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REVIEW-ESSAY

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Desire, Faith, and Flannery O'Connor

ANGELA O'DONNELL'S SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR WAS written for the *People of God Series*. The series, designed for the general reader, aims to inspire through narrations of the lives of twentieth- or twenty-first-century Catholics. O'Donnell teaches at Fordham University, and her roots are Irish. She makes no claim to a Southern identity. Her subject is, of course, famously Southern, though Southernness is not the identity most important to O'Connor. The subtitle skillfully announces what was O'Connor's focus and what drew O'Donnell to O'Connor: "Fiction Fired by Faith." Most O'Connor aficionados would agree this was what she wanted her fiction to be.

O'Donnell's account of O'Connor's life is a mix of encyclopedic detail and insightful attention to the "fired" fiction. The author never hides her own religious commitment or the important part that O'Connor has played in that commitment. Her study foregrounds the great price exacted for O'Connor's achievement.

Well-read by the time she completed her apprenticeship in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, O'Connor knew first-hand the temptations of the intellect. But she was careful to continue study of the great theologians along with her secular reading, and she attended mass regularly. Her views were tested often during her time at Yaddo and in New York City. She could hold her own with the doubters, and she made tight bonds with several Catholic intellectuals. At age twenty-five, O'Connor would be deprived of the life in New York and Connecticut that she had envisioned for her writing career. During Christmas 1925, the lupus that had killed her father struck hard; the disease had become her destiny as well. Henceforth, O'Connor would live with her mother in Georgia. There she would write her major fiction. Eventually, O'Connor would consider the constant pain another form of grace. She died at age thirty-nine.

O'Donnell's study of O'Connor might seem the ideal prelude for a reading of Kathaleen Amende's *Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity*

in White Southern Women's Writing. Given that title with two “fired” words, Amende can hardly avoid some mention of O'Connor, though it will not be extensive. Amende announces from the start that her focus is not on *agape*, but on two forms of *eros*, “a desire for something sexual that the subject takes as an object” and a spiritual or mystical desire “for whatever he or she perceives to be divine.” Under this lens “the authors and their characters can move back and forth between eroticizing Christ and exalting mortal partners” (12). Amende is also freed from extensive consideration of O'Connor because she confines her investigation to six Southern women writers of the late twentieth century. Her goal is to show how “conservative” Christian ideals of femininity shaped ideals of religion, sexuality, and power in the South.

Three of Amende's choices have enjoyed secure positions among Southern writers for some time: Lee Smith, Valerie Martin, and Dorothy Allison. The remaining three—Rosemary Daniell, Connie May Fowler, and Sheri Reynolds—made their reputations more recently but also impressively, with titles in several genres and numerous awards. The works of the six writers have been studied on college campuses and been frequent choices for book clubs; all six have also taught creative writing. Each is a feminist, though their emphases vary. Their works are set in areas of the South from Appalachian Virginia to Louisiana.

Chapter One lays the groundwork for what Amende hopes to accomplish. Her topic is huge: “Southern Women, Desire, and the Divine.” Inevitably, she ends up painting with a very broad brush. Not much, she suggests, has changed since Lillian Smith in 1949 lamented that middle- and upper-class mothers in the South had warped their daughters' understanding of sexuality and deprived them of a joyous sexuality. The nineteenth-century views still endure and are continuously propagated not only by male-headed churches and organizations in the South, but also by mothers and grandmothers, the very victims of that system. The truth is more complicated, we know. The popularity of Amende's six writers reveals how in the New South certain elements have shifted: the tastes of readers as well as the freedom of writers to portray sexual experience explicitly. Dixie did not escape the sexual revolution. The implications of Amende's study are necessarily fluid. The Fundamentalist movement, though strong in the South, is not uniquely Southern. H. L. Mencken's Bible Belt included parts of the Midwest. “Conservative” religion is a powerful force in

certain states of the American West and has pockets of influence in most. Roman Catholicism, the heritage Valerie Martin knows and portrays, is a “conservative” religion by most reckonings. The implications of the readings reach far beyond the South.

