

Preface

Flannery O'Connor evidently took great delight in the reprint of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, ten years after its initial publication. I am equally delighted with this reprinting after ten years. O'Connor stated that her book was written with zest; I will say the same. In this Preface I would like to tell you how the book was written, and respond to critics who have chided me for not doing more than I did in assessing her library holdings, as well as critics who aver that I did too much in trying both to explore the influences on her work and to critique the work.

Recently, I gave a series of lectures on Flannery O'Connor and her place in the American tradition at a number of colleges and universities in Japan. I met with and dialogued with professors of American literature and their students who were quite knowledgeable about Flannery O'Connor and profoundly interested in her. O'Connor's Japanese audience largely regards her as an anti-sentimentalist in American fiction. They bear out a thesis in my book that O'Connor can be read as an exciting and thought-provoking fiction writer by those without knowledge of or interest in the theological base of her writings.

For my Japanese audiences, the theology was an unknown factor. They sensed the presence of mystery in the fiction but could not probe it. In my view, their lack of a fundamental knowledge of Christianity led them to some strange interpretations of her fiction. From their view, each artifact communicated its own integrity; each was a well-wrought story. Critical questions which the stories raised could be answered without any reference to the great event of redemption which each of her stories reflects.

This experience of viewing an author whom I know well

through the eyes of a people who do not share the biblical base on which her fiction rests or possess a knowledge of Christian culture leaves me, in Frost's phrase, "only more sure of what I thought was true." The theological basis of O'Connor's fiction adds a dimension and subtracts nothing.

O'Connor would have been absolutely delighted at the response her stories evoked. No one asked such questions as "Why was the farm woman named Mrs. May?" or "What is the significance of Tarwater's hat?" but rather such questions as "Is O'Connor's anti-sentimental stance a studied reaction to the currents in American fiction today, or an expression of her philosophy of life?" Their comments showed that they recognized the universal quality in O'Connor's characters and identified with the basic conflict in each story.

In preparing to write *Voice of the Peacock*, I had a rare and beautiful opportunity to reconstruct mentally an author's working milieu. In the case of O'Connor, this milieu was extremely important.

Five years after Flannery O'Connor's death, I visited her mother. At that time, Mrs. O'Connor was living in the family home in Milledgeville. The farmhouse where she and Flannery had lived was still as it had been left after Flannery's death. During the week I was with Mrs. O'Connor we drove every morning to the farmhouse. While I worked with the books in Flannery's bedroom/study and in the living room, Mrs. O'Connor checked on various aspects of the farm and on the workers who were putting aluminum siding on the farmhouse.

I saw, immediately, how fortunate I was to be working with Flannery's materials before any other hand had disturbed them. It was easy to see from the arrangement of her library which books were important to her. Two of the large bookcases in the living room had glass doors and there were a number of small ornaments in front of the books on various shelves. Other books were in open cases, obviously more accessible. The books in her bedroom included an entire set of the monographs collected under the title of *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. Near her bed was her breviary and a *Book of Common Prayer*. Piled on the floor by her bed were periodicals: *Thought*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Literary Review*, and others. It became apparent to me that I should work in two concentric circles, one having its mid-point at the large easy

chair by her typewriter in the bedroom/study, and the other in the smaller of the two parlors, which contained the open bookcases.

It was a case of “note now; think later.” I started examining the books for dates, inscriptions, and annotations. When I found these I noted the specific edition of the book, the pages and paragraphs annotated or marked, and copied markings and annotations. My object was to find and note the books which seemed to be of most importance to her as evidenced by their markings and their position in her library. I had only a week in which to accomplish this.

I note this procedure to make it clear why I did not list every book in her library. It was obvious to me that some were remnants of a family library and some were review copies of books. I felt that the annotated books, not the compass of the entire library, bore a relationship to the shape of her thinking.

In my recent visits to the fine Flannery O'Connor Room at her *alma mater*, Georgia College at Milledgeville, I have seen almost all of the books I handled, now neatly accessioned and shelved. I realized what a difference it makes to see a library *in situ*. As I look around the room I am now working in, I understand how universally human it is to keep one's favorite and one's most useful books near.

When I returned from my first visit to Flannery O'Connor's home I had—in signs and symbols, in page numbers and line numbers, in phrases and sentences—the heart of the overt literary influence on Flannery O'Connor. You can imagine the zest with which I found the identical books, read the material that was marked, and then—in most cases—read the entire book to put the marked passages into context. A relationship among the books and a pattern of thought emerged. Finally that pattern of thought became a bedrock for her fiction. It was exciting to uncover the connections between abstract ideas and the O'Connor characters and conflicts.

