

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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"Everybody who has read Wise Blood thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I'm a hillbilly Thomist."

"Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown."

The mind in question is that of Hazel Motes, the central figure in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, who can stand for all her characters who are haunted by Christ and convey to the reader the wild mystery of the human person.

Flannery O'Connor lived less than forty years, (1925-1964) published two short novels and two collections of short stories, and is by general consent one of the great American writers of the 20th century. A sign of this was the inclusion of her *Collected Works* in the prestigious Library of America.

A cradle Catholic, she was more concerned than most Catholic authors about the relationship between her fiction and her faith. In retrospect, we can see that Flannery O'Connor was a beneficiary of the Catholic culture that flourished prior to the Second Vatican Council. She

also experienced annoyances from that culture.

"Everybody who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I'm a hillbilly Thomist." This is not merely a quip. A book that exercised a great influence on O'Connor was Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*.

Nowadays many Catholic intellectuals would be embarrassed by the unabashed scholasticism of Maritain's little work. Even a fan of it would admit that it is pretty heavy on block quotes from St. Thomas Aquinas and that the view of art it conveys is as old as Aristotle. A later Maritain developed a mystical notion of the experience of the artist as a connatural affinity with reality but there is nothing so fancy as that in the work that influenced O'Connor. On the other hand, she had a surprising weakness for Teilhard de Chardin.

When Flannery O'Connor read *Art and Scholasticism*, she had been to the Iowa Writer's School where she learned many things and certainly developed as a writer. But one of the banes of creative writing courses is that they convey the notion that writing is self-expression. Flannery O'Connor felt no desire to express herself. That is why when she encountered the Aristotelian-Thomist conception of art in Maritain she welcomed it as far truer to what she was engaged in.

Art, Aristotle said, is knowing how to make things well. The well-made thing, the story carefully wrought so as to convey what the writer

wants it to convey, the perfected artifact -- that is the aim of art. This is the truth that freed Flannery O'Connor from the suffocating notion that the writer's primary subject is the writer himself.

This is not to say that the quite distinctive voice of Flannery O'Connor is not audible in everything she wrote. It is a southern voice, a Georgian voice, the voice of a writer who, returned home for good, seems determined to shuck off the sophistication she had picked up in the north. Significantly, Marion Montgomery called the relevant volume of his critical trilogy *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home*.

If she was a Catholic author, if her writing was influenced by her faith, O'Connor almost never chose Catholic subjects for her stories. Her characters are the underclass of the south, most of them haunted by a fundamentalist Bible-thumping evangelical Christianity. Her ability imaginatively to occupy the outlook of men and women and children almost retarded in their simplicity is equaled only by Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men*. Her approach to her characters is anything but condescending. In them she sees the mystery and dignity of the human person.

All art, she maintained, is anagogic. That is, all fiction which is more than mere diversion conveys the awesome battle between good and evil that is fought out in every human soul. But how is the Catholic writer to convey to a secular audience this sense of the importance of the person and his actions? The Catholic writer, she felt, should not take the Church

or Catholic things as subject, that made the task too easy, and it also limited the audience.

She could kid Tom Stritch, professor at Notre Dame, about the dangers of being converted to culture, she affected a backwoodsy manner, but her letters contain references to a wide variety of Catholic writers: Claude Tresmontant, Romano Gaurdini, Fulton Sheen, Frank Sheed, Sigrid Undset, Edwin O'Connor, Charles Peguy, J. F. Powers, Caroline Gordon, Graham Greene, Walker Percy, Francois Mauriac, Thomas Merton, Baron von Huegel, Teilhard de Chardin, Joseph Conrad, Henri Daniel-Rops, Paul Claudel, etc. etc. The girl from Milledgeville, Georgia not only practiced her faith but lived in an imaginative and intellectual Catholic ambience.

She regarded her writing as a vocation and her reflections on it are instructive for any aspiring Catholic writer. The essays collected in *Mystery and Manners* and the letters brought together by Sally Fitzgerald in the large volume called *The Habit of Being* provide an instructive contrast with the voice we hear in the fiction. The authors listed above are cited off-handedly, almost as if she did not wish to draw attention to the scope of her reading. It is clear that she was drawn to authors who accepted as true the Christian vision of human life. But of course it was not abstractions that could be helpful to her in her fiction.

A writer needs a voice and a place -- she thought all good writing is regional writing -- people and events that can carry a message she would

never state explicitly in her fiction. Her material was the rural south and this meant that her characters are for the most part Protestants. In their exaggerated religiosity they enable her to portray the drama of salvation as it goes on in every soul.

In one of her letters she speaks of a preacher who had chained a lamb to a cross and sacrificed it in front of his congregation. Grotesque? Showmanship? Maybe. But she thought it might have been as close as he could come to the Mass. It is that ability to grasp the latent significance in the grotesque that marks the writing of Flannery O'Connor.

Readers, among them her mother, complained because she wrote about such odd and grotesque characters. Her response is one only a deeply religious writer could have made. "We are all grotesque."