

Suzanne Morrow Paulson

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: A STUDY OF THE SHORT FICTION

Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988. Pp. 238

Sally Fitzgerald, ed.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: COLLECTED WORKS

New York: The Library of America, 1988. Pp 1281. \$30.00

Reviewed by Melvin J. Friedman

Critical writing continues to accumulate about Flannery O'Connor's work despite suggestions by Robert Coles and others that something of a moratorium should be declared. Publishers obviously welcome new studies of the Milledgeville writer because they are assured of steady, if not spectacular, sales. The University of Georgia Press, astonishingly enough, has published books by Gilbert H. Muller, Frederick Asals, Arthur F. Kinney, Louis Westling, Barbara McKenzie, and John F. Desmond, in whole or in significant part devoted to O'Connor. The first book on her work, *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor* (Fordham University Press, 1966), which I edited with Lewis A. Lawson, went into a revised second edition in 1977 and continues to sell into its third decade.

It should be no surprise then that the second volume in Twayne's Studies in Short Fiction is devoted to O'Connor. The assurance of brisk sales coupled with O'Connor's nonpareil position among contemporary short-story writers made the choice almost inevitable. Suzanne Morrow Paulson, even at this late date, manages to say new things about the craft and the theoretical underpinnings. Indeed she successfully negotiates a via media which avoids "the strictly theological [approach] that dominates most criticism on O'Connor today" (ix).

Paulson divides her book into three parts: analysis of the stories; a selection of comments by O'Connor and by those who have approached her work and her person from a variety of angles; a small anthology of critical commentary. These three sections are followed by a brief chronology and a bibliography.

Half of the volume is given over to Paulson's own interpretation of the stories. It is sober, restrained, unpretentious. Her Introduction is especially notable for its clarity and theoretical sophistication. She indicates the need for her to examine O'Connor's Modernism, with its Flaubertian and Joycean inheritance and its New Critical thresholds. She remarks tellingly "that point of view is extremely complicated in O'Connor's works because the author aims to disappear but at the same time wants to reveal the inner landscape of her characters" (10). She also negotiates the difficult Freudian terrain and its applicability to O'Connor study.

Her introduction to Part 1 is followed by examinations of the stories under four categories: "Death-Haunted Questers"; "Male/Female Conflicts"; "the Mystery of Personality and Society"; "Good/Evil Conflicts". She makes her way through most of the canon by reading closely in good New-Critical fashion and

bringing such theorists as Freud, Jung, Erikson, Abraham, Rank, Neumann, and Teilhard de Chardin to her aid. She also comments on early drafts of the stories and makes good use of unpublished manuscripts found in the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia College. (Paulson had made the pilgrimage to Milledgeville which seems almost essential these days for anyone doing serious commentary on the maturing of O'Connor's fiction.)

The last story she deals with, fittingly, is "Parker's Back." She sees this story, which O'Connor wrote on her deathbed, as her "final and most brilliant portrait of a divided self" (103). Interestingly, despite the circumstances of its composition, Paulson finds it "one of the most comic, the most sympathetic toward the central protagonist, and the most affirmative generally of all the stories she wrote. . . . this story rather than the usually anthologized 'A Good Man Is Hard To Find' should be the starting point when beginning study of O'Connor's work" (108). Her enthusiasm about "Parker's Back" makes the pages devoted to this story the most compelling part of her study.

The remaining two parts of her book are largely turned over to O'Connor and those who have interested themselves in her work, her person, and her career. These two anthologies of statements are briefly introduced by Paulson. Some of the material in Part 2 is published here for the first time, including the transcript of a lengthy and revealing telephone interview with Margaret Meaders. Paulson is effective in counterpointing O'Connor's remarks with those of her commentators, advisors, and friends. Part 3 offers excerpts of 25 critical examinations of the work, which are chosen for their soundness and varieties of approach. Jungian readings rub up against close stylistic analyses; theological interpretations mingle with Lacanian considerations. A significant number of these excerpts are taken from the work of European critics, especially French: represented among other are André Bleikasten, Michel Gresset, and Claude Richard. All three have been involved with the distinguished journal *Delta*, which has been coming out of l'Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier since the mid 1970's. Gresset and Bleikasten, the two leading French Faulknerians, are actively involved in adding Faulkner to the prestigious "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade." Suzanne Paulson deserves credit for acknowledging the importance of Franco-American literary exchange and including the work of leading French critics. (In this connection see my "Flannery O'Connor in France: An Interim Report," *Revue des Langues*

While mentioning the Pléiade edition, one should turn to its American counterpart, The Library of America, which prides itself as being "the only definitive and comprehensive collection of America's greatest writers." *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* appears as the thirty-ninth volume in the series. Eyebrows were naturally raised at her inclusion. Here is Brad Leithauser on the subject on the November 7, 1988 *New Yorker*: "The decision to publish O'Connor in the Library of America, a series that comes as close to embodying an official national canon as anything could in these fractious and revisionist times, is unexpected, even startling. Most of what has already appeared in the series belongs to the nineteenth century, and in order to enlist O'Connor the Library's selection committee had first to leapfrog over a generation or two of commanding literary presences -- including Anderson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and Lewis" (158).

