

The Struggle for Being

L E W I S A . L A W S O N

Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home, by Marion Montgomery, *La Salle, Illinois: Sherwood Sugden and Company, 1981. 476 pp. \$19.95.*

IN ONE SENSE, any review of Professor Marion Montgomery's *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home* is a dicey proposition. The book is the first volume of a trilogy, to be completed by the publication of *Why Poe Drank Liquor* and *Why Hawthorne Was Melancholy*. The entire trilogy will trace the struggle for Being in the key texts of the American literary tradition. This review, then, will be like the description of a train, when only the caboose was seen.

The reader should understand what kind of train Montgomery has made up and what his destination is. For he will then be able to respond to the text on two levels: much of the time, thought is directed specifically to a reading of Flannery O'Connor, but that reading usually has as a ground a generalization that looks to the grand theme of the trilogy.

By no means related to the engineer of Hawthorne's "Celestial Railroad," Apollyon, Montgomery more nearly takes after Evangelist, Apollyon's vanquisher. Yet he does breathe a little fire and brimstone, if not of the Apollyonic variety. For he is, he admits, a very subjective critic. He believes that his subject, though generally thought to be a short bale of *belles-lettres*—two novels and two dozen stories— is a vital issue, and so he cannot, like the modern "thinker" against whom this book is written, remove himself from the world that he would study. Thus passionately involved, he freely admits that he will use heavy weaponry, "ironic righteousness and moral indignation." He threatens critical violence by warning that he will bear "witness

sometimes in the color of one of Miss O'Connor's own fictional prophets."

Montgomery's excursion to Milledgeville, Georgia (a Bird Sanctuary, Miss O'Connor slyly reminded her correspondents), departs from this fact: Western culture (which in one way or another includes the whole world, when you think of it) has so alienated itself from Being that human life is generally an insane, impoverished experience. If you do not accept this visible fact as a genuine fact, you are one of the readers whom Flannery O'Connor and Marion Montgomery hope to reach, she through fiction and he through exposition. For you have given up your own participation in experience—appropriately confirmed—as the primary forge of truth, to accept a much diminished "knowledge," a concoction of technical tidbits held in suspension by gaseous generalization. After nearly a thousand years of effort, Western culture has managed to limit visible truth to that which is measured by 'scopes and invisible truth to those spectacles staged by a new Gnostic priesthood, who discover ultimate reality in their own theories. Our current craze for space (both in Hollywood and at NASA) reveals just how despairing we really are: life on earth is so bad, because some generalizations, about evil, *seem* true, and others, about goodness, are obviously false, that we yearn for a new world of cute rubbery creatures, who can be controlled by a subadolescent sentimentality employing high-tech gadgetry. When this old sordid world is zapped and transcended, runs our cheap Gnostic dream, there will be love among the planets.

In the beginning of Flannery O'Connor criticism there was considerable effort to put her egg in the Southern basket, with such eggs as Erskine Caldwell and Carson

McCullers. Then, noticing that she was Catholic, some critics tried to understand her by the generalizations about Catholic writers. Not too much, praise the Lord, has been done to explain her away as a woman. (The halls of academe resemble a Pac-Man screen: the object of the game is to gobble as many blips as possible with your generalization.) Each of these labels is a point of reference, of course, and Montgomery deals with each when it is useful, acknowledging the occasional time when linking Miss O'Connor to a generalization is fruitful, but most of the time warning us that such linkage would be slanderous.

To labor the obvious, Montgomery does not begin by pinning yet another label on her. Instead, he offers a radical—at least for these times—description of her as a full human being. She was a body, a mind, and a soul. The body stayed mostly at home in Georgia and died there in 1964, at the age of thirty-nine, after thirteen years of illness. The mind was awesomely rich, coherent, subtle, and witty. The soul never forgot that it existed to experience the grace that would enable it to reach its eternal home. Recognizing that she was a wayfarer, Miss O'Connor could stay at home. Then, using her soul-informed mind, she wrote the stories that continue to mystify our more erudite critics. Aunt Pitty Pat may have been astonished to discover "Yankees in Gawgia," but, to the city folks, Miss O'Connor represents an even more incredible phenomenon, a profound thinker in Georgia.

She saw the world, as she repeatedly said, in the light of Christian orthodoxy. That is, she accepted the Bible as a picture of the real world, not as a mythic construct or as a mystical exaggeration. Which is not to say that she indulged in Georgia literalism: she knew enough about Baldwin County copperheads not to go around depending on a Bible verse to save her from a snake's nature, although she could appreciate the (misguided) faith that animated the handlers. Rather, having accepted the reality of the Biblical world, she never had to blind herself to the Georgia world around her. To help her understand

both that Biblical world and her Milledgeville world—identical in the range of sin and in the presence of relief—she very closely read those stanchions of doctrine, Augustine and Aquinas and other Church writers, especially Dante, Gilson, and Maritain for vocational guidance.

