

Flannery  
O'Connor:  
Looking in from  
the Outside

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*Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor,*  
by Brad Gooch (New York: Little, Brown  
and Company, 2009)

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An unusual feature of Flannery O'Connor's genius is her ability to reach audiences far removed from the mysterious Catholic, Thomistic core of her stories. While the denizens of

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secularism are poised to ridicule Judeo-Christianity, especially when Mel Gibson has too much to drink, O'Connor has not caused such hostilities. Her place among agnostics, unbelievers, and even atheists is secure, and she gets begrudging respect, if not admiration, from a multifaceted audience. George Rayber, the obsessed faithless "schoolteacher" in *The Violent Bear It Away*, notes that belief is a "curse" afflicting innocent children; Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* preaches "the Church without Jesus" from the hood of his car and proclaims: "Your conscience is a trick. . . . It don't exist though you may think it does."<sup>1</sup> In her characters and in an idiom called by Rayber "irrational, backwoods and ignorant," O'Connor anticipated by a half century the fashionable antireligious rants of Bill Maher and Christopher Hitchens. Maher recently observed, "Faith means making a virtue out of not thinking. It's nothing to brag about. And those who preach faith and enable and elevate it are intellectual slaveholders keeping mankind in bondage to fantasy and nonsense that has spawned and justified so much lunacy and destruction."<sup>2</sup> Maher's icy disdain echoes Rayber and Motes. O'Connor's caricatures of atheism have achieved satiric permanence. For those who watch Maher or listen to Hitchens's proclamation that "God is not great," there will always be O'Connor's satirical characters challenging the most hardened irreligious to laugh.

While it was a short distance from O'Connor's barnyard to her front porch in Milledgeville, it would seem to be a long trek from the same porch to the New York of Brad Gooch. Aside from his impressive scholarly credentials, he also wrote two books challenging the belligerence of gay activism: *Finding the Boyfriend Within: A Practical Guide for Tapping into Your Own Source of Love, Happiness, and Respect*

(2002) and a sequel, *Dating the Greek Gods: Empowering Spiritual Messages on Sex and Love, Creativity and Wisdom* (2003). Years before, Gooch notes, when he began reading Flannery O'Connor, he detected "qualities" in her that were "thirteenth century"—"the subtle tug of a spiritual quest in a dark universe animated by grace and significance."

Gooch is aware of the religious mystery in O'Connor's stories but lacks at crucial times a deeper understanding of her work's theological complexities (he is on surer footing in his other biography, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*). Biographers of O'Connor (there have been only a handful) clearly sense the presence of grace and spiritual mystery in her stories, but they often approach her from the perspective of what O'Connor's writer-compatriot Walker Percy identifies as religious science. Its method is to view Christian faith as a cultural phenomenon with its own tribal rites little different from other religions. Christ, Marx, Muhammad, and Saint Francis essentially are all humanists while Jewish exiles in the Old Testament are little different from any other dispossessed people. O'Connor became incensed when the fashionable Swedish psychologist Carl Jung used this approach to suggest that the founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius Loyola, was no different from Karl Marx because they both founded communities. O'Connor wrote a clerical friend, the Reverend James H. McCown: "Jung has something to offer religion but is at the same time very dangerous for it. Jung would say, for instance, that Christ did not rise from the dead literally but we must realize that we need this symbol, that the notion has significance for our lives symbolically etc."<sup>3</sup>

A theological heir to patristic commentators such as Origen and Augustine, O'Connor is unambiguous when it comes

