

Flannery Flummery

by J.O. Tate

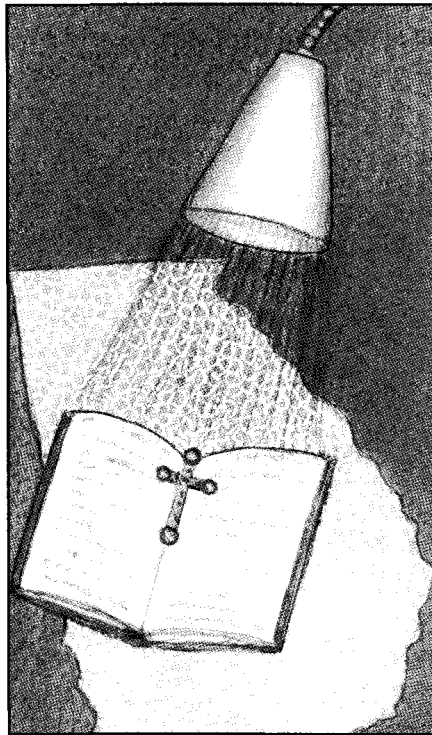
"[I]f I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything . . . I feel myself that being a Catholic has saved me a couple of thousand years in learning to write."

—Flannery O'Connor

**Flannery O'Connor:
The Obedient Imagination**
by Sarah Gordon
Athens: University of Georgia Press;
270 pp., \$29.95

Professor Gordon provokes—she certainly does not evoke—memories of days in Milledgeville, Georgia, four decades ago and more, when Flannery O'Connor was a presence in that notable town, formerly the capital of the Peach State. Though Dr. Gordon is a professor of English in the same town, at the college from which O'Connor was graduated, and though she is the editor of the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, she does not write, it seems, "from" that place. Indeed, she seems to be contemptuous of it. She knows better than Milledgeville did or does, and also—more strikingly—better than Flannery O'Connor herself. Her volume, decades in the making, is remarkably ambivalent in relation to its subject. About that equivocation, I will have more to say.

J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.



Stephen Warden Andersen

But first, I think, the principle of full disclosure requires me to acknowledge that I was once associated with the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* myself. Indeed, the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* was my idea, though it was never my doing. Have the founder and the first and second editors of the bulletin gone uncited in Gordon's book because they actually knew and understood Flannery O'Connor in context? Be that as it may, though time has taken its toll, there are still people in Milledgeville and elsewhere who

remember O'Connor as she was. Gordon has made it necessary to name the person rather than the author, for her analyses of works lead inevitably toward deprecation of the writer who inscribed them.

Dr. Gordon, by beginning her account of O'Connor "heartened by the steady increase in her readership" in the last 30 years, seems to be saying that her acquaintance with the O'Connor *oeuvre* is the history of O'Connor's reputation. Gordon claims to have been "appalled by the lack of knowledge about—and even worse, the apparent lack of interest in—O'Connor's strange, funny, deeply haunting tales." Funny she should mention that, because it was not so, though she has tried to make it be. Gordon goes on to deprecate the O'Connor Collection as it was 30 years ago in the library of the Georgia State College for Women (O'Connor's alma mater), while neglecting to mention that it was the only one of its kind and did register a recognition of O'Connor's work. "[W]e were convinced that O'Connor would inevitably find her readership and that even locally she would be recognized." But O'Connor had already made her mark locally as well as in the nation and the world, so

again it was not so. Dismissing O'Connor's "popularity in the college English Department" and "a handful of local enthusiasts," Gordon is dismissing precisely those people who knew Flannery O'Connor and her work when she herself arrived belatedly on the scene. History begins with Sarah Gordon! These opening fallacies are the equivalent of saying that Gordon's solipsism amounts to what there is to be known about O'Connor, and that she is the only authority in Milledgeville on the subject.

