

## ***The Country of Objective Truth***

JAMES SEATON

**Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism,**  
by Henry T. Edmondson, *Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002. 240 pp.*

HENRY EDMONDSON'S BOOK ON the fiction of Flannery O'Connor makes a persuasive case for the profundity and contemporary relevance of O'Connor's short stories and novels; it also demonstrates the continuing vitality of a kind of literary criticism that, according to the theories currently peddled in English departments, should have vanished long ago. Edmondson does not seem to have listened to the theorists.

Paul de Man declared in 1982 that it is doubtful whether "literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language," yet *Return to Good and Evil* insists on pointing out the ways in which O'Connor's fiction provides not just information, but insights—for our time as well as hers. Michel Foucault revealed in 1969 that "criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance—or death—of the author some time ago," and Catherine Belsey reported in 1985 that "[Jacques] Lacan's theory of the subject as constructed in language confirms the *decentering* of the individual consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action," yet Edmondson persists in treating Flannery O'Connor as an author whose "consciousness" is indeed the "ori-

gin" uniting her letters, lectures, essays, stories, novels, and actions into a coherent, meaningful whole.

Edmondson briefly but forcefully differentiates his own kind of criticism from that of others, observing that

[t]he challenges of properly interpreting O'Connor's fiction might be avoided if the reader and critic are only interested in what O'Connor could have said or should have said, in spite of her best intentions to the contrary. But my interest is in what she *did* say, the major contours of which are evident by combining her fiction with her prose and correspondence.

There are indeed few "challenges" in "properly interpreting" anybody's writings once the critic decides that the important question is not what the author in fact wrote but what the critic thinks it might be interesting to suppose she had written.

Edmondson, on the other hand, is concerned to discover what Flannery O'Connor meant, herself, to convey in the fiction she wrote. To carry out this project, he not only analyzes representative short stories and the novel *Wise Blood* (1952), but also consults her essays and letters. Furthermore, he examines "the philosophy, literature, fiction, and experience by which she herself was influenced" for assistance in judging the meaning and significance of the vision of the world O'Connor dramatizes so powerfully in her fiction. Edmondson explains that he made a great effort to see things from O'Connor's point of view, immersing himself "in her literature, correspondence, prose, and in her personal library" and carefully noting her annotations in the books she owned and read. If he had been willing to follow the lead of Professor Stanley Fish—who explains that in the anti-foundationalist or postmodernist view of things, "there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies: he supplies *everything*"—he could have saved

---

JAMES SEATON is Professor of English at Michigan State University in Lansing.

himself all that trouble. Edmondson, indeed, is so far removed from current critical trends that he seems to have considered the effort required to see things from O'Connor's point of view as a source of pleasure rather than trouble, an effort that left him "grateful and inspired."

A more important indication of his distance from the postmodernism championed by academic celebrities like Fish is Edmondson's willingness to take seriously what Edmondson calls "the threat of nihilism." Sophisticates like Fish think of those whom he mockingly describes as "fighting the good fight against the forces of deconstructive nihilism" as merely players in an academic game—a game in which it is more important to gain status for oneself than for oneself or the other to "win" (an event that no one really wants, since it would mean the end of the game, and thus of the publicity that controversy generates).

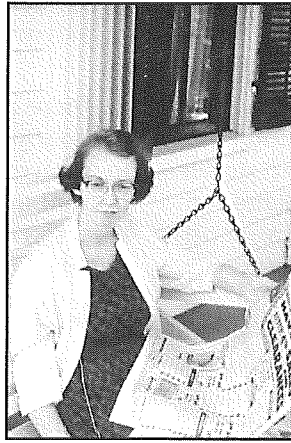
Edmondson's willingness to take O'Connor at her own valuation derives both from his careful reading of her work and from his agreement with O'Connor's belief that Western civilization is "in the middle of a kind of cosmic struggle" between a nihilism "that would eradicate the philosophy and religion of the past," on the one hand, and "the Judeo-Christian tradition" on the other. Both the plausibility and the danger of nihilism are dramatized in O'Connor's fiction by characters like Hazel Motes, the protagonist of *Wise Blood* and the would-be founder of "a new church—the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified." Motes originally believes that "I don't have to run from anything because I don't believe in anything," but he eventually learns, after a series of grotesquely vio-

lent misadventures, about the reality of evil and thus the reality of God.

O'Connor wrote to a correspondent that the violence of the novel's plot led hasty readers to think of her as a "hillbilly nihilist," whereas she was really "a hillbilly Thomist." Edmondson's persuasive analysis of the novel demonstrates that it should be understood as "an allegory of a world that not only has turned from God, but is also guilty of the matchless blasphemy of attempting to annihilate Him." Edmondson's apt use of quotation also makes it clear that O'Connor's story abounds in a vividness and dramatic power not usually associated with that genre.

Flannery O'Connor believed that the world was "going through a dark night of the soul" and that it was her obligation as a writer to pierce the darkness by shocking her readers into an awareness of the realities of good and evil, of sin and grace. Her use of grotesque characters and incidents, Edmondson makes clear, cannot be explained as a merely personal taste for the bizarre. O'Connor turned to the grotesque as a way of shocking her readers out of their usual, entirely secular ways of thinking. Despite polls indicating the prevalence of church membership in the United States, O'Connor believed that few shared her intense awareness of the reality of good and evil. She therefore felt forced to write in a way that might move readers to accept as living truths the doctrines they did not contest but did not really believe:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock.



