

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

*THE LIFE YOU SAVE
MAY BE YOUR OWN:
An American Pilgrimage.*

By Paul Elie. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
555 pp. \$27

Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor were arguably the most influential Catholic figures in 20th-century American culture. As Paul Elie shows in this astonishing and thoroughly accomplished book, all four were spiritual searchers whose lives and work endowed post-immigrant American Catholicism with unsuspected energy, urgency, and coherence. Elie rightly calls them pilgrims: Day, Merton, and Percy were converts to Catholicism, but even the cradle Catholic O'Connor found—like the other three—that Catholicism was the beginning, not the end, of her personal and artistic pilgrimage.

All four came to writing through reading. It was an era, beginning in the 1940s, when books and art and ideas mattered in ways they no longer do, and for these four, the problem of God was paramount. Since there was no body of American Catholic literature to attract the serious spiritual searcher, each initially looked elsewhere for the kind of mediating literary figures whose work spoke Rainer Maria Rilke's famous line, "You must change your life." Day, who is best known as the cofounder and embodied spirit of the Catholic Worker movement, came to Catholicism by way of Russian writers, chiefly Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. (The hardest aspect of her life as a Catholic Worker, Day once told me, was her decision to keep her books, including autographed first editions, on open shelves where anyone could steal them—which visitors sometimes did.)

Percy was deeply influenced by Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, and that most Protestant of 19th-century thinkers, Søren Kierkegaard. O'Connor found a kindred spirit in Franz Kafka. Merton read almost everyone, even after he became a Trappist monk, but his literary imagination fastened onto James Joyce. The relationship of art to life vexed all of them, and eventually they

found clarity of vision and purpose in medieval Catholic thought and art as reinterpreted by the neo-Thomist philosophers Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson.

Elie is at once an engaging biographer and a discerning critic. The genius of his book lies in the way he interweaves these four writers' wayfaring lives, showing the turning points at which they found their separate paths to a Christian understanding of their individual callings. What's new here is not the biographical material as such but the way Elie allows the trajectory of each life to illuminate the others.

Although the four had little personal interaction, apart from Day and Merton, who maintained a vigorous correspondence, they were linked through a web of enabling Catholic friendships, which included editors such as Robert Giroux—the *éminence grise* at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, where Elie is himself an editor—and major poets such as Robert Fitzgerald, Allen Tate, and Robert Lowell. For example, in her twenties and fresh out of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, O'Connor briefly fell in love with Lowell during one of his manic, messianic Catholic phases. At one point, Tate's writer-wife, Caroline Gordon, another convert to Catholicism, was handling the manuscripts of first novels by Percy and O'Connor.

As Elie shrewdly observes, the French-born Merton found in the monastery the architecture of a "perfect world" that replicated the village he had loved as a boy—though he eventually moved to a simple hermitage to be alone to write and to be with God. Elie also notices that Day surrounded herself with weak men, including those she loved in her preconversion bohemian days in Greenwich Village. Wisely, he explores Percy and O'Connor, the most accomplished fiction writers in the bunch, by examining the ways in which they came to terms with life through solving the problems of their craft. Together, these four provided American letters with a Catholic moment that seems all the richer for Elie's telling.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD