

***“No Literary Orthodoxy”:
Flannery O’Connor, the New Critics, and
Jacques Maritain***

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Flannery O’Connor could be as ferocious a defender of the integrity of the literary work as the leading “New Critics” of the 1950s and 60s: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. In the O’Connor Collection in Milledgeville, Georgia, is a videotape of O’Connor’s 1955 television interview with *New York Times* reporter Harvey Breit. The segment preceded a dramatization of her short story, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” Breit asks sweetly, “Flannery, would you like to tell our audience what happens in [the rest of] that story?” and O’Connor retorts, “No, I certainly would not. I don’t think you can paraphrase a story like that. I think there is only one way to tell it and that’s the way it is told in the story.”¹

Many critics have concluded that O’Connor is a “New Critical” writer. One has only to consider her carefully crafted fiction, in which every detail counts to construct a meaningful whole, to see how her stories reward the close reading advocated by New Critics. O’Connor wrote her first stories while at the State University of Iowa’s Writer’s Workshop during the late 1940s, when New Critics had begun to wield great power within American universities. She published her tales in journals affiliated with New Critics,

1. Rosemary Magee, ed., *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), p. 8.

such as *The Kenyon Review*, where Ransom was editor. Finally, O'Connor herself acknowledged that she was a member of "that literary generation whose education was in the hands of the New Critics or those influenced by them, and with these people the emphasis was on seeing that your thoughts and feelings—whatever they were—were aptly contained within your elected image."²

Even as O'Connor acknowledges this influence, her statements about the New Critics are ambivalent. Her wording—"in the hands of ... these people"—suggests she wants to distance herself from New Critical aesthetics even as she embraces them. She does not so much claim that the New Critics—"or those influenced by them"—educated her personally as that they influenced her "literary generation." While acknowledging the pervasiveness of the New Critical aesthetic during her formative years, she maintains a separation from it.

O'Connor admired and maintained friendly contacts with Ransom, Tate, and Warren, but she was skeptical about the value of literary theory for guiding writing. Less than a decade after graduating from Iowa, she does not hesitate to mock it. In a 1953 letter to Sally Fitzgerald, she describes a talk given by poet Robert Lowell, who suffered from manic-depressive disorder: "Toward the end he gave a lecture at the university that was almost pure gibberish. I guess nobody noticed, thinking it was the new criticism."³ Later, on a more serious note, during a 1960 lecture on "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," O'Connor locates her fiction at the confluence of several literary traditions:

... this tradition of the dark and divisive romance-novel has combined with the comic-grotesque tradition, and with the lessons all writers have learned from the naturalists, to preserve our Southern literature for at least a little while from becoming the kind of thing Mr. Van Wyck Brooks desired when he said he hoped that our next literary phase would restore that central literature which combines the great subject matter of the middlebrow writers with the technical expertness bequeathed by the new critics and which would thereby restore literature as a mirror and guide for society.

For the kind of writer I have been describing, a literature which mirrors society would be no fit guide for it, and one which did manage, by sheer art, to do both these things would have to have recourse to more violent means than middlebrow subject matter and mere technical expertness.⁴

2. Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 130.

3. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1979), p. 74.

4. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1969), p. 46.

O'Connor disparages New Critics as focusing on "mere technical expertness" while she implicitly claims for herself the difficult marriage of mimetic and didactic goals ("mirror and guide") and claims the "violent means" that characterize her *oeuvre*.

O'Connor's statements in her letters, essays, and interviews indicate that her literary aesthetics *was* New Critical in important ways, but only to the extent that techniques valued by New Critics, like narrative objectivity and symbolism, enabled her to write fiction that provides "a mirror and guide for contemporary society," and that, in particular, reflects her Catholic faith. She never hesitated to acknowledge the orthodoxy of her faith but, at the same time, insisted on the freedom of the artist: "There is no literary orthodoxy that can be prescribed as settled for the fiction writer."⁵ She preferred to ground her practice in the example of other writers, in her own experiences, and in Thomistic aesthetics. These three sources form an integrated core of O'Connor's aesthetics.

Previous scholars have ably demonstrated how O'Connor found models for her use of sensory detail and symbolic imagery not only in New Critical aesthetics, but also in the fiction of authors such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad and in Christian sacramentalism. Our sense of the New Criticism today, however, typically foregrounds the "technical expertness" that O'Connor belittled while overlooking the role of intuition in artistic creation that is emphasized by New Critics such as Brooks and Warren as well as Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain who, like the New Critics, was a formative influence on O'Connor.⁶

As is abundantly clear in the TV interview, O'Connor's concept of the literary work parallels the New Critical view that the work of art is complete in itself—autonomous, unique, and organic. She shares the New Critical dictum that though the literary work embodies meaning, a paraphrase can never fully account for the work. Like the New Critics, O'Connor prefers fiction that "shows" rather than "tells." In the tradition of Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, the New Critics insist that poetry and fiction, like drama, should be presentational. In their respective fiction textbooks, Brooks and Warren as well as O'Connor's mentor Caroline Gordon and her husband,

5. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 32.

