

***A Difficult Portrait
of the Artist***

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Flannery O'Connor: A Life, by Jean
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AFTER THE PUBLICATION of *The Habit of Being* in 1979, the award-winning collection of Flannery O'Connor letters edited by Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's large and varied audience eagerly waited, and wondered—and waited some more—for over twenty years for Fitzgerald's much anticipated O'Connor biography that never appeared. Fitzgerald had access to a wealth of material—letters, papers, and essays—still not available to other scholars. With her untimely death in 2000, the status of her long-awaited research remains a mystery. During this period Jean Cash was struggling to complete *Flannery O'Connor: A Life*. As the first biographer to finish a study, Cash is to be commended simply for her determination, tenacity, and devotion to her subject.

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Since O'Connor's early death in August 1964, there has been no full length study of her life available. As a Catholic writer with far-reaching ecumenical appeal and lauded as arguably the greatest religious fiction writer in American literature of the twentieth century, O'Connor has mysteriously lacked a definitive biography—and in some ways still does. In the recent, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (2003), Paul Elie interweaves in a sometimes meandering way O'Connor's life with three other Catholic writers of her generation—Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. Elie recognizes the religious context common to all four but does not fully understand the impact of Southern history on O'Connor. There also yet remains an accurate collection of her letters to be done that would better reveal exactly who O'Connor was. As good as *The Habit of Being* is, many letters were not included, and vital textual omissions repeatedly occur in the letters that were selected.

Meanwhile the publication of the correspondence and biographies of other writers in O'Connor's orbit has proceeded. Since O'Connor's death, Walker Percy, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and even Faulkner and Hemingway have prospered with the publication, for example, of the Tolson and Samway biographies of Percy, two collections of his letters, and the Joseph Blotner massive biography of Faulkner, as well as his illuminating life of Warren. O'Connor deserves similar exposure, but the circumstances hindering biographical studies fuel frustration and speculation. O'Connor has increasingly attracted misguided analysts who sometimes go to extraordinary lengths, such as tracking down old supposed suitors in far-flung places around the world, to produce sometimes unseemly biographical criticism. Yet there are responsible scholars who remain steadfast in unraveling O'Connor's fiction. The focus on O'Connor's stories is justified given those

bent on wondering about why she never married, her racial views, and her relationship with her mother. Such questioning, for example, has led to gross misunderstandings. For example, in the Catholic Diocese of Lafayette (Louisiana) the Bishop decreed in 2000 that O'Connor's fiction be eliminated from the required English curriculum at a local Catholic high school because of her supposed racial views.

Cash addresses, albeit incompletely, the issues leading to such unfortunate judgments. Cash shows that O'Connor was torn between the social conservatism of her mother and the profound changes wrought by the Civil Rights movement in the South. On the one hand O'Connor admired the authoritarianism of her mother, but also associated closely with progressive friends who were involved in Civil Rights efforts. These included Maryat Lee, a writer friend, Father James McCown, a Jesuit priest and O'Connor's spiritual director, and Tom and Louise Gossett, both professors of English.

Like other collections of letters, those between O'Connor and Lee have not been completely published, nor have the letters with the other O'Connor friends whose racial views help bring into focus the complexity of O'Connor's situation. For example, Father McCown was a friend of John Howard Griffin, a Catholic convert, who darkened his skin to appear as a black man and traveled through the segregated South in 1959. He recorded his adventures in *Black Like Me* (1960) that Walker Percy satirizes in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) in a character called Forney Aiken, the "pseudo Negro." McCown asked O'Connor to meet Griffin, but she was skeptical of his "black face" misadventures and declined.

While O'Connor was dubious of Griffin, she did enjoy boxing legend Muhammed Ali and his witty rhymes about defeating his opponents. McCown also provided

her with long term exposure to the Jesuit order's ministry of social justice. O'Connor and her mother donated periodically to his ministries to the poor in Texas and Mexico. In New Orleans other Jesuit efforts to foster racial equality helped O'Connor's admirer, Walker Percy, repudiate segregation. Moreover, O'Connor much admired Tom Gossett for his seminal study *Race, the Study of an Idea* (1997). The volume was a pioneering one for the 1960s, particularly for a professor from a small Georgia college to present a thoroughgoing analysis of ingrained racism in different periods of American history. Both McCown and O'Connor praised Gossett's book, which was favorably reviewed in *Time* magazine. These friendships reveal that O'Connor was as close and sympathetic to the progressive racial positions of Father McCown and Tom Gossett as she was to the paternalism of some of her Southern Agrarian teachers. Yet O'Connor kept her distance from both systematic conservatism and social activism of the 1960s. (Apparently she voted for John F. Kennedy in 1960.)