We know, of course, that the sacred/sexual binary is as old as religion itself. The myths of the Greeks and Romans teem with instances of sexual adventures among the divinities as well as intercourse of the divinities with men and women on earth. Ancient statuary highlights the allure of the body. Although the Hebrew tradition did not sanction visual renditions of the god of Abraham and Moses, the god of their stories would speak, and unmistakably: listening was key for the desired “knowing.” The Hebrew scriptures do not, however, shy from acknowledgment and celebration of the physical. Later, Christianity would take the image of the bridegroom and bride as the chief image of the relationship between Christ and the church.

Amende approaches her selected texts around themes rather than the oeuvre of her authors per se. Certain constructs shape the progression. Foucault’s heterotopic space, spaces in which opposing and incompatible meanings can exist at once, organizes the second chapter. The title catches the oppositions: “Erotic Churches and Sacred Bedrooms.” Examples from the fiction take the reader into Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Methodist, and Baptist spaces. The third chapter studies parents’ conflict with their offspring, especially as regards their religious training. Chapter Three’s title, “Mysticism and Masochism or Religious Ecstasy and Sadomasochistic Delight,” emphasizes the recurring tensions of Amende’s study.

“Contemporary Repercussions,” the last chapter, surveys the religious scene in America, highlighting and welcoming the arrival of feminist theology. Amende notes the role of the Internet in *selling* Christianity and the impact of the mega-church in its involvement throughout all areas of its congregants’ daily living. As to her six writers, they “all work towards an understanding of faith that incorporates the body and its pleasures and its pains.” Concluding, Amende throws out her own evangelical challenge:

The question each of these authors and characters, or for that matter, any ‘southern’ woman must ask herself becomes whether religion in the South can serve as a positive force in a woman’s life, or exist as a positive force in a woman’s life, or exist

along with a positive sexuality, and if it can, whether negative influences and effects can be overcome in order to make it so. (143)

The question of “religion in the South” thus stated is problematical. Some readers will question the racial divide of the study. What might the inclusion of a black woman writer have added to the analysis of Southern religion? Some will note the absence of a Jewish writer concerned with the religious life. “Religion in the South” has become increasingly diverse since Lillian Smith made her trenchant observations. Other readers will lament the lack of a vision of the Divine that transcends the passions of the body. If the study must be on white Southern writers of the latter half of the twentieth century, might inclusion of Doris Betts or Gail Godwin have provided greater complexity? Neither of them fails to reckon with the importance of the body; both portray characters with reasoned commitment to the mystery beyond the physical.

Whether the reader of Amende’s study has reservations about the book or not, that reader is well-positioned to read Flannery O’Connor’s *A Prayer Journal*. Indeed, Amende’s book almost invites it, her introduction having observed that in O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* an attempt to separate flesh and spirit is central to the narrative. But *A Prayer Journal* is not fiction. Unlike O’Donnell and Amende, O’Connor has written a text for neither general nor academic audience. It was written for no human eyes but her own. It has no beginning and no end—it is a segment of a prayer life at a particular time, intensely private. The reader is an intruder. The “space” we intermittently enter is O’Connor’s “closet” from January 1946 to September 1947.

O’Connor was then a member of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. She was in an environment vastly different from her provincial South. The large midwestern state university brought her in contact with contemporaries from throughout the nation representing intellectual positions of many stripes. She knew she had serious “catch-up” work to do. She was being challenged in ways that she had not been at Georgia State College for Women in hometown Milledgeville. She had gone to Iowa hoping to write enduring fiction, fiction that could be compared to that of the gifted modernists she had been reading. How might, how did, that goal conflict with her wish to love and serve God, her most important task? That question pervades *A Prayer Journal*.