6. O'Connor had read Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* by 1950 when she stayed with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut to work on *Wise Blood*. By 1952, when she had been diagnosed with lupus and had returned home to Georgia, she asked that Sally Fitzgerald send her Maritain's book, which she had left behind. By 1955 she had developed the habit of reading St. Thomas's *Summa Theologica* every night before going to bed (O'Connor, *The Habit*, p. 93).

poet-critic Allen Tate, privilege the dramatized scene, objectively rendered. O'Connor sounds stereotypically New Critical in a 1956 letter when she pans Frances Newman's novel, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926): "dear Lord, it's all reported; the most undramatic fifty pages I have been exposed to since [Pater's] *Marius the Epicurean*."⁷

O'Connor's descriptions of the writing process reflect her belief in the organic inter-relation of character, plot, and theme, discoverable by creative intuition rather than imposed. She advises her friend "A" in December of 1956:

When you have a character he will create his own situation and his situation will suggest some kind of resolution as you get into it. Wouldn't it be better for you to discover a meaning in what you write than to impose one? Nothing you write will lack meaning because the meaning is in you. Once you have done a first draft then read it and see what it says and then see how you can bring out better what it says.⁸

This advice seems based on O'Connor's own experience in composing. She once told an audience of student writers that she began writing "Good Country People" with "a description of two women I knew something about" who became Mrs. Hope and Mrs. Freeman. The idea of having the salesman steal Hulga's prosthetic leg didn't occur to her, she claimed, "until ten or twelve lines before he did it." O'Connor took pleasure in experiences where the story seemed to wrest control away from the author. The best stories, she said, are those that surprise the writer as well as the reader.⁹

O'Connor felt that she was writing best when she was least aware of technique. She explains to "A:"

I have also led you astray by talking of technique as if it were something that could be separated from the rest of the story. Technique can't operate at all, of course, except on believable material. But there was less conscious technical control in GCP than in any other story I've ever written. Technique works best when it is unconscious, and it was unconscious there.¹⁰

O'Connor goes so far as to question Caroline Gordon's emphasis on technique—Gordon, the lifelong mentor whom, according to biographer

7. O'Connor, *The Habit*, p. 128.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 188. The identity of this correspondent was kept anonymous in the publication of the letters, but has since been revealed as Betty Hester.

9. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 100.

10. O'Connor, *The Habit*, p. 171.

Sally Fitzgerald, "Flannery never felt ... she had outgrown."¹¹ Thanking editor Catharine Carver for her responses to the manuscript of *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor writes, "Caroline read it but her strictures always run to matters of style. She swallows a good many camels while she is swatting the flies—though what she has taught me has been invaluable and I can never thank her enough."¹²

Gordon and Tate claimed as a "master-piece,"¹³ "Good Country People," the story that O'Connor says she wrote intuitively, almost unconsciously. Allen Tate went so far as to telegraph editor Robert Giroux from Italy, urging him to make room for the story in O'Connor's first collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, then in press. Perhaps O'Connor had absorbed Gordon's technical exhortations thoroughly enough to attend to them automatically. In any case, Tate and Gordon value a story whose technical elements seem effortlessly controlled—organic.

Contrary to today's typical view of the New Criticism, Brooks and Warren also show an openness and flexibility about technical strictures. In *Understanding Fiction*, their short-story anthology that has come to represent New Critical teaching, they provide an "Appendix: Technical Problems and Principles in the Composition of Fiction," designed as an aid for student writers. Their title promises that they will focus on technique and provide rules for writing. But its opening sentence cautions, "If one learns anything about fiction from reading a limited number of short stories and novels, it is that there is no single, special technique or formula for writing good fiction."¹⁴

When O'Connor described her composing process, she cited everyday experience more often than theory. Although she placed her stories in the romance tradition, she also thought in terms of literary realism, taking into account probability, believability, *vraisemblance*: as she quotes one of her readers, "how some folks *would* do."¹⁵ Likewise, Brooks and Warren explain that an appropriate question for any story concerns the believability of the characters: "Are they 'real'? ... Do their actions logically follow

11. Sally Fitzgerald, "A Master Class: From the Correspondence of Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor," *Georgia Review* 33 (1979), p. 846.

12. O'Connor, *The Habit*, p. 328.

13. Caroline Gordon, letter to Flannery O'Connor, 19 February 1955, O'Connor Collection, Ina Dillard Russell Library, Georgia College and State University.

14. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1959) p. 570.

15. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 90.

from their natures?"¹⁶ O'Connor thought of her characters as realized individuals. She writes to "A" in 1960:

There doesn't have to be any connection between Enoch [in *Wise Blood*] and a criticism of humanism. As a fiction writer, I am interested first in Enoch as Enoch and Haze as Haze. ...when I wrote it my mind was not primarily on ... abstract things but only on what would Haze and Enoch do next, they being themselves."¹⁷

She does not deny that characters can be symbolic; rather, she sets aside such analyses while composing.

A workshop in which O'Connor participated with Robert Penn Warren in 1959 provides an extended example to compare how she and this author at the center of New Critical circles describe the writing process. Both were guests at the annual Vanderbilt University Literary Symposium. That year, the second edition of *Understanding Fiction* was published, including O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Vanderbilt could be seen as the birthplace of the New Criticism, as the meeting place in the early 1920s of the then-called Fugitives (a group that included Ransom, Tate, and Warren, and later, Brooks). Given the location and gender of the symposium participants, who included twelve men and one woman, the atmosphere might have overwhelmed a young woman (O'Connor was 34) on a panel with Robert Penn Warren, a famous writer, critic, and author of a text she had used as a student. There is no indication, however, that O'Connor is a bashful proselyte echoing the older, wiser mentor, or that theory dictates how she writes or describes experience. Often, she answers questions first, and Warren follows, echoing her response.¹⁸

O'Connor and Warren speak as writers, not theorists. Their comments communicate their sense of the intuitive nature of writing, of writing as a process of discovery and shaping. Asked about the value of outlining before writing, O'Connor states flatly, "I just don't outline." Warren adds, "I had an outline once, and it took me two years to pull out of it. You think you've got your work done." When O'Connor acknowledges that she "anticipated" the ending of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a student asks, "Do any of you begin with the theme first, and hunt for the story, or do you do it the other way around?" O'Connor says she begins with the *story*, "Be-

16. Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, 1st ed. (1943), p. 28.

17. O'Connor, *The Habit*, p. 403.

18. Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, pp. 19-36. The O'Connor Collection in Milledgeville also holds a tape recording of this session.

cause the theme is more or less something that's in you, but if you intellectualize it too much you probably destroy your novel." Warren agrees with O'Connor: "I think people can freeze themselves by their hasty intellectualizing of what they are up to."¹⁹

Despite the prevalent view today of New Critical writing as rigidly controlled, Warren describes the writing process as intuitive, even emotional. At one point, professor and critic Walter Sullivan presses Warren to account for the technical coherence of his work: "Red, to get back to this novel business: your books are awfully well put together. The opening sequences contain so many images of the book as a whole, and prepare for so many things to happen. You've got to know a whole lot or you couldn't write that way." Warren points out, "There's no law that makes you put the first chapter first, though . . .," distinguishing drafting from revising. Elaborating on his answer, he defers to O'Connor:

I don't think it's knowing how the story comes out that's the point. As Flannery just said, you know what you want it to feel like. . . . You may have your big scenes in mind before you start. . . . You don't know whether they will jell out or not jell out. But it seems to me the important thing is to have enough feeling envisaged and pre-felt, as it were, about the way the book's going to go . . . as long as it is there, you have something to guide you in this automatic process of trial and error.²⁰

Sullivan can't quite believe this; he insists: "This is wonderful talk, and I certainly don't want to minimize what you and Flannery have said. I think it is absolutely true, but I am speaking among company here which I know perhaps more intimately than you. I am afraid we might get a little too far off into a romantic notion of the muse." But O'Connor concurs with Warren, explaining, "When you write the thing through once, you find out what the end is. Then you can go back to the first chapter and put in a lot of those foreshadowings."²¹ Jacques Maritain is not mentioned in this conversation, but he anticipated its conclusions in *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), a book O'Connor owned, annotated, and kept in her library: "Aesthetics must be intellectualist and intuitivist at one and the same time."²²

Both O'Connor and Warren express wariness about beginning a story with "belief," with any abstract theme or idea. Asked whether belief inter-

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

22. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 164.

feres with writing, O'Connor replies, "I don't think a theological point of view interferes in any way unless it becomes so dominant that you're so full of ideas that you kill the character." Warren spins out this idea, asking: "Flannery, would this be true about theology or anything else: that by the sort of deductive way of going at it—illustrating the point—you're a dead duck before you start?" O'Connor agrees, fervently: "You don't begin a story with a system. You can forget about the system. These are things that you believe; they may affect your writing unconsciously. I don't think theology should be a scaffolding."²³ Again, Maritain's previous formulation resonates in O'Connor's. Discussing "The Purity of Art," he explains, "every thesis [an intention extrinsic to the work itself] whether it claims to demonstrate some truth or to touch the heart, is for art a foreign importation, hence an impurity."²⁴