Aside from O'Connor's racial views, Cash reluctantly addresses what she calls her "pivotal decision" not to marry. Cash criticizes "contemporary readers" who ask "all of these questions" that "are obtrusive and irrelevant: what matters most in the life of Flannery O'Connor is her enduring fiction." Cash, however, traces O'Connor's flinty individualism and social awkwardness to a childhood dominated by strong women. She argues that her strict rearing was typical of Catholic homes that were governed by strong matriarchs. (It could have just as easily been the home of James Joyce with the parental authority provided by a garrulous, domineering father.)

O'Connor got away from family discipline when she enrolled at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the 1940s. Here was a distinct change from her high school and college years spent in Milledgeville and

also marked O'Connor's immersion into the authors of literary modernism—Faulkner, Kafka, Eliot, Joyce, the Russians, and the Nashville Fugitives, to name a few. She had little time for socializing but went to Mass regularly and honed her craft at Iowa. O'Connor more than mastered the steep learning curve that would eventually result in her original, distinctive first work, *Wise Blood* (1952). She eventually won a fellowship in 1948 to the Yaddo Artists' Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, became a friend of Robert Lowell while there, left Yaddo amidst political controversy, and finally finished *Wise Blood* while living with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut.

Poised on a promising career and living near New York City, O'Connor took ill, returned to Georgia, and was diagnosed in late 1950 with lupus, the same illness that had earlier killed her father. Cash soundly concludes that once O'Connor came to grips with her malady, she cheerfully accepted growing immobility, frequent hospitalization, and protracted medication. Settling at *Andulasia*, her mother's farm, and realizing she had little time, O'Connor pursued relentlessly a vocation as a writer. Cash quotes a letter she wrote to her dear friend, Betty Hester, that reveals what O'Connor considered a severe mercy: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place more instructive than a long trip to Europe.... Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies."

Cash also documents those who labored long and hard to establish O'Connor's place in the Southern literary renaissance. These include Paul Engle and Andrew Lytle, who taught her at Iowa; Caroline Gordon, who scrutinized O'Connor's stories sometimes line by line; Robert Giroux, O'Connor's publisher, who did not call for excessive revision of her fiction; Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, who were the first to collect her essays and

talks for publication; and Walker Percy, another Gordon writing student, who deferred to O'Connor even as he forged his own brand of ecumenical Catholic fiction.

Cash's work in the literary history of O'Connor's life is illuminating and informative. She read widely in unpublished holdings at various libraries, as well as interviewed those who knew O'Connor in all phases of her life. There does remain, however, a larger vital omission in Cash's presentation. The problem is not unique to her analysis and is fairly typical of O'Connor criticism. Cash does not analyze sufficiently the integral connection of O'Connor's faith to her art. To assess fully its depth and richness the biographer needs to see with the eyes of O'Connor's faith. This insight would reveal the crucial complexities and hues of Catholicism that are integral to her life and fiction. Cash quotes an O'Connor speech given in Atlanta in 1960 where she proclaims that the "Georgia writer's true country is not Georgia but Georgia is an entrance to it.... The region is something the writer has to use in order to suggest what transcends it." While a Southern writer, O'Connor also called herself a "hill-billy Thomist." She also belongs to a more inclusive, older community of sapiential writers such as the Church Fathers, Aquinas, and Dante. She also read widely European, predominantly Catholic, twentieth-century philosophers and theologians, and wrote reviews of their writing for the diocesan newspaper, later collected in a volume, *The Presence of Grace* (1964). O'Connor's study of Romano Guardini, Etienne Gilson, Karl Adam, Eric Voegelin, Jacques Maritain, Baron von Hügel, and Teilhard de Chardin, among others, reveals that the depth and complexity of her intellectual life surpasses the *savants* of nineteenth-century America such as Emerson or Thoreau. Her collection of books in the room dedicated to her at the Georgia College in

Milledgeville is unique in American literature.

