

Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South

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In Review



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The homogeneity of modernity—with its Wal-Marts, Lowe’s stores and Advance Auto Parts—is marking the South. It is being transformed from a unique region into Everywhere and Nowhere—and this transformation is a great threat to our nation’s redemption, argues Baylor University professor Ralph Wood. In Wood’s inspired book on Flannery O’Connor, he avers that the gospel-haunted South remains the best hope for our nation’s religious redemption.

For O’Connor and Wood, the South’s tragic history (the loss of the Civil War and the stain of slavery), combined with its deep religious and biblical culture and traditions, make it a special, Christ-haunted place. O’Connor was deeply connected to the South and its religious heritage, and even 50 years ago feared that it was being transformed into the modern, the urbane and the secular. An educated Roman Catholic in a sea of Protestants, she was strangely at home in Milledgeville, Georgia (1960 population: 11,117). There she suffered and died of a debilitating illness, her plans for living a New York literary life wrenched away by lupus.

Many have struggled over her fictional southern protagonists, who are often uneducated Pentecostals and fundamentalists. Was it satire, parody or plain old bitterness that led her obsessively to write about them? Wood argues, rather, that O’Connor found strange bedfellows in her Protestant neighbors, who, like her own Catholicism, resisted the stain of modernity. Those who obstinately held to the gospel (even if it entailed believing the world was only 6,000 years old), in the face of modern facts and urbanity, earned her respect. She cast her satirical eye not on them, but on the self-satisfied bourgeois Christians and self-righteous liberals who misunderstood both the gospel and the South.

Wood’s eloquence will send you scrabbling for your dictionary (a practice he enjoined on his students), as he coolly uses phrases such as “oleaginous ecumenicity,” and you have to love a line like “saccharine piety produces dry-rot minds.” His book is not a biography or an introduction to O’Connor’s work, but a sustained argument about the nature of her importance today in relation to the South and the world. Wood deals with southern history, Catholic and Protestant theology, race and racism, modernity, nihilism and vocation. How immense is the applicability and importance of O’Connor’s writing and thought! The footnotes are extensive, as is Wood’s knowledge of Eugene Genovese, George Marsden, Walker Percy, Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas. Wood also draws upon unpublished letters and correspondence to further illumine the startling complexity of O’Connor’s work

and thought, especially in relation to her Protestant neighbors and her own possible racism (recently discovered racist remarks in her personal letters have further muddied the study of her work).

O'Connor's unusual genre—her surprisingly brutal yet strangely redemptive southern Gothic style—has an enduring appeal. Wood has read her books throughout his professional life, from his undergraduate years to today. He serves on the editorial board of the *Flannery O'Connor Review* and has published numerous articles about her. This book is the result of a lifetime of thought and careful scholarship.

O'Connor's openness to her Protestant neighbors is mirrored in reverse in Wood, a Texas Baptist who found his mentor in a Catholic professor. Wood has been deeply formed by Catholic fiction and sacramentalism, the perspective that revealed to him the depths of his own faith and the radical claims of the cross, as well as its deep joy and laughter. He is an ideal guide to O'Connor's work and thought.