

Flannery O'Connor and the History Behind the History

J O H N F. D E S M O N D

THE QUESTION OF Flannery O'Connor's place in the tradition of modern Southern letters remains a vexing one for critics. Both the number and the wide ideological range of critical assessments that have appeared since her death testify to the anomalous position she continues to occupy as a Southern Catholic writer. Some may wish to argue that her rare blend of Christian orthodoxy, Southern regionalism, and comic literary genius makes her writing so unique as to defy categorization. But to argue so merely begs the question of her relationship to modern Southern literature, and the larger, more important question of her place among twentieth-century writers. The issue cannot be ignored because it is not simply a matter of establishing a line of literary and intellectual influences or correspondences within a tradition. Of a more crucial nature, attempts to determine O'Connor's place in a modern tradition raise questions about the fundamental value of her work as a whole.

Among some readers and critics of O'Connor's fiction there is a belief that her work simply does not adequately represent the complexities of the modern consciousness. This belief is sometimes revealed popularly in the form of a kind of critical dualism which accepts and admires

O'Connor's comic talent as a literary artist in spite, as it were, of the demanding religious vision embodied in her work. Such a critical dualism implicitly suggests a split within O'Connor herself—fiction writer on the one hand and believer on the other—and thus raises the whole complex issue of the relationship between her thought and her art. At other times the religious orthodoxy in her stories is "accepted" as orthodoxy, but often with the deeply felt reservation that her presentation of the spiritual consciousness is too simplistic and antiquated to do full justice to the modern temper.

Such a view is that expressed by Lewis P. Simpson in his study of the American literary consciousness, *The Brazen Face of History*. Simpson argues that like their contemporaries in England and Europe, the major twentieth-century Southern writers—Faulkner, Warren, Welty, and others—were confronted with the modern crisis of the "historicism of consciousness," that is, an intellectual crisis which creates a consciousness bent on "looking upon everything—man, nature, place, time, and God—as subject to the dominion of history . . . history as an ineluctable process or series of processes, which may be regarded as teleological or blankly purposeless."¹

This crisis had its roots in the breakup of the medieval order in the West and the rise of modernity beginning in the Renaissance, and it involved the "transformation of an assumed metaphysical and moral order into the dehumanized present-day society of history and science" (p. 240).

In reaction to this compulsion toward historicism, which threatens the very bases of order and identity within the mind, the great Southern writers developed an "aesthetic of memory," according to Simpson. Writers such as Faulkner, Warren, and Welty came to look upon "remembering as an art of the Psychic—the spiritual—survival," and their aesthetic of memory came into being as a conscious literary mode when the "culture of kinship and custom, of tradition and myth, began to give way altogether to the culture of rationality. . . . In this situation, memory became, not a spiritual heritage, but a 'life's work'." Thus for Simpson the great Southern writers discovered what he sees as the "omnipresent subject of modern letters: man's idea of himself as a creature of his own conception of history, and his resistance to this idea" (p. 238).

But such is not the case with Flannery O'Connor, Simpson argues. She rejected the aesthetic of memory because she saw the South's history as a microcosm of larger universal history, one which the Southern writer can perceive because his vision is essentially prophetic, "a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols." For O'Connor the Southern writer gifted with this prophetic vision is, to use Simpson's phrase, "a participant . . . in the transcendent mystery of the history behind the history," and his problem as an artist is to discover in his work that "nexus of time, place, and eternity" which is his true location. But Simpson believes that by rejecting the aesthetic of memory in favor of a "mode of revelation" as a fictional aesthetic, O'Connor effectively removed herself both from the mainstream of the Southern literary imagination and from the modern mind's struggle with the central issue of the historicism of consciousness.

Ascribing to the southern writer a transcendent religiosity of consciousness, she parodies the quest to resist the historicist compulsion. An actor in the drama of existence, lacking the capacity for detached observation and suspension of judgment, she fails to realize that her concept of a simultaneous descent into the self and into the South is a way of evading the historicism of consciousness; that the problem of locating the transcendent juncture of time, place, and eternity is ironically involved with the problem of the modern self's tendency to enclose history in the self. Having no empathy with the self that internalizes history as memory so that it may survive history and its catastrophes, she oversimplifies the modern situation of the self; her stories employ a series of characters who lack the sophistication to grapple inwardly with the subtleties of the self as a creature of modern history. She lacks, perhaps refuses, an intimacy with history. Blessed by an overpowering gift of faith, she lets the Faulkner company, the survivors of history, go its way. Her vision is directed toward timeless order and the ultimate beatitude of the soul. Prophesying the irresistibility of God's grace in the life of the individual, her stories follow a compelling aesthetic of revelation. The result is that, in spite of their detailed portrayal of the manners of her region, they divest it of a tension toward historical reality (pp. 247-8).