In one of her talks O'Connor notes that fiction ought to involve the four levels of allegory that medieval commentators "applied to biblical exegesis" and that the fiction writer should "acquire this enlarged view of the human scene...if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature."¹ In another important statement, O'Connor observes that the "writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location."² The influences of Dante, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. Paul, and even the parables of Jesus are evident in a theory of fiction grounded in both Biblical and medieval allegory.

Caroline Gordon once advised O'Connor that if she wanted to be a storyteller she had to not only tell the reader about the Crucifixion, but also what the road was like on the day Christ carried the cross to Calvary. The O'Connor biographer is at a disadvantage in looking at her faith from outside the community of faith, much like Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), who props himself in a tree to peer at a church service through the window. Without the double perspective of seeing O'Connor as both a Catholic and a Southerner, ironies and surprising features of her intellectual and spiritual life remain elusive or unstated. She stated several times that the only thing that kept her from being a "Southern writer" was Catholicism, and the only thing that kept her from being a "Catholic writer" was being Southern. Cash does not observe sufficiently the tensions and nuances of this subtle interplay.

The fidelity to the craft of fiction, the lack of recognition by Church officialdom, and finally O'Connor's eclectic political views were all rooted in a religious certainty that made her unpredictable. For example, O'Connor was an ardent 1950s

Catholic anti-Communist and would not allow her works to be translated in any Soviet-dominated country. She wrote once that “Communism is a religion of the state, committed to the extinction of the Church” and it “condemns communism because it is a false religion, not because of the form of government it is.”³ O’Connor’s theological anti-Communism, however, did not extend to domestic issues. Like Walker Percy, she was ill at ease with activist conservative or liberal movements of her day. She believed, like Ralph Ellison, who also was criticized for a lack of social activism, that her stories revealed her views and she was vigilant not to be associated with any movement. She learned fiction-writing from Southern Agrarian teachers, but did not marshal her talents in behalf of the movement’s conservative social vision. She was once provoked that a small Georgia college started off a literary series with Donald Davidson, one of the original “Twelve Southerners” of *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). She wrote a friend in her typical opinionated style that she thought Davidson was so “right wing” that he might give a mistaken impression of Southern literature.

Andrew Lytle, who published several important O’Connor stories as editor of the *Sewanee Review*, remarked fifty years after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*: “I can wish now that *I’ll Take My Stand* and the writings that followed had made it clearer that, in defending what was left of Southern life, we were defending our common European inheritance.”⁴ In her fiction, O’Connor presents a dramatic exposition of Lytle’s statement. She has a deep grasp of European Christendom and its essentially immigrant legacy, not only in the Protestant South, but also in modern America rapidly undergoing secularization. O’Connor’s fiction presents a unique, Thomistic medieval criticism of such trends. Unlike the original Agrarians such as Davidson and Lytle, O’Connor was twice “unreconstructed”—once by the histori-

cal calamity of the defeated South and yet again by a Thomistic apocalypticism vividly rendered in violent stories.

Richard Weaver once noted that the rural population of the early twentieth-century South admired St. Thomas Aquinas, but had not studied the *Summa Theologica*. Flannery O’Connor prophetically appears as a communicant of St. Thomas’s faith that most of her fellow Southerners kept at a distance, preferring to embrace humanistic skepticism, the beauty of the Anglican liturgy, or a Stoical code of honor. In a letter in *The Habit of Being* (1979) she recalls reading St. Thomas late at night and her mother asking her to turn off the light. O’Connor “with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression would reply, ‘on the contrary, I answer that the light being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes.’”⁵ If her mother did not know what to make of her daughter’s mysticism, so too have the critics. Tracing the role of an often searing, tumultuous Catholicism in O’Connor’s life and art is a daunting prospect that Cash begins but does not sufficiently develop. To her credit, however, she has written under frustrating circumstances the first full-length biography. Her work is important not so much for what it omits as it is for an initial illumination of Flannery O’Connor’s short, complex, and heroic life.

1. O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York, 1962), 49. 2. *Ibid.*, 59. 3. Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *Flannery O’Connor, The Habit of Being* (New York, 1979), 347. 4. *From Eden to Babylon* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 185. 5. *Flannery O’Connor, The Habit of Being*, 93-94.