O'Connor's use of violence and the grotesque can be understood as a deeper realism as well as a technique to rouse readers from moral-spiritual torpor. Against those who would classify O'Connor as a Southern writer not entirely intelligible or even relevant to non-Southerners, Edmondson emphatically asserts that "O'Connor is a 'regional' writer only insofar as she employs her regionalism to transport the reader to another 'country,' the country of objective truth." Russell Kirk would have agreed with him; in *The Sword of Imagination* (2000), his third-person autobiography, he comments that "Kirk well understood [O'Connor's] fantastic and her depraved characters, their twisted faith and all, because precisely such people lived about him in Mecosta County [in Michigan]." O'Connor believed that her writing offered "an honest fictional representation of life." She despised didactic fiction, Catholic or otherwise, that scored moral points through sentimental appeals or contrived endings.

O'Connor was more interested in telling the truth than in celebrating her region, but she did believe that living in the South gave her a certain advantage. She wrote to a correspondent that "The Southern writer can outwrite anybody in the country because he has the Bible and a little history." O'Connor was herself "outwriting" almost everybody in her novel *Wise Blood*, which Edmondson examines in two chapters, and in her short stories "Good Country People," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "The Enduring Chill," "A View of the Woods," and "The Artificial Nigger," each of which is treated in a separate chapter. The title of the last story is likely to shock in a way that obscures rather than illuminates. Edmondson wisely prevents any misunderstanding by pointing out that

O'Connor's use of the word "nigger" in this story, far from being gratuitously "racist,"

is meant to underscore the awful evil of enslavement, oppression and prejudice.... [W]hen the term appears in her literature, disagreeable if not repulsive characters employ it. Her characters often use the word to reveal their souls—perverse and desperately in need of redemption.

Edmondson's interpretation of the story, which O'Connor called her "favorite" and "probably the best thing I'll ever write," bears out his comments. The title refers to "a small statue, the type that in O'Connor's day was a ubiquitous yard decoration in the South, a plaster image of a Negro boy." In a letter quoted by Edmondson, O'Connor describes such statuary as "a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself." In the story the image transfixes Mr. Head, an older man, exhausted by a day of humiliations, and his grandson, Nelson. Whatever racial myths the statue might once have conveyed, it now conveys a "misery" that is both mysterious and somehow redemptive. Edmondson comments that the "pain represented by the statue" seems strangely "efficacious in overcoming the congenital insecurity and enmity" between the old man and the boy. The narrative describes the impact of the statue this way:

They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.

In absorbing the suffering implicit in the statue, Edmondson explains, "Mr. Head and Nelson experience a mysterious encounter with the redemptive work of Christ." In a letter, O'Connor explained that "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all." The story exemplifies the point Ralph Ellison made in his essay "Perspective of Literature" when he commented that "the Afro-American" has had "an inadvertent

and unrecognized but crucial role in the nation's drama of conscience. Racism took on the symbolic force of an American form of original sin, and as a man chosen to suffer to advance the nation's spiritual and material well-being, the black American was endowed linguistically with an ambivalent power, like that vested in Elizabethan clowns, Christian martyrs, and tragic heroes."

Flannery O'Connor's stature continues to grow, and Edmondson's short book should not only encourage that growth but insure that it occurs for the right reasons. After Edmondson's book, there will be little excuse for dismissing—or praising—O'Connor's stories and novels as exercises in the grotesque for its own sake, or for listing O'Connor among the existentialists, as one of her reviewers did.

Edmondson succeeds admirably in his chosen task of making explicit the vision of the world that Flannery O'Connor dramatized so powerfully in her fiction. Because he confines himself to accomplishing this goal, he inevitably leaves a number of questions unanswered. Which stories does he regard as O'Connor's best? He offers no explanation as to why "Good Country People," say, is discussed at length, while the often-anthologized "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is not. Likewise, there is no attempt to place O'Connor in relation to other fiction writers, from the South or elsewhere. Faulkner's name, for example, does not appear in the index. These cavils, however, do not detract from the quality of what Edmondson does accomplish. One hopes that his achievement will lead others to read and write more about O'Connor, and perhaps encourage even members of English departments to return to the kind of literary criticism exemplified so well in *Return to Good and Evil*.

## *The Novelist's Left Hand*

RICHARD K. CROSS

**The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000**, by Martin Amis, New York: Talk Miramax Books, 2001. xv+506 pp.

KINGSLEY AMIS, MARTIN AMIS: one can scarcely say at this point who is the more illustrious, father or son. It is clear, though, that time is on the side of Amis *filis*, who, still in his early fifties, has published eleven books of fiction—among them *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989), and *Time's Arrow* (1991)—and has at the same time established himself as a man of letters in the traditional sense, with such works as *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* (1994) and the memoir *Experience* (2000) to his credit. *The War Against Cliché* is a garner of Martin Amis's journalism, the great bulk of it literary. He is an exceptionally penetrating critic and reviewer, who writes a prose that is witty, vigorous, and free of cant.

Starting out thirty years ago with a day job at the *Times Literary Supplement*, Amis was "very moral when it came to literary criticism. I read it all the time, in the tub, on the tube: I always had about me my Edmund Wilson—or my William Empson." But the privileged position of literary criticism in British and American culture from the 1940s through the mid-1970s could not last: "it had based itself on a structure of echelons and hierarchies; it was about the talent elite. And the structure atomized as soon as the forces of democratization gave their next

---

RICHARD K. CROSS is Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park.