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## Flannery O'Connor: Mystery & Metaphor

*Flannery O'Connor and the Language of Apocalypse*, by Edward Kessler. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

*The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, edited by C. Ralph Stephens. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.

A RECENT REVIEW in the New York *Times* employed the phrase, "the Flannery O'Connor industry," in reference to the growing number of scholarly studies, letter collections, and biographical works about O'Connor and her fictional world. Up to now, the notion that an "industry" could be developing around O'Connor's work would have seemed an unlikely phenomenon. The victim of disseminated lupus at a relatively early age, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) left behind a small body of work—two novels and two dozen stories—that has been considered eccentric and emphatically minor, though occasionally intriguing. Her "grotesque" characters and settings and her strong identification as a Southerner and Roman Catholic have often elicited dismissive or merely bewildered comments from the critics.

Nonetheless, O'Connor's fiction is now generating a flood of critical interpretations. Some of this can be attributed to the publication of doctoral dissertations focusing on some aspect of the grotesque or her rural Southern settings. But the tenor of this burgeoning criticism is increasingly universal: the claim is being made that her fiction has achieved significant breakthroughs in form and vision. In the context of post-war American letters, a period that has produced little of enduring value, O'Connor seems to

be standing out from the crowd and rewarding readers with deeper meanings than her quirky world at first appeared to justify. Though most of these new books on O'Connor are confused or partial in their understanding of her full stature and importance for our age, they are at last becoming sensitized to her peculiar genius.

Edward Kessler's *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of Apocalypse* is perhaps one of the better studies that urge a reevaluation of O'Connor as a seminal writer. Like most of her critics, Kessler tends to downplay or even disregard O'Connor's public statements about the inspiration and meaning of her fiction. This is largely a function of Kessler's methodology: he associates himself with the New Critics, who concentrate wholly on the "text," emphasizing irony, ambiguity, and paradox, and eschewing the use of biographical or historical information in forming an interpretation of the text. But in support of his thesis he goes even further than New Critical methodology would warrant: because he sees O'Connor's stories as being

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dominated by "visionary poetics," the traditional techniques of prose fiction (character, plot, setting) are abandoned in favor of an exclusive concentration on "metaphoric process."

An emphasis on metaphor in O'Connor's fiction is not only a welcome relief from commentaries on the grotesque or Southern "realism," it is also to enter the heart of her achievement. Kessler associates O'Connor with T. S. Eliot, both of whom engage in an effort to estrange or "displace" the reader from his habitual perception of things. Language and hence sensibility are continually falling prey to cliché and debasement (and, in this century, I would add, to ideology), and must be rescued by the artist and opened outward to mystery. Unlike simple analogy, which reconciles the reader to a known order, visionary metaphor disrupts expectation and creates a new order, a new way of seeing. The metaphors of estrangement commonly reflect disorder and irrationality: "Let us go, then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table. . . ." Eliot's opening to "Prufrock" is the modernist paradigm for violent metaphor, but Kessler gives many examples of O'Connor's appropriation of this technique. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes confronts the prostitute, Mrs. Watts: "His throat got drier and his heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage." Old Tarwater is described in *The Violent Bear It Away* as "a bull-like old man with a short head set directly into his shoulders and silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads."

Central to Kessler's argument is the belief that O'Connor's "hunger for the absolute" was such that "for her, meaning can never be identified with shifting words; it is only released whenever words engage, conflict with, and oppose deadening cliché." The violence of metaphor can bring about a blinding flash of meaning, an apocalypse signifying the irruption of mystery into the commonplace. Kessler points to O'Connor's characteristic use of "as if" in her metaphoric

strategy. An example would be the first sentence of *Wise Blood*: "Hazel Motes sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window *as if* he might jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car." The constant use of the "as if" construction, according to Kessler, with its combination of the comparative "as" with the conditional "if," makes for a pervasive ambiguity in O'Connor's fiction.

