

Flannery O'Connor's Book Reviews

The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor, compiled by Leo J. Zuber, edited with an introduction by Carter W. Martin, *Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983. 189 pp. \$16.00.*

BETWEEN 1956 AND 1964 Flannery O'Connor reviewed some one hundred and forty-three books for the local Catholic diocesan newspapers *The Georgia Bulletin* and *The Southern Cross*. These reviews are now published in collection, along with pertinent selected correspondence between O'Connor, her editors, and interested friends. The project was begun by the late Leo J. Zuber, a former *Bulletin* review editor, and completed by Carter W. Martin. The significance of these reviews can be viewed from a threefold perspective: first, for what they say about the individual works reviewed; secondly, for what they reveal about American Catholic culture and O'Connor's response to it;

third, and most importantly, for what they reveal about O'Connor's intellectual life and its growth during this crucial period.

In a letter to her friend "A" shortly after she began reviewing, O'Connor remarked: "These aren't reviews, just notices, and what you need to develop for them is something I call Church Prose (from Church Mouse)—lean spare poor and hungry. It's no great question of art here though you can say one or two pertinent things with 200 words." Consequently, space limitations dictated that her "notices" be primarily descriptive rather than evaluative. Nevertheless, that very restriction helped to produce reviews that are models of clarity, sharply-honed paragraphs that capture the heart of the work as well as offering "one or two pertinent things" by way of evaluation. For example, reviewing a book on Zen Buddhism, O'Connor remarks: "Zen, although it teaches poverty and charity and ethically bears a superficial resemblance to Christianity, is non-conceptual, non-purposive, and non-historical, and thereby admirably suited to be exploited by the non-thinker and the pseudo-artist." Again,

reviewing Oliver Rabut's study of Teilhard de Chardin, she deftly summarizes: "He believes that Teilhard yields to the temptation to overemphasize the element of psychism in nature and that he does not distinguish adequately between the supernatural action of Christ and the purely natural ascent of evolution." These statements typify the careful precision—the faithfulness to the works—which O'Connor displays throughout the reviews; any author would welcome such integrity in a critical examination of his ideas.

The nature of O'Connor's role as reviewer was also determined by her special audience, mainly Catholic readers whom she wished to acquaint with significant contemporary letters in a variety of fields. She undertook this task, Martin notes, as part of her serious obligation as a practicing Catholic, and though she occasionally referred to it drolly as "penance," it is clear that she undertook this missionary work with relish. I say missionary work because of O'Connor's view of her average readers' religious mentality. To her they were essentially anti-intellectual, either ignorant or sentimental about the fundamental ideas of the Catholic faith. "Today the idea of religion of large numbers of Catholics remains trapped at the magical stage by static and superficial images which neither mind nor stomach can any longer take." Against this tide of ignorance and complacency O'Connor set herself firmly in the reviews, sometimes urging, sometimes scolding, yet always with the cold eye of realism, the benchmark of her own belief. Her often harsh tone derived from the paradox of trying to elevate the intellectual level of her readers without lowering the level of religion to popular taste. Consequently, a persistent theme of the reviews is her attack on religious sentimentality and false pietism. She quotes approvingly theologian Romano Guardini's observation that "... it is remarkable how readily piety slides off into fantasy, sentimentality, and exaggeration . . . to lose itself in the subjective, to become musty, turgid,

unspiritual. Divine reality is never any of these. . . ." Against this tendency O'Connor calls for a rigorous intellectual standard for laymen and clergy alike, one that insists on a deepening knowledge of the Catholic faith, but also of the larger Christian tradition which embraced it. Her thrust was ecumenic, catholic in the root sense; she reviewed many works by modern Protestant theologians, finding them among the best in contemporary religious thought.

O'Connor was equally critical of her audience's literary taste, which she saw as rarely rising above the treacly sentimental. Speaking of Caroline Gordon's *The Malefactors*, she noted that "... it is profoundly Catholic in theme but it is doubtful if it will receive the attention it deserves from the Catholic reader, who is liable to be shocked by the kind of life portrayed in it. . . ." Later she refers to a so-called "Catholic" novel as "fictionalized apologetics, which introduces a depressing new category: light Catholic summer reading." Throughout her literary reviews she reinforces the paradox of the intimate relationship between art and belief on the one hand, and the necessity of maintaining the integrity of fiction as fiction on the other. Her belief in mystery is at the heart of this paradox; any effort to dilute mystery she found particularly appalling.

But perhaps the greatest value of the reviews is for what they suggest of O'Connor's own intellectual life and development at this time. One first notices the remarkable range and depth of her reading: work of theology, biography, literary criticism, biblical criticism, historiography, fiction, and aesthetics. The range is particularly impressive because this represents only a portion of her reading, and because so many of the works, such as Eric Voegelin's *Order and History*, are among the most challenging produced by modern intellectuals. Moreover, she read carefully; the reviews unfailingly demonstrate her clear grasp of the central thesis of the works.

At the same time, the reviews show the lines of her intellectual development dur-

ing this eight-year period. Central themes reoccur that have direct bearing on her own fiction: the relationship between nature and grace; the attack on sentimentality; abstractionism versus the incarnational sense; the mystery of human personality; the enhancement of faith with reason. One also sees changes and refinements in her thinking; e.g., her early enthusiasm for the work of Teilhard de Chardin is later marked by a clearer distinguishing between his significance as visionary and as scientist. In all, the reviews support and clarify the picture of O'Connor's mind presented in her fiction, essays, and letters.

Finally, the reviews make superb reading for the sheer flavor of her wit and trenchancy of phrase. Criticizing a dull work of vague spirituality, she remarks laconically: "The ideal form for unadulterated wisdom is the aphorism." In another review she defines the best seller list as "... a standard of mediocrity through which occasionally a work of merit will slip for reasons unconnected with its quality." Regarding Cardinal Spellman's feat of delivering seven sermons in one day, she notes that "... he exercises the clerical gift for bringing forth the sonorous familiar phrase of slowly deadening effect." On pretentious language, she is particularly merciless, especially as used by educators: "... if they do this to the language, what do they do to the child?" Even her favorites were unspared if she thought they were mistaken. Her high praise for J.F. Powers's short stories in *The Presence of Grace* is tempered by her dislike of his use of a cat as a central intelligence. "It is the hope of this reviewer that this animal will prove to have only one life left and that some Minneapolis motorist, wishing to serve literature, will dispatch him as soon as possible."

With equally blunt dispatch, O'Connor serves the life of the mind in these sparkling reviews.