to faith in the sacraments. The Eucharist is not a *mere* archetype. Likewise, baptism is not *just* another initiation rite but a sacrament of grace celebrated in the childlike credence of Harry Ashfield in “The River.” Marriage is another mysterious sacrament requiring hard work and sacrifice. Only in forsaking it do Mr. Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” and Ruby in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” recognize marriage’s difficult demands—Shiftlet cannot love the infirm, and Ruby despises the demands of childrearing. O’Connor reveals that “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” because living out the sacraments is difficult, hard, and demanding. Watching believers try (and sometimes fail) to live sacramentally is easy for the religious scientist. He tracks convenient paradigms of religious myth and does not differentiate one tribal rite or observance from another. Jung and his disciples celebrate in detachment their superior intellectual powers with fellow religious scientists. O’Connor would concur with Walker Percy’s calling the religious scientist an “ontophobic” observer who imparts the “kiss of death” to the mysteries of revelation.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Johnson noted centuries earlier in his *Lives of the English Poets* that John Milton, like Jung, reduced religion to intellectual analysis while not troubling himself with communal observance: “He has not associated himself with any denomination of Protestants: we know rather what he was not than what he was. He was not of the Church of Rome; he was not of the Church of England. To be of no church is dangerous.”<sup>5</sup> Milton “grew old without any visible worship. In the distribution of his hours there was no hour of prayer, either solitary or with his household; omitting public prayers, he omitted all.”<sup>6</sup> Dr. Johnson did not give Milton a pass from the public exercise of faith as a believer just because he crafted beautiful lines in *Paradise Lost*.

O’Connor, by contrast, writes powerful spiritual passages but is attentive to worship as a believer. She even made an arduous pilgrimage to Lourdes that she credits with delaying the ravages of lupus. Her stories, written centuries after Milton, challenge what he could not envision: religious science transforming into militant atheism. The mocking caricature of George Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* is a composite figure summarizing in a grand, repugnant way the heresies of other secular rationalists in O’Connor stories—for example, Hulga, the nihilist philosopher; Sheppard, the humanitarian reform school official; Julian, the enlightened intellectual lecturing his mother as she lies dying on the street; Asbury Fox, the bohemian aesthete who loathes his mother’s Georgia dairy farm; and Hazel Motes, who preaches the church without Christ. In superior rationalist isolation, Rayber lodges himself in a tree outside a storefront church to watch what he thinks is the benighted preaching of a child prophet, Lucette Carmody. As she recounts vividly to a rapt congregation the difficulties of the Holy Family, she rebukes Rayber, staring in at the congregation, as a “damned soul” and “a dead man Jesus hasn’t raised. His head is in the window but his ear is deaf to the Holy Word.”<sup>7</sup>

The scene suggests the limited approach of some O’Connor biographers and critics. Faith is an intellectual problem to be submitted to academic analysis. Peering through the window, like Rayber, from the outside, they try to explain the theological complexities at the core of O’Connor’s writing. Sacramental mystery has inspired a rich witness of believers in O’Connor’s generation alone: from her own theological apocalypticism and Dorothy Day’s political radicalism to Russell Kirk’s conservative prescriptive politics and Walker Percy’s theistic existentialism. Undaunted

by Catholicism's range and variety, credentialed academics sometimes offer glib opinions about the nuances of theology, sociology, and gender. Speculations about O'Connor lead to the cottage industry of probing her life to find evidence of racism or forbidden love. A devout believer, she sometimes used indiscreet language, she never was married, and she lived in rural Georgia. (There must be something hidden to be uncovered.)

Gooch engages in some of this kind of speculation, but thankfully not too much. His tenacity, perseverance, and skills as a researcher prevail and deserve recognition. Undertaking to write the book that "I want to read but cannot find on the shelf," he soon runs into the formidable matriarch of O'Connor studies until her untimely death in 2000: Sally Fitzgerald.

Sally and her husband, Robert Fitzgerald, met O'Connor in 1949 while she was finishing a fellowship at the Yaddo Community in New York. O'Connor later lived with the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut while completing her first novel, *Wise Blood*. After O'Connor's death in 1964, the Fitzgeralds coedited *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose of Flannery O'Connor*, a simple yet enduring collection of her lectures. Mrs. Fitzgerald then compiled O'Connor's letters, resulting in the seminal *Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, published in 1979. (In 2009, Emory University in Atlanta hosted a thirtieth-anniversary commemoration of the collection with a new cache of O'Connor letters made available.) Fitzgerald later edited Library of America's *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (1988), containing more complete and additional letters than those published in *The Habit of Being*.