Miss O'Connor thus had the profound common sense to understand that the Biblical world is the most fundamental—"realistic," if you will—world possible, one in which Being is not hidden by overlays of sophisticated thinking. Her job in fiction, then, was to present a person struggling to rejoin Being. Since it is the struggle away from alienation toward communion which is universal, she had no hesitation in using her local world as her setting, content that there would be an audience for her if her work was good.

It is enormously to Montgomery's credit that he understands Miss O'Connor's vision and strategy. But rather than repeat the studies that have sketched her relationship both to her Biblical world and to her local world, though he would no doubt have advanced those areas of understanding, Montgomery approaches that vision and strategy from a different direction. He will argue that her work is both understood by and a parabalization of the modern scholarship on the Gnostic attempt to subdue Being to thought. Her characters still "know" rather than merely "think," albeit that such "knowledge" in a proudly agnostic world frequently drives them toward denial because the rituals of acceptance have disappeared or calcified.

Montgomery is conducting a Joe Johnston campaign, is engaging, in other words, in a Dixie version of Parthian warfare. While appearing to defend Miss O'Connor (about whom a supporter would *have* to be defensive, her detractors seem to think), he is attacking establishment critics, who march out from their Eastern citadels, each phalanx front a solid shield of *New York Review of Books*. He is fighting the entire intellectual establishment, understand; he is hitting the literary critics because they happen to be the closest intellectuals to him.

The chief inspiration of his attack is Eric Voegelin, who has in the past twenty years provided a rally point for believers in Being. In the South the tide of battle has been turned. Miss O'Connor was herself a Voegelinian (though Montgomery rightly stresses the confluence of their ideas, rather than the influence of Voegelin on O'Connor), and so too is Walker Percy. In the academy there is, in addition to Montgomery himself, such a powerful warrior as Lewis Simpson at Louisiana State University, and there are said to be Voegelinians as far north as the Baltimore city limits.

Voegelin's most valuable contribution has perhaps been his description of the process by which secular forces, all the while professing to desire only what is rightfully theirs, have arrogated the symbols and rituals that formerly mediated between men and Mystery. To enhance Voegelin's argument, Montgomery wisely calls in Mircea Eliade and Josef Pieper. He also notes that Miss O'Connor was tolerant of Carl Jung, as one who was bothered by symbols and rituals, even if he finally used them as grist for his Gnostic mill. Montgomery himself does not seem so charitable toward Jung or, for that matter, Teilhard de Chardin, the saintly heretic, whom Miss O'Connor seems to have treasured because he wanted so much to discover an inherent advancement toward Being. Her orthodoxy told her, of course, that the advancement can only be through a personal acceptance of the Incarnation.

Montgomery directs most of his attention to the writers just mentioned, but he deals in passing with several dozen more, as he situates Miss O'Connor in one or another context. He uses the Fugitive-Agrarians and Richard Weaver to provide background for her Southern suspicion of American modernism. He discusses Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, and Joyce in establishing a body of recent literature as context for her writing. And he distinguishes between Faulkner, McCullers, Capote, and Miss O'Connor, in order to shred another generalization: a long analysis establishes Faulkner as ultimately

a man of the Old Testament, humble before God in nature, but incapable of accepting an Intermediary. There are others still yet, who must await discovery by Montgomery's readers.

This book is, speaking now with wide eyes, *big*. A book with such an epic theme, or at least a third of it, could hardly be expected to be small, and when his trilogy is complete, Montgomery will have provided the student of American literature with an absolutely essential tool. Yet in another way, it must be said, it is too big, by at least fifty pages. The nature of its creation no doubt accounts for the surplus: Montgomery acknowledges that parts of the book were first published in twelve different journal articles: those separate essays sometimes employed the same arguments and cited the same sources. There is, then, a good deal of redundancy, which grates after a while and sometimes even distorts the point being made. Poor Isaac Rosenfeld is accepted at first citation as the kind of obtuse critic who pestiferated Flannery O'Connor like the *dermatitis herpetiformis* on Job, but after he is repeatedly hailed for his boorishness, there is a kind of sympathy created for the poor man, who seems, by page 300, to be pursued by a stern Michael. And after Walker Percy has been quoted for the third time about the instructive values of losing a war, he begins to sound like Gavin Stevens, who he is decidedly not. Beyond these matters, the book should have been more closely proofread: there are too many reversals, misspellings, and agreement faults. A tightening up of the text would have taken care of such blemishes.

These observations are not made by someone who was hired to read a book and means to show that he did. Rather, they are offered in the conviction that the trilogy will be so solid that it will become a classic. It will be revised for a one-volume edition, to take its place among the few really significant studies of the American literary endeavor. Then, in the making, these tiny flaws in a truly great book can be removed.