A year later, I returned to Milledgeville for a second visit. This time, Mrs. O'Connor and I lived in the farmhouse—now sparkling with aluminum siding. During this visit I double-checked references and explored the farm more thoroughly. One afternoon Mrs. O'Connor and I watched a peacock eating the flowers which fringed the house. Mrs. O'Connor quoted Flannery: “Let them alone. The roses are beautiful only for a time and the peacocks are beautiful all year round.” It was on

this visit that I found the cartoon mentioned in the fourth chapter of my book. I also had more opportunities to meet Flannery O'Connor's friends and the townspeople with whom she interacted. I was able to add a number of personal observations to my accumulation of material. I was able to feel for myself how it was to rise each morning in a small farmhouse in Georgia, to gaze out at the peaceful landscape, to hear the activity of the black farmhands, and to respond to the rhythm of this kind of life. The rhythm was a leisurely one.

I remember well the afternoon when I was working intensely in the library and Mrs. O'Connor came in and suggested that we stop for a cool drink on the porch. We sat together on the wide screened porch and I surveyed what Flannery had seen so many times: the wide front yard with peacocks strutting about, the horses in the side pasture, the lake (one of the four artificial lakes to water the animals) barely visible in the distance, and the wall of trees on the horizon. I sensed what a solace this view would be after a morning of intense concentration. I understood how Flannery could call this kind of leisure "recuperating" from the morning's work.

In one of her trenchant answers to a questioner, O'Connor said that she used her eyes on what she was facing. Many times I saw how she used her locale to deepen reality in her stories. On my bus ride to Milledgeville I passed a First Methodist church whose pastor was Dr. Bevel Jones. In one of the small towns there was a tavern sign, "Greenleaf." I saw a new building being erected; a billboard proclaimed that it was the School of Bible Prophecy. In a small town, I passed Chancey's Shoe Store.

Leo Zuber, for whom O'Connor wrote numerous book reviews, wrote me that O'Connor "dropped the comment that one could get some good character leads by reading ads in the *Market Bulletin*." He sent me several copies, and I saw some of her characters in embryo.

During this visit a certain fusion of elements occurred within my mind. I felt the objective view of O'Connor the author which I had had before I came to Milledgeville merge with the subjective view of O'Connor the writer, the daughter, the friend, the neighbor, the invalid (for example, the electric heater in her bedroom was raised about 18 inches from the floor on cinder blocks because Flannery had difficulty bending down to adjust the gauges), and the raiser of peacocks. I felt in

my own being the conflict which she must have felt between what she was reading in theology, philosophy, and psychology and what she saw as she looked at the world around her. Out of that distillation of elements came my reflection and my writing.

Therefore, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* is a blend of objective research and subjective analysis, which is, I believe, a valid form of literary criticism. I make no apologies for the point of view that O'Connor's belief in the mystery of the Redemption was, to adopt her phraseology, the engine that operated her perception.

In a recent O'Connor study it is noted that one of the books which I mentioned is not currently in the O'Connor library and, therefore, it may have been mentioned in error. I assure you, every book about which I spoke I held in my hands in the O'Connor home. That particular book, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, elicited from me a cry of delight as I saw a photograph of what was to become in O'Connor's fiction "a moving arabesque of color" on a man's body. In regard to Flannery's total collection, all my sins are those of omission; I committed nothing to my note cards which was not there.

In writing this book, I made some assumptions. When *The Habit of Being* was published I read it with great eagerness and also a sense of concern. Here I would find whether or not my assumptions were correct or, at least, whether some other information would render an assumption invalid. The reading was full of delight. Her letters gave additional depth, breadth, and humor to what I had intuited from her writings and from her life. Nothing she said contradicted my assumptions; rather, her correspondence corroborated and enlarged them.

I have met many people who say that they just do not understand Flannery O'Connor's fiction. I advise them to read the first chapter of my book; read one O'Connor story twice with time intervening; read my analysis of that story in the text; read the story again. In more than half of these encounters, the person returned to say that his or her understanding and appreciation increased. Many readers need a little orientation before they can grapple with the "large and startling figures." I am happy that this book provides such an orientation.

Flannery O'Connor commented that a good story "hangs on and expands in the mind." In several educational, religious, and civic meetings I have attended lately, a wide variety of

speakers have alluded to a work by O'Connor to illustrate a point. Also, her foreign audience is growing steadily. All this is a sure sign that she speaks a universal language, even though she does "talk Southern."

College of Notre Dame of Maryland
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FLANNERY O'CONNOR