As far as local recognition is concerned, I distinctly remember being with my classmate and friend Walter Reeves in 1960 as he regaled his mother and me with a spirited reading of the passage in *The Violent Bear Aways* in which the young Tarwater pretends to be an idiot in order to fool the truant officer. In response, there was much laughter all around, as Walter held his new hard-bound first edition, still in its purple dust jacket. The 1962 second edition of *Wise Blood* was in a red dust jacket when I bought a copy from Mrs. Colgrove at her gift shop, Marc's. I gave that copy to another friend, Marion Combs, who read it forthwith and understood it completely. He said he was quite moved by it, as well he should have been, even though he was a mere local fellow of 17 years. I think he read *The Faerie Queene* for the first time that year also, because he had already pretty much done Shakespeare. You know, it is just remarkable what these hicks from the sticks will get up to.

Yes, indeed, people in Milledgeville knew who Flannery O'Connor was, though not all of them cottoned to her. My grandmother, for instance, did not take to her work—her taste ran more to Mrs. Gaskell. But my parents responded not only to her work but to O'Connor herself. My mother enjoyed her and admired her; my father loved her and would do—indeed *did do*—anything he could to help her. They saw quite a bit of her at her home, Andalusia. I saw Miss O'Connor many times, embarking from her mother's car on crutches, proceeding to lunch at the Sanford House. (Let me digress to say that lunch at the Sanford House was something else—you do not see beaten biscuits on a menu very often. I even remember the salad dressing.) Oddly enough (and speaking of narcissism), Flannery O'Connor saw *me*: She even mentioned doing so in a letter that has yet to be exposed to the world, or to

analysis by aliens. But in those days, it was routine to see Flannery in front of the old Campus Theater, sitting in the right hand seat of the O'Connor car while her mother ran errands, as she greeted and was greeted by all sorts of people.

That was on the street. But I remember another occasion when Maryat Lee and her niece, Deanie, took me up to Andalusia to visit with that person who was so often the topic of conversation. The view from the farmhouse, I knew, had been "done." (I was to remember that line of trees and the sun and the peacocks later on when I read that Gustav Mahler once declared to Bruno Walter, as the latter gaped at his summer environment, "I've composed that already.") Flannery O'Connor, on that occasion at least, was recessed in shade in the house. She was composed, guarded, and centered in a certain way that I had never known before, and have not since, though I have encountered perhaps a few other geniuses. I think that part of her self-possession and her achieved simplicity was essentially a matter of efficiency. O'Connor did not waste her energy, since that was challenged, but saved the best part of herself for what was most important, the cultivation of her vision.

The last time I saw Flannery O'Connor was on August 4, 1964, but I did not really see her because she was in a coffin at the time.

Turning from these recollections to Dr. Gordon's account of O'Connor, I find I have at best a mixed bag before me. I think there are some good things in the book—such as the author's comments about James Thurber as cartoonist and stylist—that are insightful and useful. There is too much in it that paraphrases the work of others, but what is worse is its insistence on an "openness" which is a path to confusion. "Flannery O'Connor" has been treated extensively, but finally she was her own best critic, and remains so. That is because she insisted on knowing her own mind, and because she meant it when she said that the sensibility and the dramatic imagination had to be fused. When she was at the top of her form, they were. That being the case, she left less for analysts to work with than other writers have done, if only in the sense that what seems to be seamless perfection, as in "Good Country People," has a way of quelling comments other than "Good grief!" or "Brava! Encore!"

I do not at all mean to say that O'Connor is immune or impervious to criticism

or analysis because, in the first place, it is through these that we understand craft and, in the second, not all of O'Connor's work has perfect pitch. I do not think that "A View of the Woods" or "The Comforts of Home" (to mention two stories) are equal to her best work. Nor do I believe, the world being as it is, that Flannery O'Connor has any claim to exemption from the trashing routinely directed at other writers, such as the wife-oppressing Nathaniel Hawthorne, the wife-beating Herman Melville, or the wife-abusing F. Scott Fitzgerald, to name but three. And it is just at this point that we see the problem that has congested Dr. Gordon's rhetoric. Framing the question that is, in effect, "When did F. O'C stop beating her wife?" is not so easy.

