

dents,” but otherwise minimizes the seriousness of the offense. “All he had done was falsify his life experiences,” and such imaginative storytelling, Hoffer speculates, merely reflects how “a man’s ability to invent himself and his ability to reinvent the past in his books” draw upon the same creative skills. But Hoffer’s declaration that “Ellis did not mean the lies to hurt anyone” betrays undue sympathy, as the same excuse could also be offered in behalf of Ambrose, Goodwin, and even Bellesiles. Ellis betrayed his students’ trust in a profound way, even if equivalent wrongdoing has never manifested itself in any of his widely praised books.

Hoffer ends his impressively intelligent book on a pessimistic note. From 2002 until 2004, he served in the Professional Division of the American Historical Association (AHA). Long responsible for adjudicating accusations of professional misconduct against historians, the division had considered serious allegations in the early 1990s that a less-noted popular historian, Stephen B. Oates of the University of Massachusetts, had committed plagiarism in his biography of Abraham Lin-

coln. Oates challenged the association’s authority to adjudicate the charges against him, and the AHA held back from issuing an explicit verdict on Oates’s guilt.

Hoffer says that, even a decade later, the association’s handling of the Oates case “was still an embarrassment to the Professional Division,” and in mid-2003 the AHA shamefully decided to discontinue review of *any* professional misconduct charges against historians. Hoffer blames this “retreat from professional responsibility” on historians’ “unwillingness to act in cases of misconduct.” The AHA rhetorically proclaims a strong commitment to professional integrity, but its “hypocritical refusal to enforce ethical precepts,” Hoffer writes, gives the lie to that declaration. More cases like Ambrose’s, if not Bellesiles’s, will certainly occur, and when they do, interested Americans unfortunately will not be able to look to academic historians’ professional organizations for expert guidance on what has gone wrong.

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Grace and the Grotesque

FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S SACRAMENTAL ART.

By Susan Srigley. Notre Dame Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$42 (hardcover), \$20 (paper)

FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND THE CHRIST-HAUNTED SOUTH.

By Ralph C. Wood. Eerdmans. 272 pp. \$22

Reviewed by Charlotte Allen

Flannery O’Connor (1925–64) is now recognized as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, perhaps second in stature only to fellow southerner William Faulkner. This despite the fact that, because she died at age 39 of hereditary lupus, her literary output was small: just two novels and 32 short stories, nearly all set in or near her native

Georgia, and nearly all bearing her signature qualities of extreme physical and emotional violence, mordant wit, and fascination with the “Christ-haunted” (her words) consciousness of the Protestant fundamentalist South.

The characters in O’Connor’s fiction typically flail in semicomical, semitragic misery as they strive to break free from



Flannery O'Connor stands in front of a self-portrait at her home in Milledgeville, Georgia.

their religious pasts and remake the world in their own images, but find themselves pinned like butterflies by a God who will not leave them alone. In her novel *Wise Blood* (1952), the anti-Christian protagonist Hazel Motes winds up blinding himself with lye and dying in a ditch; in her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a prison escapee called the Misfit shoots an entire family to death; in another story, "Good Country People," the smug intellectual Hulga has her wooden leg stolen by a traveling Bible salesman. Not a single one of those novels or stories seems dated some 40 years after the author's death.

O'Connor herself was a Roman Catholic, and not just any sort of Catholic, but a daily Mass-goer when her health permitted and a ferocious defender to friends and correspondents of every last embarrassing Catholic teaching, from the Real Presence to the ban on birth control. At the same time, she despised the smarmy "Pious Style," as she called it, of conventional midcentury Catholic writing, and, like her fellow anti-sentimentalist Evelyn Waugh, she chose mostly not to write

about Catholics.

For these reasons, as both Susan Srigley and Ralph C. Wood point out in these additions to a burgeoning corpus of O'Connor criticism, Flannery O'Connor has been systematically misinterpreted by critics. When O'Connor's work began appearing in the 1950s, she was pigeonholed as "Southern Gothic" in the tradition of Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. A little later, she got lumped with John Hawkes, Terry Southern, and the rest of the nihilistic black humor crowd of the 1960s: She was the Diane Arbus of literature.

Many of today's critics, led by Frederick Asals, the author of *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (1982), attempt to sever O'Connor the writer from O'Connor the Catholic, putting her literary and religious aims utterly at odds with each other. Mary Gordon, the dissident Catholic novelist, considers O'Connor's sensibility cruelly Jansenistic. It views humans as essentially lacking free will and condemns most of them, à la Hazel Motes, to unredeemed death. Oth-

ers have characterized O'Connor, who never married and seldom wrote about carnal matters, as sexually immature (and hence limited as a writer), or as a premature feminist who, as one critic put it, seethed with "repressed rage," or as a lesbian. On the other side, many Christian critics have offered simplistically allegorical readings of O'Connor, interpreting "Good Country People," for example, as a satirical critique of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, the notion that "Scripture alone" is the source of God's revelation.

Srigley and Wood try to correct this state of affairs through sophisticated reconciliations of O'Connor's artistry and her Catholic religious intentions, with varying degrees of success. Wood, a longtime professor of theology and literature at Baylor University, is the more eloquent and interesting of the two, but also the more disappointing. He frankly admits that he is offering not a "close literary examination of O'Connor's individual stories and novels," but rather a study of her work "as it bears on the life of the contemporary church and one of its regional cultures," the South. Many of his readings of O'Connor's work strike me as spot-on, as when he observes that the Grandmother, a casually racist, self-satisfied chatterbox who is the last family member shot in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is no mere Southern grotesque, but redeems herself just before her death when she cries out to the Misfit in a sudden gesture of Adamic solidarity, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children." Elsewhere, however, Wood's book tends to turn into a florilegium of generalized observations about southern culture, American religion, and the emptiness of modern secular life, with long quotations from Dostoevsky, Walker Percy, Pope John Paul II, and others only tangentially connected to Flannery O'Connor.

Srigley's book, a revision of her doctoral dissertation (she teaches at Nipissing University in Ontario), is more focused, but could use some of the larger context that Wood serves up in overabundance. She aims to counter the theory of Asals and oth-

ers that O'Connor's religion was irrelevant to her art, as well as the view of critics such as Gordon that the comic cruelty in O'Connor's fiction suggests that she was a quasi-Manichaean dualist who regarded the physical world and the spiritual world of God's grace as radically separate.

O'Connor was a devoted reader of the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, whom she had encountered in the writings of Jacques Maritain, a famous mid-20th-century French neo-Thomist. Maritain's book *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, translated into English in 1962, interpreted Aquinas's theories about nature and grace to devise an aesthetic philosophy holding that when an artist creates something from the materials of the natural world, the creation, even if uninspiring, is good and partakes of God's grace. Art is thus "incarnational," imitating God's becoming part of the natural world through Christ, and also "sacramental," using the materials of the natural world to invoke God's grace. Supporting her claims with many detailed citations from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Srigley makes a case that O'Connor intended to represent human nature as ever open to salvation—unless we willfully blind ourselves with self-regard, like Hazel Motes.

This is an interesting argument, although Srigley does not, perhaps cannot, offer any evidence that O'Connor, for all her devotion to Aquinas, actually read many of the specific passages in the monumental *Summa* that Srigley cites. O'Connor's voluminous correspondence does not make it clear that Aquinas himself, rather than Maritain's interpretation of Aquinas, inspired her aesthetic. Still, Srigley's book, as well as Wood's, puts to rest any notion that Flannery O'Connor can be regarded as just another of the 20th century's secular specialists in the grotesque. Anyone seriously interested in her well-deserved place in America's literary pantheon should take a look at both books.

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