The young woman asking this question would understand the conflicts of desire in the fictional examples Amende has provided. She reads Augustine, Freud, Proust, Lawrence. Her journal entry of May 4, 1946, declares: "Man's desire for God is bedded in his unconsciousness & seeks to satisfy itself in physical possession of another human. This necessarily is a passing, fading attachment in its sensuous aspects since it is a poor substitute for what the unconscious is after" (30). Here O'Connor gives a considered judgment, one certainly in keeping with the teachings of her church.

But the journal makes clear that its author is a young woman of flesh and blood. She confesses to erotic thought. A Freudian reading of the journal is easily imagined. When O'Connor prays, "I don't want to be doomed to mediocrity in my feeling for Christ. I want to feel. I want to love. Take me Lord, and set me in the direction I am to go" (35), the fervor is not distant from many of the Protestant hymns Amende has found troublesome. The passage—and the rest of the journal—permit a feminist reading as well. This "Lord" is a patriarchal figure.

To stop with either reading would be to miss a good deal. O'Connor is not confusing the physical with the spiritual. She looks at no icon during these prayers. Her words of direct address are "Dear God," "Oh God," "My dear God." For a time these addresses regularly begin the prayers; sometimes they appear within the prayer as well. References to Christ in the prayers are few. O'Connor ends one prayer: "Thank you, dear God, I do believe I feel thankful for all You've done for me. I want to. I do. And thank my dear Mother whom I do love, Our Lady of Perpetual Help" (12). The lines are conversational and touching. The suppliant does not doubt that there is a Listener. And yet these prayers are written, accenting the heightened intellectual force that the writing brings to the experimental acts of prayer.

O'Connor's practice of writing her prayers resulted from the excitement and challenges of the Iowa experience. The conflict between faith and intellect were in the very air. O'Connor attended mass almost daily, but she confessed that she was not feeling the prayers of the mass she could so easily recite. *A Prayer Journal* becomes her personal exploration of the nature of prayer. By November 1946, O'Connor declares "a new phase" of her spiritual life, abandoning "certain adolescent habits & habits of mind" (20). The prayer format in the earlier entries gives way to the "journal" format. O'Connor reflects on faith,

hope, charity, her reading. Direct addresses to “dear God,” now few, are embedded within an entry. In September 1947, the journal format turns back pointedly to the prayer format. It begins, “Dear Lord please make me want You” and ends, “Lord keep me. Mother help me” (36). The final entry in the *Journal* is the most somber of all: “My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me” (40). A dark night of the soul, indeed, but not the end of O’Connor’s story. The “new phase” O’Connor has identified has led to no quick jubilation. There is need for more searching, but apparently no more written prayers. The suppliant feels woefully deficient, but her God remains omnipotent and will answer in his own time, as is intimated perhaps in the blank pages that conclude the journal and then O’Connor’s strange drawing (95) of a treble staff and a base staff, with notation of three-quarter time, but then three half notes in each clef. The chords are discordant. Prayer is mystery.

In *A Prayer Journal* O’Connor’s commitment to a merciful God is closely connected always to her wish to be a good writer, her fiction being of a high order and yet carrying meanings pleasing to God. At Iowa she was in a period of discernment not only in her religious quest, but in her commitment to writing. Even the writer who does not share O’Connor’s religious vision will understand and empathize with her fierce drive to be a writer. The price for art can be as exacting as the price for sainthood. James Joyce would famously fictionalize his battle between a religious calling and the calling to art. Gerard Manley Hopkins also knew the conflict firsthand, and some of O’Connor’s prayers will likely remind readers of Hopkins’ “terrible” sonnets. Eudora Welty declared that she would never recommend the writing life to anyone: it’s just too hard. It was, of course, the “chosen” path for Welty. And for O’Connor.

O’Connor’s prayer journal must have been immensely useful to her as she began her writing career—writing her first fiction worthy of publication, beginning the hard journey that would give her readers *Wise Blood* and much else. With this attractive edition from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, the journal becomes a valuable asset for those studying the art and life of the author. It will also attract those drawn to the concept of the Divine.

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