That question takes masked forms, such as the problem of O'Connor's religion. This is presented by Dr. Gordon as the internalization of "patriarchal values," which might lead us to ask two questions of our own. The first would be, What in blazes are *matriarchal* values? (A matriarchy has never been identified, as Marvin Harris has pointed out.) Then another question: If being a Catholic and embracing a rational aesthetic (as from the New Critics) represents adopting the "male gaze," then what exactly are we talking about? O'Connor's religious commitment and her aesthetic models are, after all, the ones she knew. Without them, she is unimaginable, because they made her what she was. As for womanhood itself, why has O'Connor's notable achievement as a woman been written off by feminists? Is it because she dismissed feminism and had such a keen sense of the demonic forces hidden behind mental disorder, or was it because of the jealousy keenly felt by the ungifted and ungracious for the superior attainment of the artist, or was it both—or even something else from the feminist funny farm we have not heard about yet? And if the achievement of art, the maintenance of faith, and the acceptance of early death count so little from this woman, then who cares about anything anyway?

But having played the feminist card while frequently acknowledging its irrelevance, Dr. Gordon has played the race card as well. It was Flannery O'Connor, if I am not mistaken—and not any delegate to the left wing of the Democratic Party—who wrote "The Artificial Nigger," in which the author showed—through a decrepit, vulgar, and mysterious lawn ornament—the action of grace

on two benighted but not unredeemed souls. That black totem is a warped Christ, and as such clearly implies that the African-American in the South has been a Christ-figure at least, crucified on the cross of unreasoning hatred, and even an agent of God's grace. Not one writer in the history of American literature has ever done as much so economically and so uncannily to make us see the race business in a new light. Yet that has not deterred Dr. Gordon from suggesting, often by quoting others, that there is something wrong with O'Connor on race. She was not enthusiastic enough about the civil-rights movement; not only that, she used "the 'n' word" in her private correspondence. We have not heard yet from the Rev. Al Sharpton about this, but there are other troubles with this line of attack, the worst of which is the last step—namely, that it circles back to the subtextual assertion of the moral superiority of Sarah Gordon to the subject of her biography.

There are other things I was less than satisfied with in this book, but there is a limit here on space. For one thing, the discussion of O'Connor's letters veers unnecessarily but predictably into a denigration of the integrity of the late Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's editor and biographer and a great lady who is sorely missed. The exercise is crowned with the claim that attacks on O'Connor's person through her letters are justified in order to avoid reducing her to "pious platitude or dogmatic exemplum." That is another straw-man argument. O'Connor herself denied she was a saint, but her "canonization" is not the point. The point is that she was a person who impressed some in her lifetime as a saint, and there are not many people, and certainly not many writers, of whom one can say as much. Hagglng over O'Connor's letters is silly. The point to make about them is that they are a wealth of information about her character and mind, and that they are quite possibly the greatest collection of letters in the history of our national literature. But by the time she comes to mishandling this exposition, Gordon's credibility is already shattered by her insistence on the legitimacy and equality of every view of O'Connor, and by her maneuvering everything about O'Connor to a point of contention that becomes tedious. O'Connor is funny and haunting—but she is loveless and severe. She is this, but she is not that. So why are we

reading about her, then? The stories we cannot imagine and cannot write are better than the ones O'Connor did, so let us imagine what O'Connor might have been like if she had been more like us—but she was not.

