in such novels as Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948).

To be sure, the undeniable brilliance of O'Connor's writing won her near-immediate acclaim from the American intelligentsia. Her cause was promptly taken up by such noted editors and writers as Robert Giroux, Robert Lowell, Katherine Anne Porter, and Philip Rahv, who published two excerpts from *Wise Blood* in *Partisan Review*. But it soon became evident that some of those who most admired her writing failed to grasp its point, and the middlebrow publications of the day reviewed her with a blend of puzzlement and disdain.

Typical of the critical response to O'Connor's early work was *Time's*

³ Throughout her adult life O'Connor suffered from lupus, a physically debilitating autoimmune disease that ultimately led to her death.

unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), her first short-story collection, in which sympathetic detachment was mistaken for cutting satire:

Georgia's Flannery O'Connor has already learned to strip the acres of clay-country individuality with the merciless efficiency of a cotton-picking machine. . . . The South that simpers, storms, and snivels in these pages moves along a sort of up-to-date *Tobacco Road*, paved right into town.

O'CONNOR WAS unsurprised by such obtuseness. "I have found," she wrote with dry amusement, "that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is going to be called realistic." Yet it vexed her all the same, and when *Wise Blood* was reissued in 1962, it was accompanied by a newly written author's note in which she called the book "a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*."⁴

Some of O'Connor's friends were dismayed by her decision to speak so frankly about the book's religious implications, no doubt because many of them, as Brad Gooch makes clear in *Flannery*, preferred not to believe that orthodox belief was so salient an aspect of her work. Even the usually sympathetic Gooch describes the note to *Wise Blood* as "rather heavy, and blunt." By then, however, it had become apparent to most of O'Connor's critics that she was writing from a specifically religious perspective, though only a few saw that she identified herself with her Christ-haunted preachers and prophets.

Consider, for instance, the critical reception of *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), a dark and shocking short novel whose protagonist, Francis Tarwater, is a fourteen-year-old boy torn between the crude but passionate Protestantism of his great-uncle, an angry old man who believes himself to be a prophet, and the bloodless secularism of his un-

cle, a school teacher who longs to bring the boy "out of the darkness into the light." Francis is ignorant, willful, and violent, and there is nothing obviously sympathetic about the way O'Connor describes him—but he has still been touched by grace, and so she sides with him in his quest. "The modern reader will identify himself with the school teacher," she told a friend, "but it is the old man who speaks for me." Yet *Time*, though its reviewer sensed something of O'Connor's larger purpose, failed to perceive her sympathy, claiming that the book showed "the secure believer poking bitter fun at the confused and be-deviled."

It was not until 1979, fifteen years after her death, that the full extent of O'Connor's orthodoxy became widely known. In that year a collection of her letters, *The Habit of Being*, was published, revealing her to have been a witty, engaging correspondent.⁵ Paradoxically, it was *The Habit of Being* that cemented O'Connor's reputation, displaying her as a person in a way that her fiction never does (though *Flannery* reveals that a considerable amount of her private life made it onto the page, albeit in cryptic form). But O'Connor also tore the veil of symbolism away from *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and such widely anthologized stories as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," writing with straightforward specificity about their religious aspect.

After the publication of *The Habit of Being*, there was no longer any excuse for readers to ignore or misinterpret the religious underpinnings of O'Connor's fiction, or to fail to take at face value her categorical statement that "I write the way do because (not though) I am a Catholic. . . . The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism." By then, though, O'Connor's work had taken on a life of its own, and to this day it remains common for readers

to assume that her comic portraits of Southern Protestantism are hostile rather than sympathetic.

THEREIN LIES the O'Connor "problem," if problem it is. To what extent is her fiction accessible to those who do not take its religious wellsprings seriously? This is far more of a problem today than it was in the 50's and 60's, for American intellectual culture has lately become almost entirely secularized, and it begs a hard question: Will O'Connor's work survive only by being misunderstood?

It is true that she has much to offer beyond her spirituality. O'Connor was also a consummate craftsman whose stories are both beautifully wrought and closely observed. A case in point is "Parker's Back," a story from *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), her second and last collection, on which she was working at the time of her death. She describes a small-town boy who sees a man covered with tattoos at a fair and immediately undergoes something like a conversion experience:

Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.

In many of O'Connor's best stories, "Parker's Back" prominent among them, the religious theme is so subtly dramatized that it can be overlooked by casual readers unaware of the author's larger purpose.

⁴ That is, a believer in spite of himself. The reference is to Molière, the greatest of comic playwrights, and his play *The Physician In Spite of Himself* (*Le médecin malgré lui*).

⁵ Most of the letters originally published in *The Habit of Being* are included in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, along with 21 additional unpublished letters.

Whatever else her fiction is, it is not Catholic propaganda.⁶ In the end, though, a critical approach that denies or downplays O'Connor's faith will necessarily result in only a partial appreciation of her work. It is no more possible to understand a book like *Wise Blood* without taking Catholicism seriously—if only to reject it—than it is possible to understand the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer without taking Judaism seriously.

The difference, of course, is that Singer viewed religion with reluctant skepticism, O'Connor with unswerving certitude. As I once wrote in these pages:

O'Connor's Christ-haunted characters differ profoundly from Singer's demon-infested Jews. In O'Connor, unbelievers living in a fallen world tainted by modernity suddenly find themselves ir-

radiated by grace, but, like Hazel Motes . . . they struggle in vain against its revelatory power. In Singer's world, by contrast, there are no sudden revelations, only the unquenchable desire to believe, against all evidence to the contrary, that life has meaning.⁷

Might O'Connor's faith cause the brilliance of her art to fade in an age of increasingly militant secularism whose cultural tastemakers do not share her beliefs? The fact that her reputation has continued to grow when so many of her contemporaries have become critical also-rans says something about her staying power. Yet there have always been doubters. In 1972, O'Connor was posthumously given the National Book Award for an omnibus volume of her complete stories. Robert Giroux, her longtime editor, was accosted at the ceremony by a dubi-

ous colleague who asked, "Do you really think Flannery O'Connor was a great writer? She's such a Roman Catholic."

It will be interesting—and revealing—to see whether that question is asked with increasing frequency in the years to come.

⁶ Nor is it conservative in any meaningful sense of the word, though critics on the Right have long warmed to the savagely funny parodies of liberal humanism that are found in *The Violent Bear It Away* and such stories as "Good Country People" (from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*) and "The Lame Shall Enter First" (from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*). O'Connor's "conservatism," such as it was, was exclusively religious in its orientation. She had no political interests of any kind beyond a Southerner's understandable interest in racial segregation (which she opposed).

⁷ "I.B. Singer and Me," COMMENTARY, September 2004.