Ambiguity serves to keep possibilities open. It is the antidote to literalistic metaphors that assert a one-to-one identity between two discrete things. Such equations are too pat—they are static and hence devoid of an imaginative intuition of mystery. Kessler admires the endings of most of O'Connor's stories because they do not impose a rigid meaning upon the dramatic action. One of the examples he points to comes from "Everything That Rises Must Converge," in which the smug, literalistic Julian is wrenched from his ironic detachment by his mother's collapse and imminent death. The story concludes with Julian running for help.

"Wait here, wait here!" he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. "Help, help!" he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

Julian acts instinctively but he is portrayed as if he were suspended in a type of limbo: in short, no moral to the story is provided, and Julian's future remains mysterious. The open-ended nature of many of O'Connor's best stories contrasts, in Kessler's opinion, with such declarative statements as the conclusion of "The Enduring Chill," in which a water stain on a ceiling is identified with the Holy Ghost. That identification prevents a polyvalence of meaning because it is too

direct. Despite the attempt to load the water stain with meaning in anticipation of the denouement, the element of surprise—the shock of recognition—lacks dramatic force.

Taken in a limited context, the thrust of Kessler's analysis is not only sound but a necessary form of attention to O'Connor's painstaking craft. However, his thesis is plagued both by methodological narrowness and an ideological mindset that ultimately sells O'Connor short. The pervasive problem with O'Connor's critics is that they take her modest self-deprecation with regard to her knowledge of philosophy, theology, and the nature of the modern crisis at face value. The sole exception to the wholesale underestimation of O'Connor's intellect by the critical community is Marion Montgomery, whose *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home* places her fiction in the wider context it requires. Montgomery himself has noted the difficulty with the New Critics and their methodology. The principal adverse effect of the New Criticism, Montgomery writes, "was an emphasis upon the element of irony as revealed by metaphor, an emphasis which shifted irony and metaphor from their position as means to ends. . . . Though she is a poet, to her metaphor is not all. Art must at last open outward, and open its beholder as well." In his exclusive focus on her poetics, Kessler subordinates meaning to process, and in so doing undermines his own understanding of O'Connor as an apocalyptic poet.

Throughout her career, O'Connor stressed that the writer of fiction must strive for wholeness; the constant danger is that he will undergo certain "separations" that will reduce his art to propaganda or sentimentality. Repeatedly she warns that if he writes to prove sociological facts or religious sentiments "judgment will be separated from vision, nature from grace, reason from imagination." Kessler is representative of most of our critics in opting for vision and imagination at the expense of reason and judgment. To a great extent this bias derives from the continued force of Romanticism: meaning is seen as static and lifeless while

ambiguity and vague "mystery" are praised. Kessler rightly argues that O'Connor does not "illustrate" theological concepts—a failing she persistently excoriated in others and strove to avoid in herself. But he never discusses her belief that "dogma is the guardian of mystery." She writes:

In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing, and he is free to use it. I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.

Kessler would consider it beyond the scope of his book to discuss why T. S. Eliot and O'Connor were able to reveal mystery and transcendence, but it is far from irrelevant to their art or to the state of our culture.

O'Connor's understanding of the relationship between form and meaning was more profound than Kessler imagines. She believed that fiction could not be reduced to a single reading: "A story that is any good can't be reduced but only expanded. A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you." Elsewhere, she wrote: "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation." Anagogy is a term deriving from medieval biblical exegesis and involves seeing a particular text as relating to our spiritual destiny. Unlike allegory, which is a simple cloaking of ideas, anagogy sees multiple levels of meaning in a single action or image. This is why O'Connor thought of fiction as an "incarnational" art. More specifically, anagogy means the sense in which a biblical text can refer to "the Divine life and

our participation in it." Here we are very close to the language of apocalypse, though not in a sense that Kessler would allow: the experience of felt meaning in O'Connor's fiction always points in an eschatological direction. "Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama," she declared.