I think, though nobody asked, that there is work still to do on the topic of O'Connor. I think she should be examined as a poet in matters of rhetoric (there are some good pages on that in Gordon's book), rhythm, and diction. The way that O'Connor sometimes ends her stories with an expansion of sound and range is quite effective and could benefit from some detailed attention. I think, too, that there is yet more to say, as Gordon has also done, about some of O'Connor's sources or resources, elements of her blend. I am thinking not only of Chapter XVII of *Huckleberry Finn*, but also of Chapter VIII of *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*. I once made an argument that Stephen Crane was an important influence on O'Connor, but how could I have omitted such an example as the one I have indicated? To read the bitterly satirical passage as Pete shows Maggie a dime museum ("where rows of freaks astonished her. She contemplated their deformities with awe and thought them a sort of chosen tribe") is to become alert. In the passage following, we read about a "monkey" and "monkeys" and "mummies," and then about a naive viewing of popular melodrama on stage. Change the play to a movie, and we are in O'Connor territory, sure enough. That is interesting to me, but even if it is not interesting to anyone else, at least it does not involve the moral improvement of Flannery O'Connor but an attempt to see a small part of how she did what she did.

Even so, in the end we must address the phrase or the idea of "The Obedient Imagination." It hardly seems to be a useful or appropriate handle for the O'Connor phenomenon, but a euphemism or substitution for something else—"O'Connor's Idiosyncratic Catholic Imagination," perhaps; or "The Politically Incorrect Imagination," even better. Was it "obedient" for O'Connor to leave home to seek further education, for example? Was it obedient for her to go her own way, at Iowa City and at Yaddo, refusing to act out the self-serving role of the bohemian artist? Was she obedient or subservient or pious or mincing or unctuous when she refused to be pushed around by the editor John Selby, who

wound up calling her "stiff-necked, uncooperative, and unethical"? Was she deferential to Mary McCarthy or even pious, when she famously said to her, "If I thought it [the Eucharist] was only a symbol, I'd say to Hell with it"? If we remember that life-threatening illness that alone forced her back home to live with her mother, we must ask whether it had been "obedient" of her to refuse to live in Milledgeville as she established her own identity? And was it then obedient or reverent of her to finish and publish *Wise Blood*, with its lurid scenes, which were superficial causes of embarrassment at home? Was it obedient of her to continue her highly individual way in writing stories of such force that their shock was only as great as their success, soon acknowledged nationally and even internationally? How was she obedient to anything when she said of her second novel, "Nobody would have been caught dead writing it but me"? No, there was no obedience to be identified but rather the fulfillment of her sense of herself and her calling and her faith, a life elected and a vision to be embodied. There was no obedience in her distinct modulation of diction and rhythm, in the discipline of point of view and circumscription, but rather something in the nature of a new creation. And O'Connor knew perfectly well that she was writing in a hostile environment, even then.

Her work exists in an even more hostile environment now, although she was the first woman born in the 20th century to be gathered into the Library of America. What a punishment and provocation to feminist truculence and racial grandstanding the towering accomplishment of Flannery O'Connor has been and will continue to be! But if there is an obedient imagination or rather lack of imagination to be identified, it would seem to belong to Sarah Gordon. If there is one cliché of feminist blather or contemporary political presumption unsounded in her migraine-inducing discourse, I do not know what it might be, nor would I want to. The response to art should be more and other art, not the begging of every question. The response to imposing and unmistakable personal integrity should be at least respect—and better, admiration. From what Harold Bloom has called the "School of Resentment," we have learned to expect none of the above—and we have not been disappointed.

c

The Executioner's Tale

by Paul Gottfried

**My Love Affair With America:
The Cautionary Tale of a
Cheerful Conservative**

by Norman Podhoretz
New York: Free Press; 248 pp., \$25.00



This “celebration” of his intense love affair with America will not likely teach Norman Podhoretz’s devotees anything new. For the most part, it incorporates material that can be found in earlier autobiographical writings and in Podhoretz’s other published recollections about life in New York literary circles.