Probably no one has put the case for O'Connor's limitations as forcefully as Simpson has in this statement. But one may well ask whether the central assumption behind his argument—the historicism of consciousness—can be regarded as so definitive of the modern situation as to be totally inclusive. Or is such a thesis too rigid a formulation to explain the complex reality of the twentieth-century historical-literary situation? Does the problem of the historicism of consciousness necessarily mean that the "culture of kinship and custom, of tradition and myth, began to

give way altogether to the culture of rationality. . . .”?

On the contrary, it is possible to find many examples of vital belief in a traditionalist moral and metaphysical order in the modern sensibility, and if these do exist, they are an appropriate subject for representation in fiction, as indeed O'Connor has done in characters such as Mrs. Greenleaf, Father Finn in "The Enduring Chill," old Mason Tarwater, and the priest and the Guizacs in "The Displaced Person." One may wish to argue that these are exceptions which do not represent the general condition—that being the modern mind's struggle against the forces of historicism. But such a view only leads to the more fundamental question: Whether or not the modern compulsion toward historicism precludes any access whatsoever to a transcendent order of reality, that divine order which is revealed in the "history behind the history"? This is the question raised by Walker Percy in his essay "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World," when he asks whether the "tempestuous restructuring" of modern consciousness has made it temporarily impossible for modern man to hear the Good News. O'Connor's response to this question, and more importantly her fictional method in dealing with it, show clearly the reasons behind her rejection of the aesthetic of memory.

For O'Connor, because the act of memory itself is a mode of consciousness, a process of human intellectuality, as such it is incapable of transcending the historicist compulsion. The fallibility of memory, both in the sense of lapses from truth and in terms of memory's tendency toward selectivity and exaggeration, is made clear in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy." George Poker Sash has been "recreated" as General Tennessee Flintrock Sash through his own and others' impulse to romanticize history. This impulse constitutes a denial of true history and of Sash's real situation in both past and present. Against this O'Connor affirms a truer historical sense in the words of the commencement speaker in the story: "If we forget our past . . . we

won't remember our future and it will be as well for we won't have one." But even this more accurate memory of history, valuable as it is, is insufficient for man. General Sash struggles to deny acknowledging his true past, which has been reawakened by the speaker's words, and he dies trying to escape death, the "black procession" that has haunted all his days. While his effort to escape death is futile, his struggle against it and his whole tendency to romanticize his history represent an attempt at transcendence, albeit in a mock, distorted form. That it is a mock and sentimental attempt at transcendence of course destroys its validity, yet it does implicitly acknowledge the need for transcendence, beyond the limits of human memory.

But to regard the historicism of consciousness as *the* modern problem is to assume that consciousness be identified with the whole of reality, a view that O'Connor categorically rejected. In her essays, letters, and fiction, she constantly condemned those for whom reality began and ended with the borders of their skulls. Again and again the false god of a presumed self-sufficient intellectualism is attacked: the reductive rationalism of Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* and Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People"; the intellectual pride of Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill" and Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"; and the mental rigidity of Haze Motes in *Wise Blood* and Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," whose attempts to limit reality to the dimensions of their own minds are comically confounded at every turn. In every case, O'Connor shatters the icon of solipsistic consciousness and forces these protagonists to encounter that larger reality governed by mystery. For her, the life of consciousness, *including* memory, was too limited both as a subject for fiction and as an artistic stance, too narrow to encompass the full reality of man's true situation in history. Her view is akin to that expressed by Mircea Eliade in *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*:

The terms "history" and "historic" can occasion much confusion; they indicate, on the one hand, all that is *concrete* and *authentic* in a given human existence, as opposed to the inauthentic existence constituted by evasions and automatisms of every kind. On the other hand, in the various historicist and existentialist currents of thought, "history" and "historic" seem to imply that human existence is authentic only insofar as it is reduced to the *awakened consciousness of its historic moment*. It is to the latter, the "totalitarian" meaning of history that I am referring when I take issue against "historicisms." It seems to me, indeed, that the authenticity of an existence cannot be limited to the consciousness of its own historicity; one cannot regard as "evasive" or "inauthentic," the fundamental experiences of love, anxiety, joy, melancholy, etc. Each of these makes use of a temporal rhythm proper to itself, and all combine to constitute what might be called the integral man, who neither denies himself to his historic moment, nor consents to be identified with it.²