Kessler's narrow frame of reference often causes misreadings that a broader knowledge of O'Connor's intellectual horizon would prevent. In discussing her use of "place" as metaphor, Kessler asserts that O'Connor "rejects class hierarchy, social decorum, the idea of keeping in one's place" and that "unlike the Agrarians, O'Connor did not long for some closed, static, hierarchical society. . . ." Kessler's reductive reading of the Southern Agrarians is matched by his failure to perceive that O'Connor lived in and consciously wrote about a society that had abandoned a traditional piety toward nature and place in favor of a restless desire to subdue being. If "history and community" are subordinated to metaphor in O'Connor's fiction, as Kessler claims they are, it is not because she entertained any facile rebellion from the manners of her region, but because she believed that modern, alienated man would no longer have access to these sources of order. Her settings are often stark, populated by only the members of a single family. In this her art reflects that of Samuel Beckett, a comparison she would not, perhaps, wholly repudiate. Even here, history and community are present in a way Kessler does not perceive. Marion Montgomery has pointed out that O'Connor's pitting of grandchild against grandparent (a common device) achieves a condensed sense of history. One need only think of *The Violent Bear It Away*, where the old prophet, Mason Tarwater, who still had access to faith, is succeeded by his great nephew, who attempts to live within the confines of the deracinated world of modern rationalism.

By concentrating on metaphor as an end, Kessler fails to see the end for which metaphor is used. Thus the sentence from *Wise Blood* which Kessler notes merely for its "violence" and "irrationality" ("His throat got drier and his heart began to grip him like

a little ape clutching the bars of its cage") actually plays an important role in forwarding O'Connor's story. Throughout *Wise Blood*, the head and the heart (or the blood) are at odds, a disjuncture that O'Connor believed to be acute in our time. This separation is not merely between reason and the emotions but between body and soul, the immanentist, mechanistic view of mind and the spiritual openness to the ground of being. The metaphor of the "little ape" anticipates the visit of Haze and Enoch Emery to the zoo while it reiterates the head/heart disjuncture. Enoch, a wonderful comic character, never rises above the level of animality: in him, reason has completely atrophied.

O'Connor said that she practiced the "reasonable use of the unreasonable," but Kessler tends to minimize her reason. He pays little attention to her technique of gradually allowing a few central metaphors to accrete meaning. The head/heart/blood symbols in *Wise Blood* are a good example. The character named Enoch Emery may be a moron, but his form of retardation is widespread today: "Enoch's brain was divided into two parts. The part in communication with his blood did the figuring but it never said anything in words. The other part was stocked up with all kinds of words and phrases." O'Connor resolves the breach metaphorically late in the novel, when Mrs. Flood puzzles over the mystery of the method in Haze's seeming madness.

She thought of her own head as a switchbox where she controlled from; but with him, she could only imagine the outside in, the whole black world in his head and his head bigger than the world, his head big enough to include the sky and planets and whatever was or had been or would be.

Mrs. Flood's rationalism is a faint but clear echo of the Cartesian intellect, the mind as a self-sufficient place. But she senses that after blinding himself Haze develops an *inward* vision that is whole and inclusive. Contrary to Kessler, Haze has not simply rejected "place": his seemingly aimless wandering is part of his mortification on the road to the

City of God. In a mysterious way, Haze has regained the world. O'Connor believed that in the modern era we are all displaced persons, and that our only road back to spiritual health is the path of negation (in the mystical sense of the "dark night of the soul"). Kessler suggests that the image of Haze walking in place in his room indicates the paucity of O'Connor's metaphoric imagination in this "early work"; but in fact she is alluding to a penitential discipline that leads to *inner* freedom. That is why Mrs. Flood thinks to herself: "He might as well be one of them monks. . . ." It is no coincidence that a certain Trappist monk named Thomas Merton should have been one of O'Connor's greatest admirers.

Despite its many problems, Kessler's book is a valuable addition to the critical literature on O'Connor. The correspondence between O'Connor and Brainard Cheney, however, adds little to our understanding of her work.

A novelist, political speechwriter, and journalist, Cheney and his wife converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before they encountered O'Connor. He had been at Vanderbilt during the heyday of the Southern Agrarians, and numbered such writers as Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Andrew Lytle among his friends. In addition to shared religious beliefs, O'Connor and Cheney both came from Georgia and were politically conservative—they were enthusiastic about Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. Because they held so much in common, their correspondence is relatively tame—O'Connor was at her best in her letters when drawn out by those whose worldviews differed significantly from her own. Nevertheless, these letters bespeak a fruitful literary friendship, and prove that O'Connor's work had perceptive readers during her own brief life.