My Love Affair With America includes an extended description of American Jewish life among predominantly Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their offspring in New York during and after World War II. These people made efforts to fit into what they understood as mainstream America, and if they were eager to change that mainstream (which they helped to do over time), they also cultivated their own brand of American patriotism. As defined by Podhoretz, it consisted of a general admiration for what the Founding Fathers had done, or were imagined to have done, typically understood through the prism of the New Deal. It also included identification with the Puritans as judaizing Christians and the creators of a non-antisemitic New World. Podhoretz shows how these formative elements came together in the American Jewish culture of the 40’s and early 50’s and found expression in *Commentary*, a magazine founded in 1945 by an archetypal Cold War liberal and strongly self-identified Jew, Elliot F. Cohen. Although Podhoretz initially pushed the same publication toward the left after assuming its editorship in 1960, he correctly identifies the orientation with which it started. He believably as-

serts that the Jewish community to which he belonged showed little concern about antisemitism, which it assumed was waning—to the extent it ever existed—in the United States and that the holocaust did not rank high among postwar Jewish preoccupations. Never did one encounter in the conventional Jewish discourse of the time the eventually ubiquitous charge, which found its way into *Commentary* on Podhoretz’s watch, that the Nazis were driven by Christian conviction into slaughtering Jews. That was simply not the kind of thing that even inveterate goy-bashers were likely to say in 1950.

Having made these points, Podhoretz never explains—to my satisfaction at least—how the Jewish culture of his youth morphed into one he now deplores. He is right that communists and communist fellow travelers constituted only a minority of American Jews, and that after Jewish communists had embraced the party line during the years of the Soviet-Nazi pact, they lost all moral status among most of their fellow Jews. One would also have been hard pressed in those years to find significant Jewish support for gay rights or for most of the rest of the yuppie-left agenda now espoused, according to polls, by the vast majority of American Jews. The changes in mood that Podhoretz is aware of can be explained by looking at causes that his “cautionary tale” does not go into, from the self-destruction of a once self-confident WASP society to the rapidly changed position of deeply ethnocentric and long socially isolated Eastern European Jewish communities in the United States. Unlike their Sephardic and German Jewish predecessors, these groups resisted assimilation, bore continuing resentment against Christians, and became increasingly anxious about antisemitism the higher they climbed on the socioeconomic ladder. This status anxiety is apparent in Podhoretz’s own invectives against alleged antisemites and in his preoccupation in this book and elsewhere with who is, and who is not, on the right side (in both senses) in matters that bear on Israel.

The most embarrassing illustrations of his obsessions are the remarks Podhoretz devotes to those he condemns as “cheerless conservatives.” Among these are the New England man of letters James Rus-

sell Lowell, the historian Henry Adams, the Southern Agrarians, and “their intellectual and political descendants of the latter part of the century, the ‘paleoconservatives.’” Although he tars all of these figures with the same antisemitic brush, it is unclear that any of this distinguished company wasted much time insulting Jews. Lowell represented the kind of Protestant Podhoretz should appreciate, and this Boston Brahmin associated with Jews and praised their “talent and versatility.” Nonetheless, Podhoretz tells us, Lowell also made remarks, as vaguely intimated by Edmund Wilson, suggesting grave concern that Jews threatened his social class. Henry Adams, though the relevant texts are never quoted, complained portentously about the effects of the immigration of uncultivated Catholics and ambitious Jews into Protestant America. In an allegedly similar way, the paleos have committed the sins of opposing Third World immigration and disliking a development Podhoretz has a proprietary interest in preserving, American imperialism. On these subjects, our cheerful conservative is driven to distraction, revealing not only an exceedingly thin skin but also a tasteless mean streak. Thus we learn that, although paleos resemble Southern Agrarians (particularly in their undemonstrated antisemitism), these bigots are a “lesser breed and could boast no adherent of even remotely comparable stature.”

After exerting himself to drive cheerless conservatives out of the public square, Podhoretz cannot be so dense as to fail to see that he and his friends have played a major role in preventing paleos from achieving the stature that earlier generations of traditionalists were able to attain. As in his earlier writings about himself, the subject of Podhoretz’s celebration eventually becomes his own putative achievements, among them a signal success in marginalizing the “lesser breed” on his right while helping to shape the political conversation in collaboration with other certified “patriots.”

Paul Gottfried, a professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, is the author, most recently, of After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State (Princeton).

**To Subscribe
(800) 877-5459**