

Edward Kessler

*FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE APOCALYPSE*

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. 163

Reviewed by Arthur F. Kinney

The poet and critic Edward Kessler sees as the peculiar source of Flannery O'Connor's powerful fiction not "the customary devices of the prose critic (e. g., character, setting, plot)" (p. 6) but the poetics of a visionary resembling the "apocalyptic poets like Blake and T. S. Eliot" (p. 7). For him, her work largely dismisses a sense of regional history so common to writers of the American South, and dismisses the sense of society and community so common to American fiction generally, to seek out through metaphor that exact moment when a character's thoughts transcend the mundane and are gripped in the revelation of a new order of being. Thus "her metaphors are more allied with feeling than with ideas" and "they sometimes appear, like feelings themselves, illogical, incoherent, and pervasively ambiguous" (p. 8).

While Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and especially Coleridge are occasional touchstones in Kessler's argument—for this is more argument than appreciation, despite his caveats—the extended comparisons are really to other fiction writers, especially to Poe, Hawthorne, and Welty, and (to O'Connor's disadvantage) Flaubert. What he discovers—and it is hugely significant—is O'Connor's sometimes studied attempts to find those images that function as hypothetical conditions and perceptions, what he neatly and succinctly calls the "as if" in her writing by tracing, to my new awareness, the extraordinary frequency with which she uses this syntactic construction to admit two meanings that are then eternally suspended, neither given preferential treatment. The "as if" construction, as Kessler develops it in instance after instance, allows us to juxtapose unenlightened and transcendent beliefs. This sharp juxtaposition, cutting through time and space, character and narrative line, is what O'Connor continually strove for, especially in her later fiction, a moment held tautly through the accommodation of a striking metaphor.

She was not, in Kessler's view, always successful. The use of the waterstain in "The Enduring Chill" he finds (as she did) her least apt piece of work, since she was unable to locate a natural relationship between that "symbol" and the Holy Ghost it is meant to represent. Far more successful, though hardly less obvious and (I think) less explicit is the "temple of the Holy Ghost" in the story of that name. By contrast, young Tarwater's spiralling vision at the conclusion of *The Violent Bear It Away* and the extraordinary vision of Mrs. Turpin at the end of "Revelation" (where unmediated vision nevertheless keeps freshly before us the prosaic quotidian world she means to escape) are among her most successful. This helps to explain the shocking power of her conclusions, the strangeness of her images, even the occasional *inconclusiveness* of her fiction. For it does not matter to O'Connor what happens to her characters once they have been forced to confront higher realities, nor what they do as a consequence; what matters is the state of their being that such visions emblemize. It also explains why certain images—such as the circle of fire or the artificial nigger—gripped her own imagination so powerfully and why biblical analogues, both told and buried, often lie so thickly behind and within her prose.

This study of an artist's imagination and technique does not proceed through the works chronologically and treats them only as they illustrate points in the argument. This permits Kessler to have his own loose ends. Because Mrs. Flood tells us most about her changing vision at the end of *Wise Blood*, he concentrates on her at the expense of Hazel Motes (who is, I think, still more interesting) and he neglects the fact that Hazel has served as a stimulus to others—to Sabbath Lily, to Enoch, to the policeman, to name just a few—all the way through; in a way Hazel himself is the chief metaphor in the book. Or in the case of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Kessler like O'Connor (he always follows her judgments on her work) dismisses the rejected ending when Mr. Shiftlet goes back home and attacks his family and television set. But surely that television set is what is replaying the story he has just lived; it is, in fact, a powerful metaphor that brings the withheld transcendent vision back into the mundane where it has no place, where it demonstrates to Mr. Shiftlet his own complicity and

guilt. But this metaphor is not transcendent; like Hazel Motes it does not fit into Mr. Kessler's scheme; and he dismisses it out of hand.

Despite the fact that the functioning and most successful metaphors in O'Connor grow directly out of Roman Catholic doctrine, deeply felt and stunningly placed for the most part on Protestant characters, this study has little to do with doctrine but much to do with believing and belief. Since such matters extend beyond language as well as reality, Kessler's concentration on metaphor is immensely helpful. Where she was weak—in finding the right metaphor for endings—she knew that too. "Metaphor was O'Connor's instrument for accommodating transcendent vision to the traditional materials of prose fiction," Kessler concludes, "and if in the end the marriage was unable consistently to dissolve different shapes into a composite whole, her raids on the inarticulate remain among the most powerful in contemporary literature" (p. 159).

William Mills Todd III

*FICTION AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PUSHKIN*

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986. Pp. 265.

Reviewed by Edward Wasiolek

This is a study of the role salon society played in forming the literature of Russia in the first four decades of the nineteenth century, a time of rapid change in Russian cultural life. What had been formed in centuries in Western Europe had to be formed in decades in Russia: the secularization of culture, the development of a national literature, the growth of education and the universities, the intrusion of the government bureaucracy into all areas of life and resistance to that bureaucracy, and the shift from patronage to "trade" in literary matters. Among the institutions that were making themselves felt in the first four decades of the nineteenth century, the government bureaucracy, the church, commercial interests, the universities and salon society, Todd chooses to anchor his study in salon society, perhaps on the grounds that the other institutions all found their way into salon society, and had their immediate impact on the writer by way of the discourse that went on in salon society. It was there that these matters were discussed, weighed, judged, accepted, and rejected. Specifically, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and Gogol's *Dead Souls* are analyzed as illustrations of the way that polite society molded the space in which literature worked out, made palpable, and actualized the forms that were discussed and acted out on the social stage.

*Eugene Onegin* is, as Todd eloquently and persuasively shows, a rich and expressive vehicle of the multiple tones, gestures, forms, and discourses that were being explored in Russian culture and polite society at the time. It also held up a mirror to society, because the relationship between literary work and society was reciprocal; Pushkin's narrative poem molded the society as much as the society molded it. Todd's argument works less well with Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Lermontov held salon society in contempt, and Gogol's relationship to it by class and interaction was less visible. Todd's argument is that Pechorin's contempt for society is part of Lermontov's transformation of society's harmonizing rituals into viciously competitive rituals. Pechorin follows society's script even as he condemns it and attempts to distance himself from it. As for Gogol, Todd shows that Gogol actively sought the company of important people of polite society and kept an active correspondence with some of them when he was outside their company. *Dead Souls* questions the ideological processes of polite society: *honnete homme*, harmonization of social antagonisms, spatial configuration (provincial cosmopolitanism), and the very functioning of language itself. The novel questions these not directly but by mimicking society's discourses, playing with them, highlighting them, and showing their shortcomings.

Apart from the intrinsic merit of this study, that is, the persuasive argument that literature and polite society carried on a formative intercourse in the first decades of the century, I was taken by the nature of the study itself, that is, by a study that concerned itself with the relationship between society and literature, or the institutions of society and literature. That such a relationship exists and is a fruitful object of study is surely without doubt. Yet for some time in our century, such studies have been discouraged, or when permitted pursued