As O'Connor's letters and papers became available, her audience grew in variety. It eagerly waited—and continued to wait—more than twenty years and then wondered

what happened to Fitzgerald's biography, which never appeared. Years before, in 1965, Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor's first literary executor, wrote an enduring, perceptive introduction to *The Violent Bear It Away*, in which he identifies the crucial influence of medieval theology on O'Connor, specifically Dante. He gave her what would become a well-marked copy of the *Commedia* that is the foundation of her fiction (along with the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas). Such clues about the intersection of faith and writing in her life provide a focus that no biographer has explored yet.

Dante and Thomas Aquinas were O'Connor's literary and philosophic masters. She confounded her mother by reading the *Summa* for twenty minutes a night and derived dramatic scenes of morality from her marked copy of *The Divine Comedy*. Borrowing from Dante, O'Connor notes that fiction ought to involve the four levels of allegory the medieval commentators "applied to biblical exegesis," and 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."<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere 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."<sup>9</sup> The influences of Dante and Aquinas, as well as Saint Paul and other New Testament writers, are evident in a theory of fiction grounded in both biblical and medieval allegory. Robert Fitzgerald recognized early on such influences in O'Connor's stories and pointed out Dante's imprint in his vital introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*: "The true range of the stories is vertical and Dantesque in what is taken in, in scale of implication."<sup>10</sup>

After Robert Fitzgerald's death in 1985,

the wealth of O'Connor papers and letters fortuitously accrued to Mrs. Fitzgerald. Keeper of the keys to O'Connor's biographical kingdom, Mrs. Fitzgerald benefited like no other editor or scholar working on O'Connor. Gooch, however, beseeched Mrs. Fitzgerald in 1980 to sanction his proposal for a biography. She summarily rebuffed him: ". . . should I ever feel the need of an assistant, I will certainly think of you and your proposal." A few years later Gooch decided to delay no longer and undertook his own biography. He was fully aware of the difficulties he would face—no sanction from Sally Fitzgerald, from the Mary Flannery O'Connor Trust, and no permission to quote from unpublished materials at various holdings of O'Connor papers at Emory University, Duke, and Georgia College (Milledgeville).

Given these inherent limitations, Gooch, like the other O'Connor biographers before him, Jean Cash (*Flannery O'Connor: A Life*) and Ted Spivey (*Flannery O'Connor: The Woman, the Thinker, and the Visionary*), is to be commended simply for his determination, tenacity, and devotion to his subject. A relentless researcher and a good stylist, he laces his writing with strategic, rich quotations from those who knew O'Connor in all phases of her life. His prose is lively and lacks the plodding pace of much academic writing. Gooch begins his biography, however, with discussion of a film clip of O'Connor as a child encouraging a chicken to walk backwards. He refers to the scene several times as crucial to understanding O'Connor. The emphasis accents eccentricity at odds with O'Connor's voluminous correspondence showing the blending of her flinty opinions, philosophic skepticism, devout beliefs, and charitable advice.

The historical context and detail Gooch provides for many O'Connor stories,

nonetheless, will be invaluable in teaching them in the future. He explains, for example, that "displaced persons" were of compelling interest to O'Connor because their plight involved the intersection of faith and international politics. While O'Connor eschewed direct political activism, she became engaged when foreign policy impinged upon faith. When the Soviet Union illegitimately annexed Eastern European countries in the aftermath of World War II, the Catholic Church relocated many displaced persons to the United States. A Polish family, the Matysiaks, found their way to the O'Connor dairy farm in Georgia. Gooch interviewed a son, Al, who recollects his father's resurrecting a John Deere tractor, much to the delight of Regina O'Connor. Who can forget the satisfaction repeatedly expressed by Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person," "that man is my salvation." Unlike Mrs. McIntyre in the story (complicit in the tragic death of Mr. Guizac), Regina O'Connor, as Al Matysiak notes, was "like my second Mama, basically . . . she would take my temperature and give me an aspirin." Gooch's inclusion of such details puts Regina O'Connor in a favorable light and countervails those who emphasize her segregationist racial views, lack of literary sophistication, and strict social mores.