But the deeper question underlying the notion of the internalization of history in consciousness remains. That concerns O'Connor's attempt to evoke the history behind the history—the transcendent order of reality which encompasses and gives meaning to history. From her writings it is evident that she was well aware of the problem of the historicism of consciousness, the process of making history immanent within the self, the rationalistic imperative that so saturates contemporary existence as to make awareness of the transcendent, immutable reality extremely difficult.

For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source. . . . For nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries

of life will eventually fall before the mind of man. Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind. In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected.³

Awareness of the transcendent reality may indeed have become difficult, but not impossible, for that would be antithetical to O'Connor's Christian conception of history; her theology would reject this complete "closure" of man from the divine. So her problem as a writer was how to break through the condition of closure which has been created by the very force of the historicism of consciousness, the modern tendency to identify self, mind, and all reality. That she believed the transcendent metaphysical and moral order could not be recovered by memory is apparent from her fiction. In addition to "A Late Encounter With The Enemy," there is the fact that frequently in her stories we meet putative Christians—Mrs. Hitchcock in *Wise Blood*, Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire," and at times old Mason Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away*—who attempt to "appropriate" Christianity through memory, internalizing it and identifying it with the self and with history. O'Connor's devastating description of Mrs. May typifies this kind of mind: "She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true." But such spiritual decadence won't do for O'Connor; she attacks this rationalizing process by pulverizing the idol they have made of Christianity in attempting to reduce its mystery to a mode of consciousness. And pulverizing the idol of consciousness in order to reveal the history behind the history meant adopting violence as a fic-

tional strategy, and a means of both revealing and speaking to what Eliade calls the "integral man," the whole person who is within the historic moment but not completely identified with it.

I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.⁴

Consequently, O'Connor's fictional stance was not based on the dynamic of memory and history of other modern writers, but rather on the dynamic of history (including memory) and eschatology.

Because for O'Connor the roots of man's being are anagogical, mind is not the whole self. Therefore, the violent action in many of her stories is necessarily anterior to the kind of complex consciousness exemplified by, say, Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Why? Because so many of her characters are already imbued with the historicist disease, having internalized history within the mind and identified it totally with the self. One need only look at the state of mind represented in Rayber, Hulga Hopewell, Asbury Fox, Mrs. McIntyre, the Misfit, and Mr. Head to see the condition clearly. It is a condition perhaps best dramatized in Haze Motes' gospel of the Church Without Christ when he proclaims that "Nothing outside you can give you any place. . . . In yourself right now is all the place you've got." This condition constituted such a reductive, closed view of reality that O'Connor felt compelled to use violence—particularly the violent intrusions of grace offered—as a means of reestablishing *in the mind* that larger,

complex vision of reality. The emphasis on "mind" here is crucial, because the violence in her stories is only incidentally physical; in fact, it is directed precisely against the internalizing, historicizing mind. Its real aim is to produce a new level of consciousness in the character, a complex and subtle awareness in which the character is forced to see the whole self in relation to history and in relation to the transcendent order from which his existence in history derives its ultimate meaning. Sometimes the new awareness comes only at the moment of death, as in the case of the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person." At other times it breaks forth in the form of a startling hierophany, as for Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," or for young Tarwater in his vision of his resurrected great-uncle Mason eating the fishes and loaves near the end of *The Violent Bear It Away*. Rather than evading history and the problem of historicism, O'Connor recast it within a larger framework, at the same time implicitly revealing the very limitations of mind by itself to transcend the historicist compulsion.

To envision the kind of complex consciousness created by this violent action, imagine the state of Hulga Hopewell's mind *after* her encounter with Manley Pointer, or Asbury Fox's *after* the descent of the icy Paraclete, or Julian's *after* the death of his mother. These characters will continue to live in the world—in history—with their new self-awareness, and it is difficult to imagine them as intellectually less sophisticated than a Quentin Compson. For in spite of his great subtlety of mind and eloquence, Quentin Compson *is* in the grip of a fateful determinism leading to suicide. It is a determinism that, by reducing the reality of transcendent order to an idea (or memory) within the mind, thereby simplifies the issue by eliminating creative choice, since Quentin is powerless to act in the light of a transcendent reality. But O'Connor's protagonists are not powerless to act, because the vital dimension which is established by the violence in

her stories is the power of freedom, that terrifying freedom which is at the core of the tension between history and eschatology—the freedom to accept or reject divine grace which has absolute consequences.