One advantage O'Connor brings to the enterprise is the modest size of her oeuvre. Sally Fitzgerald had little difficulty fitting virtually everything worth preserving into a single Library of America volume. (The 1281 pages, with their bold, readable print, should accommodate even the most serious and demanding readers. Scholars should of course still hold on to their copies of *The Habit of Being*; *Mystery and Manners*; *The Presence of Grace*; and *The Complete Stories*.)

More than half of *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* is given over to her four essential works of fiction: *Wise Blood*; *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*; *The Violent Bear It Away*; and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Only the last story in *Everything That Rises* departs from its original published text; it is now called "Judgment Day" instead of "Judgement Day" and acknowledges late revisions made by O'Connor who, for reasons of failing health, was unable to send them to her editor, Robert Giroux. In these four works of vintage O'Connor one gets a heady dose of what Brad Leithauser calls her "eccentric" style, which "prized the maladroitness" (157).

Appearing after her two novels and two collections of stories are the six stories which comprised her 1947 Iowa Master of Fine Arts thesis; they are reproduced here from the thesis typescript. These, in turn, are followed by three additional stories and eight pieces of her "occasional prose." Included among the short fiction is the final fiction "The Turkey," called "An Afternoon in the Woods"-which is published here for the first time. The new version is not dramatically different from the thesis text, but the usual O'Connor name changes take place; the main character's name, for example, changes from Ruller to Manley. (Another Master's thesis story, "The Geranium", features Old Dudley who turns up as Tanner in the final version of that story, "Judgement Day." The various transformations of Hazel Motes's surname, before it reaches its final form in *Wise Blood*, should also be mentioned.)

A generous selection of letters (259, covering some 350 pages) concludes O'Connor's part of the volume. Twenty-one of these appear here for the first time. Two or three of the new ones are particularly notable. The one written to Ashley Brown on May 22, 1953 contains this revealing paragraph: "When I read Henry James, I feel something is happening to me. I'm not always sure if I like it but it is something happening. Perhaps I feel it's "the deep deep sea," keeping me up. Anyhow you see I read Conrad. I don't think there is any writer I like so much as Conrad" (911). The letter written to Carl Hartman on March 2, 1954 contains a full-scale discussion of *Wise Blood*, one of the most convincing O'Connor offered anywhere.

Sally Fitzgerald's contribution to the enterprise begins with her "Index of Letters" and "Index of Stories and Occasional Prose" and carries through her Chronology and two categories of notes. Her twenty-page chronology is the most detailed account of O'Connor life that we have. It contains a number of revealing items, such as the presence of Erik Langkjaer on the scene, with whom "O'Connor falls in love" in 1953 (1246) and is "distressed" by his "decision to return to Denmark" in 1954 (1247). (Included among the twenty-one previously unpublished letters is a singularly unrevealing one sent to Langkjaer on May 23, 1955.) The notes are invariably helpful-especially those on the texts-and round out an impressively edited collection.

I regret the absence only of a sampling of the book reviews. While the ones collected in *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews* (University of Georgia Press, 1983) are all rather brief, the best half dozen or so do reflect an intriguing side of O'Connor's talent and are worth preserving in her *Collected Works*. This sentence from her review of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* is especially memorable: "Because Teilhard is both a man of science and a believer, the scientist and the theologian will require considerable time to sift and evaluate his thought, but the poet, whose sight is essentially prophetic, will at once recognize in Teilhard a kindred intelligence." A more ironical and irreverent tone is evident in many of the other reviews. Thus when reviewing the Catholic magazine *The Critic*, she is quick to point out: "The poetry will probably be tolerated, though not read, and the fiction read but not tolerated." She begins a review of Julien Green's *The Transgressor* with this sentence: "Spokesmen for the deliver-us-from-gloom school of Catholic criticism have found that this novel commits the unpardonable sin: it is depressing." She ends a review of a novel she finds especially distasteful: "The result, fictionalized apologetics, introduces a depressing new category: light Catholic summer reading." O'Connor had the gift of aphoristic turn; a handful of her more successful reviews reveal this talent. It is rather a shame that they did not find a place in *The Library of America* volume. But in every other respect Sally Fitzgerald has served O'Connor readers well

Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, eds.

BREAKING THE SEQUENCE: WOMEN'S EXPERIMENTAL FICTION

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Pp. xvii + 325

Reviewed by Emma Kafalenos

"Three words. Three difficulties." With this succinct statement Christine Brooke-Rose introduces the three categories of problems that still confront an experimental woman writer: to be a writer, to be a woman writer, to be an experimental woman writer. In her essay "Illiterations," she traces these difficulties to two sets of prejudices or "ill iterations of untenable positions in the face of change" (55): a prejudice against women writers, on the part of (not necessarily male) theorists of innovative narrative, who usually devote their attention to texts by male authors; and a prejudice against experimental writers, on the part of feminist critics, who tend to emphasize thematic studies and the restoration of "lost" women to the canon. As a result, it is "not only more difficult for a woman *experimental* writer to be accepted than for a woman writer (which corresponds to the male situation of experimental writer vs. writer), but also peculiarly more difficult for a *woman* experimental writer to be accepted than for a *male* experimental writer" (65).

Breaking the Sequence, in which "Illiterations" appears, is ideally designed to rectify the situation Brooke-Rose describes. After an introduction by the editors, Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, the volume offers two essays (including "Illiterations") on the present situation of women's experimental fiction, followed by articles on individual writers, categorized according to the publication dates of the fiction. In the section on the first generation (before