

Flannery O'Connor

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

SPEED, NOT DEATH, is the great leveller today. Travellers dash around the globe destroying by their visits the very sites and cultures they have come to view. For those who do not travel, mass media homogenizes experience and does so with the speed of light. Only the past stands secure from the poking fingers of man's curiosity, mysterious and impervious to change.

Some people, and Flannery O'Connor was among them, have the ability to view the present as what might be called "the past that is to be." As we would be enthralled if we were somehow able to walk down a street of the Montreal of 1750, so they are enthralled to walk down the street they live on now. One day our civilization will be seen for what it is, an exotic florescence of human culture populated with eccentrics whose bizarre behaviour cannot fail to startle and amuse. O'Connor was already diverted by it. Once, in a letter, she described her admittance into hospital:

When I came in & gave the information about myself at the admitting place, the woman, who had carrot-colored hair & eye glasses to match, asked me by whom I was employed, "Self-employed, says I. "What's your bidnis?" she says. "I'm a writer," I says. She stopped typing & after a second said, "What?"

"Writer," I says.

She looked at me for a while then she says, "How do you spell that?"¹

In her novels and numerous short stories, Flannery O'Connor could equip her readers with that special lens which reveals the uncanny world which lurks beneath what we have the audacity to call "ordinary." Ruby Hill, for example, in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," is smug and plump at thirty-four. Yet she is like a bizarre Ulysses whose laborious ascent of the staircase to her apartment is her Odyssey into the real world. Mrs. May, too, seems as ordinary as ordinary can be a, widow who wants to keep the farm going. But one morning before sunrise, in "green rubber curlers . . . [and] an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept," she encountered a lover

¹ *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York, 1979).

whose embrace is fatal: “the bull, silvered in the moonlight . . . like some patient god came down to woo her.”

In our strange world, O’Connor says, there are prophets who speak words of life and death. God’s messenger in “Revelation” is an acned young woman with the telltale name of Mary Grace who shatters the conventional world of Mrs. Turpin by throwing a book – *Human Development* – at her. For Sarah (“Parker’s Back”), the prophet is her husband who receives his call at a burning bush and brings Christ to her in the form of a tattoo. And in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Satan comes to an old woman and her retarded daughter in the person of Mr. Shiftlet, a handyman; he is welcomed.

Flannery O’Connor often spoke about her fiction. Sometimes she gave lectures, but more informative and interesting, I think, are her letters. In one of them we read:

[God] has revealed himself in history and continues to do so through the church, and . . . he is present (not just symbolically) in the Eucharist on our altars. To believe all this I don’t take any leap into absurd. I find it reasonable to believe, even though these beliefs are beyond reason.

This vivid sacramental theology infuses all her writing, but in a generalized, symbolic form as she delineates the workings of divine providence. Her presentation of the mystery of God’s care of his creation is often startling. For her characters—and by implication, also for her readers—violence is sometimes the only way God can smash the walls we build around ourselves. The demolition may be painful, but it is always portrayed with humour and a sense of the ridiculous. Her fantastic characters crowd into the memory: unhappy Joy, alias Hulga, who defends herself with a pair of glasses and a wooden leg, is eventually robbed of both of them; Rufus Johnson, a prophet with a club foot, brings disaster to the home of Shepherd, his social worker; Haze Motes, founder and sole member of the Church without Christ – “‘Protestant?’ she asked suspiciously, ‘or something foreign?’ He said, ‘No, ma’am, it was Protestant.’”—blinds himself. There are no short cuts to God in Flannery O’Connor’s world. Only by way of suffering do her characters come to understand that God is the goal they seek. It is a world that Flannery O’Connor knew at first hand. She was stricken at twenty-five with lupus, the disease that had killed her father, and died of it in 1964 when she was thirty-nine. ❧