There were tensions, to be sure, between O'Connor and her mother. Beginning in 1956, however, both delighted in the appearance of a two-toned Cadillac coming up the long driveway to Andalusia bearing a whiskey salesman and a Jesuit priest, the Reverend James H. McCown. This important, little-known friendship inspired O'Connor's story "The Enduring Chill" about what she called the "one-eyed Jesuit." Gooch gives brief attention to this association and cites only minimal published correspondence between Father McCown and O'Connor in *The Habit of*

*Being* (in which he is misidentified as John McCown). Only a handful of her letters to him later appear in the Library of America's *Flannery O'Connor*.

Gooch did not find his way to the rich repository of unpublished correspondence and the chapter it merits. Instead he often cites the unpublished transcripts of interviews from a television documentary still in the making. It features O'Connor's romantic friend, a textbook salesman from Denmark, who had worked in Georgia in the 1950s. The still underrepresented, obscure correspondence to Father McCown is far more fruitful than Gooch's inclusion of the Dane's recollections a half century later of dates with O'Connor. Jean Cash in her earlier biography warns of "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."<sup>11</sup> Gooch, however, follows the transatlantic trail to the long-lost boyfriend to quiz him about his romance. Such inquiries help explain the misgivings of the Mary Flannery O'Connor Trust about O'Connor biographers. Bent on probing with surgical precision O'Connor's possible romances, they look for recollections and memories about her, often tediously rehearsed. Gooch's analysis at times reads like Hulga in "Good Country People" dissecting Manley Pointer's kiss in one of O'Connor's most succinct and hilarious descriptions: "It was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka."<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, Lorraine V. Murray in *The Abbess of Andalusia* (2009) goes in another direction. She writes the chapter about the friendship between Father McCown and O'Connor that Gooch omits. A pietistic stylist and not conversant in southern history, Murray nevertheless

understands the crucial role the Jesuits played in the 1950s in O'Connor's emergence as a writer. O'Connor's friendship with Father McCown, a kind of reverse of Gerard Manley Hopkins, reads like an O'Connor story. O'Connor reroutes him as "Father Finn . . . from Purgatory" in "The Enduring Chill." Hard of hearing, he informs Ashbury Fox, "Joyce, never heard of him," while drilling him on the *Baltimore Catechism*. His guidance is similar to the spiritual direction Father McCown provided Flannery O'Connor.<sup>13</sup> His Oxford-educated brother, also a Jesuit, the Reverend Robert McCown, was one of a handful of clergy who O'Connor believed "got" her stories. O'Connor thought his article "The Education of a Prophet: Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*," published in the obscure *Kansas* magazine (omitted in *Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews* [Cambridge University Press, 2009]), was the most illuminating on that difficult, troubling novel. O'Connor wrote Father Robert McCown, "What you say about the book exactly reflects my intentions when I wrote it. . . . Most of the theories proposed about the book make my hair stand on end."<sup>14</sup>

The McCowns—two brothers, and remarkably, two Jesuits from Alabama—are statistical aberrations from a region of the United States in which religious surveys list Catholics in single digits. Crucial clerical emissaries of acceptance and understanding, the McCowns stand out from the larger ecclesiastical hierarchy, which was often puzzled by O'Connor's stories. Father James McCown, O'Connor quipped, "was the first priest who said turkey-dog to me about my writing."<sup>15</sup> Father McCown would have been gratified that his early recognition continues to inspire efforts of biographers like Gooch in helping us to understand Flannery O'Connor's elusive genius.

- 1 Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 93.
- 2 "Memorable Quotes for *Religulous* (2008)," International Movie Database (IMDb), accessed January 11, 2012, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0815241/quotes>.
- 3 Thomas F. and Louise Y. Gossett Papers, Duke University Library.
- 4 Walker Percy Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.
- 5 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, vol. 1 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925), 92.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 415.
- 8 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962), 49.
- 9 Ibid., 59.
- 10 Robert Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965).
- 11 Jean Cash, *Flannery O'Connor: A Life* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 184.
- 12 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 278.
- 13 O'Connor's letters to Father McCown, related correspondence, and Father McCown's own lively travel narratives about his mission trips to Mexico and Africa will be published soon in a collection I am editing, *Good Things Out of Nazareth: Letters of Flannery O'Connor, Father McCown, and Friends*.
- 14 Gossett Papers, Duke University Library.
- 15 James H. McCown, "Flannery O'Connor" (unpublished lecture, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL, April 26, 1985).