The New Testament notion of the tension between history and eschatology is important to recall here for two reasons: one, because it is so central to the Christian conception of history, and antithetical to the theme of the historicism of consciousness as a completely adequate interpretation of history; and two, because it so accurately describes the tension between history and eschatology created in O'Connor's work, tension founded on the Scriptural thesis.

The full meaning of the Scriptural concept of eschatology continues to be debated, but several of its essential features can be elucidated. As the theologian John L. McKenzie has pointed out, the basic definition of eschatology involves "the belief that history issues in a divine act which terminates history and inaugurates a new age, a new dimension of reality."⁵ The concept of eschatology is a Biblical answer to the problem of dualism, particularly the dualism inherent in the conflict between history as process and the idea of a transcendent, absolute spiritual order. The aesthetic of memory is another response to that dualism, but one that is finally incapable of resolving that dualism because its source, especially since Descartes, is too exclusively within the mind, too conditioned by historical process.

The complicating factor in the notion of eschatology is, of course, the Incarnation, Christ's entry into history. With this event human destiny achieves its fully eschatological and historical character. On the one hand, Christ is an eschatological figure whose coming inaugurates a new age—the Reign of God. As Father McKenzie puts it, "the New Testament speaks with conviction of the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ; and the Church has always understood that there cannot be another gospel. He begins the last age. . ." (p. 81). On the other hand, this tendency toward the fulfillment of human destiny cannot be conceived as separate from the function

and goal of human destiny in the world—in history. In spite of the paradox, "both characters must be retained," and "when this is understood, one feels that the tension between history and eschatology has become more acute" (p. 81). This tension derives from the Biblical conception of history, which "sees the present both as recapitulating the entire past and as implicitly containing the entire future" (p. 84). Eliade states the same paradox as follows:

And yet it must not be lost sight of, that Christianity entered History in order to abolish it: the greatest hope of the Christian is the second coming of Christ, which is to put an end to all History. From a certain point of view, for every Christian individually, this end, and the eternity to follow it—the paradise regained—may be attained *from this moment*. The *time to come* announced by Christ is already accessible, and for him who has regained it, history ceases to be. The transformation of Time into Eternity began with the first believers.⁶

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor dramatizes this tension in the fact that while young Tarwater receives the transcendent vision of his great-uncle resurrected in glory, he still must follow out his earthly vocation, to enter the "dark city" and "warn the children of God of the terrible speed of God's mercy."

What is particularly crucial in the eschatological thesis, and indeed in the whole Christian conception of the redemption of history, is that fulfillment is not seen in individualistic terms. Rather, fulfillment is viewed in terms of an ideal of unity, mankind's corporate destiny (individual man as a member of one mystical body), a view which runs counter to the predicament of the solitary self-consciousness that derives in the historicist process. This Christian conception of history and eschatology is the traditional orthodoxy O'Connor believed in, yet she saw everywhere resistance to this corporate destiny, particularly in the form of those who retreat into the world of solitary mind,

attempting to avoid the corporate process of history by self-reliance on their own monolithic visions of reality. Consequently, she attacked this situation of closure, with its tendency to internalize history within the self, by violence, in order to create the possibility of a new mind capable of perceiving man's true historical situation. Whether or not her characters accept this larger vision is another question. She gave them, and her readers, the freedom to see it, to experience in their minds the com-

¹Lewis P. Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 241. (Future references to this work are noted by page reference in the text.) ²Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), pp. 171-72. (Future references to this work are noted by page reference in the text.) ³Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners*

plex dynamic between eschatology and history, and to live as creators of history and not simply as its victims. That it took violence to make possible this larger vision may seem unfortunate, but, like Walker Percy, O'Connor well understood that it was too late in the day for the mode of remembrance as a viable fictional stance. Moreover, she understood that many things are accomplished by violence, among them the kingdom of heaven which the violent bear away.

(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), pp. 157-58. ⁴Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 112. ⁵John L. McKenzie, *The Power and the Wisdom* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1972), p. 74 and passim. (Future references to this work are cited by page reference in the text.) Throughout this discussion of eschatology I am greatly indebted to Father McKenzie's analysis. ⁶Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, p. 172.