

## *Her Sacred Office*

**The Complete Stories**, by Flannery O'Connor, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. 555 pp. \$10.00.*

NO AMERICAN WRITER of fiction ever had a grander view of his high calling than Henry James: he referred to it as a sacred office. And the term may be used, in more senses than one, to characterize the works of Flannery O'Connor—her actual fictional achievement and her attitude toward that endeavor. Now, less than eight years after her untimely death in 1964, at the age of thirty-nine, she is no less a phenomenon in the recognition that continues to be accorded her and the increasing attention given to her work. Already there are four full-length studies of her work in print, besides two pamphlets and several hundred articles and reviews and also a score of theses and dissertations. And in the most recent annual bibliography of critical and scholarly work done on Southern writers (compiled

by the Society for the Study of Southern Literature), Miss O'Connor is ahead of all the competition, coming, after Faulkner, who heads the list in number of entries, behind only Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain, about whose essential "Southernness" very real questions might be and already have been raised. (One can always call Poe a "courtesy" Southerner and Twain a Westerner and thus rescue them for the less "regional," more "national" American literature, which, before Vernon Parrington, was pretty much owned and operated by the good gray beards of New England and New York. Even today no epithet can more effectually damn a novel than the word "regional," which largely means it's simply not set in either New York or some anonymous suburb.)

How does one account for such critical popularity, which, incidentally, had already begun coming Miss O'Connor's way during her lifetime? Hardly any short story anthology published today, whether intended for an academic or a general audience, appears without at least one of her stories. Hardly any professional literary meeting is convened where at least one paper on her works is not read. Most recently, her mother, Mrs. Edward F. O'Connor, of Milledgeville, Georgia, presented her daughter's papers to the library of Georgia College (Miss O'Connor's own undergraduate school) there on a day officially proclaimed throughout the state as Miss O'Connor's own. In almost every way in which writers can attract either fame or notice, Miss O'Connor is "news." And this despite the fact that she neither wrote up the news of the day nor taught a Sunday-School lesson in her thirty-odd stories and her two novels. Many readers today, who do make such demands of fiction, would accordingly find her almost perversely "irrelevant" and not pertinent for their own "life styles." Yet her popularity with discerning readers not only persists; it continually increases. Since this review was written *The Complete Stories* won the National Book Award for Fiction for 1971.

Perhaps we can work most quickly to the heart of this matter by observing that hardly any reader is ever indifferent to Miss O'Connor's work: he either loves it or loathes it. And, in many ways, such a reaction is altogether appropriate, even inevitable, because Miss O'Connor's fiction, for the most part, revolves around the one central issue of the Jesus question or the Jesus "bidness," as some of her characters would say. The dilemma, for man, is never posed better in her works than in the Misfit's anguished spiritual grapplings in the title story of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*:

If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away every thing and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.

This is a choice which, of course, the modern world is not really prepared to make; but Miss O'Connor puts the question to the reader again and again: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?" And there is no middle way out: either He's the Son of God or else—who knows?—a devil or some other manifestation of the Everlasting Nay. Many discriminating readers have cried "false dilemma!" here, and Miss O'Connor has unfortunately lost them. And perhaps such loss is unavoidable. But her most avid partisans, who wanted to turn her into something like a Christian—not to say, Roman Catholic—Writer in Residence were no greater friends, in the long run, than her most violent detractors, of whom there were and continue to be a great many. That she was not a propagandist for the Christian faith, the discerning reader knows: had she been one, she would not have written nearly so well. But the Jesus business, the Jesus question was the one story which seemed to be eating on her, to the exclusion of almost all others: one felt she never *willed* it, rather she answered the

summons of "Lazarus, come forth!" and behaved accordingly.

Because she was one of the most nearly honest writers we have ever had in this country, in that she was never false to her vision, her story. Certainly, the early stories collected here—some of them submitted as a thesis for her Master's degree at Iowa—are unsure and defective, compared with her later and her best work, the stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. But, on the whole, it's all very much of a muchness, a seamless garment which speaks honesty and fidelity every step of the way. And one cannot help but think James would have commended her for being so faithful to the writer's sacred office and that Hemingway would also have praised her accordingly—both of them, one remembers, extremely limited writers as well. Miss O'Connor, too, found—or was there found for her?—early in the day what for her was the one thing needful, what her one story was; and she served it well and faithfully all her days.

Robert Giroux, for many years Miss O'Connor's publisher, has provided a perceptive and sympathetic introduction to the present volume. And he does not do Miss O'Connor the disservice of indiscriminately praising all the stories. (The hitherto uncollected stories—largely, early ones—are of inferior caliber: Miss O'Connor, one infers, was most judicious in deciding which stories to exclude from her collections. The principal value of these early stories is their shadowing forth, in both theme and structure, the greatness yet to come: their merit, their significance is thus more historical than intrinsic.) Further, Mr. Giroux sensed early in their acquaintance much about Miss O'Connor which spoke of fortitude and integrity—and this before those qualities were intensified and strengthened by the long years of her illness. And, one infers, her attitude toward her life was also her attitude toward her work: they both constituted a sacred office which one could not betray with impunity.

But Mr. Giroux wisely lets Miss O'Connor put her case in the best possible way—in her own words. Writing in 1949 to a publisher who had some doubts about her first novel, *Wise Blood*, as it began to take shape, she asserted,

I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity of the aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from . . . In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not pretend to do otherwise.

Brave words these, from a beginning writer; but she stuck by them all her life. And verily, she has had her reward.

Reviewed by ROBERT DRAKE

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### *The Knower and the Known*

**The Identity of Man**, by Jacob Bronowski, Garden City, N. Y.: *The Natural History Press*, 1971. (Revised edition: paper) xii + 145 pp. \$1.45.

IF THERE ARE any savants still alive and flourishing in our age of specialization, then Jacob Bronowski must be numbered among their select membership. The same might be said of Arthur Koestler. Like Koestler, Bronowski has shown that a marriage between science and the fine arts is not only possible, but can even be happy. Bronowski's training is in mathematics, but he is also a poet, dramatist, and literary critic. He writes about science and mathematics from the point of view of one with first hand acquaintance coupled with an awareness of their purpose and significance in a prose style that is eminently readable.