More often than not in her letters and essays, O'Connor cites theologians and authors rather than literary theorists to explain her aesthetics. Like the New Critics, Maritain believes that true art is not utilitarian or propagandistic. The "habit" or *habitus* of art is an inner virtue. The Christian artist can best develop this *habitus* by striving to make the best work rather than by trying to mold art into a dogmatic expression of faith.²⁵ In his chapter on "Christian Art," Maritain advises:

Do not *separate* your art from your faith. But leave *distinct* what is distinct. Do not try to blend by force what life unites so well. If you were to make of your aesthetic an article of faith, you would spoil your faith. If you were to make of your devotion a rule of artistic activity, or if you were to turn desire to edify into a method of your art, you would spoil your art.²⁶

Jacques Maritain was not a New Critic, but his ideas about the autonomy of art are congruent with New Critical principles. One does not have to *try* to write as a Christian, because faith and art are ultimately inseparable. Faith—like literary technique—works best in art when the author is least conscious of it. While O'Connor's stories reflect her faith, she did not write as an apologist for the faith. Instead, she concentrated on reflecting in a well-made work what she saw in the world.

23. Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, p. 29.

24. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 62.

25. O'Connor cites Maritain's concept of the "habit of art," and St. Thomas's focus on the "the good of that which is made," for example, in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," a composite of her lecture notes published in *Mystery and Manners*, pp. 64-65.

26. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 66.

Maritain first published *Art and Scholasticism* in 1920, before the rise of the New Criticism. He completed its third and final revision in 1935, shortly before teaching at Princeton University in the early 1940s. During this period, he developed a friendship with Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate. In his Mellon Foundation lectures, published in 1953 as *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Maritain chooses the poetry of Tate and Ransom to illustrate certain points. Developing an argument that reflects O'Connor's and Warren's experience of composing, Maritain explains that intuition is the heart of the creative process: "Poetic intuition ... is born in the unconscious, but it emerges from it; the poet is not unaware of this intuition, on the contrary it is his most precious light and the primary rule of his virtue of art."²⁷

Similarly, O'Connor's views on symbolism, which scholars have traditionally linked to the New Criticism, also reflect Thomistic aesthetics. Discussing the composition of "Good Country People," O'Connor insists that she did not choose Hulga's wooden leg as a symbol; rather, the leg "accumulated ... meaning" as she wrote the tale.²⁸ For O'Connor, symbolism is not a technique that one uses to add resonance to fiction. Instead, it reflects the layers of meaning that exist in the world and that one perceives while "staring" at it.²⁹ Maritain also praises this kind of symbolic layering that reflects one's perception: "the more the object of art is laden with signification (but with spontaneous and intuitively grasped signification, not with hieroglyphic signification), the greater and richer and higher will be the possibility of delight and beauty."³⁰

O'Connor found support in both New Critical theories and Thomist aesthetics for her sense that literature should not be designed to prove a point. Yet despite her wariness about didacticism, she wanted her art to reflect what she saw as the realities of God's world, and for readers to perceive these realities. In order to communicate this view without slipping into propaganda, she combined violent characters and events with an understated narrative style, relying on her belief, grounded in Thomistic aesthetics, that the realities of the created universe will pass through the artist's being into the work of art.

Many of O'Connor's aesthetic principles coincide with those of the New Critics: her sense of the organic nature of the art work; her experience that

27. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), p. 91.

28. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 99.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

30. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 55.

writing is a process of discovering that organic whole; her view that belief informs art, but art does not serve belief; and her practice of incorporating details with symbolic resonance in an objectively rendered narration. But O'Connor distrusted theory. Instead of citing New Critical experts to explain her aesthetics, she refers to writers or theologians. The works of writers like Flaubert, James, and Joyce, whom O'Connor names approvingly, also serve as a foundation for much of the New Critical aesthetics. Thus, O'Connor's aesthetics integrated literary and religious principles.

It might seem odd that a writer with strong and orthodox religious beliefs found congenial a literary theory that distrusts didacticism and limits the role of statement in literature. I believe, on the contrary, that it was precisely this aesthetic that allowed O'Connor to respect both her art and her religion. She felt that a utilitarian art that existed to serve religion would be a perversion of art. She wanted her fiction to represent sin and doubt and yet express faith. The Thomistic aesthetic formulated by Jacques Maritain and the literary theories of the New Critics, as expressed in modern literature, enabled Flannery O'Connor to maintain a vital faith and a vibrant art.