Writing lives

by Joseph Cunneen in the May 31, 2003 issue

The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage.
By Paul Elie. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 555 pp., $27.00.

Profound, original and entertaining, Paul Elie's new book weaves together the life and work of four 20th-century American Catholic writers: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Elie illuminates their literary achievement and makes clear that their spiritual search was far from parochial. He uncovers fascinating connections between his subjects and reminds us of what was going on in America as they passed through the various stages of their separate but interrelated pilgrimages.

The wide reading, interviewing and traveling that lie behind this book are impressive, especially since the result is never fussy or academic. Elie was on a pilgrimage of his own as he studied the four, concerned not just with the quality of their writing but with the meaning of their lives. Rather than making exaggerated claims for his subjects, he strove to understand their development as writers and to illuminate the complexities of religious experience in a rapidly changing society. He gives fresh, insightful critiques of specific books, shows how they fit into individual careers, and makes clear each writer's strengths and limitations.

Elie switches back and forth between his subjects, following the line of their development. He explores Dorothy Day's career as a left-wing journalist and bohemian; Flannery O'Connor's Catholic childhood in a deeply Protestant South; the melancholic and aristocratic family background of Walker Percy, whose father and grandfather both committed suicide; and Thomas Merton's years living with his artist father in a small French village. All four had to revise early decisions about their lives: Percy studied medicine in uptown Manhattan, while Merton dreamt of a literary career during his student days at Columbia--ambitions which were soon modified. Though there was a sense of religious yearning in Dorothy Day's early radicalism, painful wrenches in her personal life preceded her founding of the Catholic Worker movement; and serious illness forced Flannery O'Connor to return home to

Milledgeville, Georgia, where she fulfilled her vocation by writing about the lives of the people around her.

Elie is shrewd in assessing influences. Even before her own baptism Dorothy Day had a deep feeling for the working-class Catholic masses; later, her convert's yearning for sanctity was mixed with dissatisfaction at the way the church presented sanctity. This helps explain her sense of discovery in meeting Peter Maurin, the largely self-taught worker-philosopher who had developed his own Catholic social theories. As for Merton, his response to a visit to the Cloisters in New York City reflects the impulse to find and inhabit another world. *The Seven Storey Mountain* became so successful because it was the first book "to speak with authority about American Catholicism" and because it is a firsthand account of one person's religious experience. Its overwhelming popularity encouraged Merton's religious superior to keep giving him writing assignments, while Merton felt the book had created a false self. Meanwhile, Percy, who had decided to specialize in psychiatry, contracted tuberculosis; as a convalescent he read Dostoevsky and the existentialists and felt drawn to writing rather than to doctoring. His deep sense of alienation at first left him without a sense of direction, but he finally determined to get married, try to be a writer and become a Catholic.

Elie is especially successful in showing how central writing was in the religious odyssey of each of his subjects. Despite Day's responsibilities as director of the growing Catholic Worker movement, she was anxious to reach a wider audience through her books; constant travel by bus to lecture all over the country not only gave her time away from the incessant demands of CW's Lower East Side headquarters, but widened her contacts and gave her opportunities for reflection. Although Merton finally achieved the solitude of a hermitage, Elie rightly emphasizes the monk's "street-corner epiphany" in Louisville in 1958 when he suddenly realized he loved all the ordinary people around him, and determined to make his writing more of a dialogue with them.

Elie perceives that O'Connor's story "Good Country People" is the conclusion of a significant line of inquiry: "Failure to love the stranger has disastrous consequences. She who condescends to the stranger will be brought low. She who manipulates the stranger will be manipulated." As for Percy, Elie offers a fine appreciation of *The Moviegoer* along with a perceptive awareness of the pitfalls of his "diagnostic" approach to the novel. Elie believes that it was only with *The Thanatos Syndrome* that Percy discovered the centrality of plot, which enabled him to write a successful

medico-philosophical thriller.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own combines aesthetic praise for the writers it discusses--and especially for the short stories O'Connor wrote near the end of her short life--with an awareness of the way in which its subjects were limited by their backgrounds and educations. Particularly effective is Elie's consideration of Alice Walker's criticism of O'Connor's "gradualist" approach to racial integration, and of Merton's fear "that his gift of radical identification with others . . . could lead us to bury our unbelief in his belief, to remain religious novices sitting humbly in the presence of the master." Elie seems pleasantly surprised that the Catholic Worker movement has grown since Day's death, but is unenthusiastic about the campaign for her canonization. "Something is lost when she is merely venerated," he says. "She meant for her life to point beyond herself--to God, and to the poor people among us." He says that Percy saw how the modern self "goes forth in the world to fill itself, but swamps the world with its search for selfhood instead."

The author sees an ongoing value in the work of his chosen writers even though he recognizes that what they believed may appear foreign to contemporary readers: "We are all skeptics now, believer and unbeliever alike. . . . Every religion is one among many." This awareness makes me wish he had made more use of Merton's pioneering steps in interreligious dialogue. His book is a major success, however, because he shows that, for his four subjects, "The way to knowledge, and self-knowledge, is through pilgrimage . . . The story of their lives, then, is also its meaning and its implication for ours. They saw religious experience out before them. They read their way towards it. They believed it. They lived it. They made it their own. With us in mind, they put it in writing."