

Richard Giannone

FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1989. Pp. 268. \$24.95

Reviewed by Melvin J. Friedman

Josephine Hendin, in her *The World of Flannery O'Connor* (1970), disparagingly began a number of her endnotes, "For a religious interpretation see." Hendin had grown weary, even at that early date, of the proliferation of studies which placed the theological before the aesthetic in examining O'Connor's fiction. Richard Giannone now offers another "religious interpretation," but his *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* takes a different turn from most of its predecessors. He tries to characterize "O'Connor's Pauline frame of mind" (112) and "her biblical sensibility" (245) in the course of emphasizing the joy, love, and tenderness which inform her fiction. He acknowledges "the preponderant malevolence in the texts" (4) as a starting point, but feels the need to pass beyond it toward a more affirmative "experience of love" (5). His position is far removed from the nay-sayers who are preoccupied with sin in O'Connor's work and seem to dwell on the harshness and Jansenistic underpinnings of her worldview.

Giannone's sunny perspective, which goes against the grain of so much existing commentary, is firmly rooted in elaborate examination of the fiction. His thoroughness is exemplary as he makes his way through the two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*--each at chapter length--and through all nineteen of the stories contained in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. He takes no short cuts through the oeuvre; his considerable strength is in his patient handling of all the works which mattered to Flannery O'Connor. If O'Connor were still alive she would almost certainly respond favorably to Richard Giannone's book.

Chapter one, the discussion of *Wise Blood*, is perhaps the high point of *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*. It is as impressive a study of O'Connor's first novel as any I have seen, with the possible exception of Frederick Asals's in his *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (1982). I find very compelling Asals's view of it as "an odd, angular book" which goes its own disruptive "Manichean" way--almost in defiance of its author's widely advertised Catholicism. I agree with his notion that it reads like "a naturalistic novel gone berserk." Giannone's approach is in every way more "orthodox" than Asals's, but it shares with it an awareness of *Wise Blood's* special position in the O'Connor canon. At the nerve center of Giannone's reading of the novel is the presence of St. Paul and St. Francis. He puts this very neatly: "St. Paul, St. Francis, and Hazel Motes meet on the ground of chosen suffering. The works of all three men lead to their climax in the voluntary sacrifice of their individual lives" (30). Further along in the chapter he remarks tellingly: "Paul's theology of conversion provides a perspective, and Francis's spirituality the aegis, for O'Connor's Taulkinham story" (37). Giannone pursues this "odd fellowship" insistently through the chapter, offering us quite new optics for view-

ing *Wise Blood* and its hero, whom O'Connor once called "a Christian *malgré lui*."

St. Francis offers little help in explaining the rest of O'Connor's fiction, but St. Paul's name is often invoked. Indeed the Bible, especially the New Testament, is Giannone's constant companion as he makes his way through O'Connor's texts. His knowledge of Greek and Hebrew produces occasional interesting insights. Dante (whom Giannone characterizes as "O'Connor's master teacher" [152]) and Milton also offer helping hands.

Two chapters are given over to the ten stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, all of which offer "a fresh perspective on O'Connor's inexhaustible story of the response to the terrifying experience of guilt" (46). Giannone's readings are generally convincing, but he is especially good on "The Displaced Person," which he sees as an example of theology yielding to poetry through the central symbolic presence of the peacock.

During his lengthy discussion of *The Violent Bear It Away* he comments on the three sections and twelve chapters of the novel, again having recourse to the Old and New Testaments. (He had earlier demonstrated how the fourteen chapters of *Wise Blood* loosely invoke the fourteen stations of the cross.) His treatment of the principal characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* is skillfully managed; a sentence such as the following is so good that it is worth committing to memory: "As Rayber and Tarwater continue their shadowboxing with Mason's ghost, Bishop receives their punches because he is the breathing reminder of Mason's univocal commission to baptize others into the life of redeeming love" (134).

Giannone leads into the four-chapter sequence devoted to the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* with a discussion of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, from whom O'Connor got the title for this 1965 collection. He sees "Paul's theology of the mystical body" (156) as the tie between O'Connor and Teilhard. The Teilhardian presence in *Everything That Rises* opens up areas of tenderness and gentleness not apparent in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

After making his way systematically through the first eight stories in the collection, he devotes a final chapter to "Judgement Day." In the course of examining this story, he looks at the three earlier versions of it, beginning with "The Geranium," which was part of her Iowa M.F.A. thesis. Unfortunately, Giannone seems unaware of a supposedly final version which acknowledges late revisions made by O'Connor who, for reasons of failing health, was unable to send them to her editor, Robert Giroux; this appears as "Judgment Day" in *The Library of America Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (1988) and should finally replace the less finished "Judgement Day" of *Everything That Rises*.

A word should be said about Giannone's ability to interweave the stories in O'Connor's 1965 collection. A sentence like the following manages to bring together characters from four of these stories: "The tide of darkness that sweeps over Julian, over Mrs. May, and over Thomas now overtakes Tanner with its irresistible force" (244).

Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of love offers an appendix which contains a previously unpublished O'Connor letter that comments on an episode in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Giannone refers to it earlier in his text as he does to many other letters found in *The Habit of Being*. Indeed he leans heavily on her epistolary jottings for support in passing judgement on the fiction.

The bibliography which concludes Giannone's book is carefully managed. It measures up to the high standard of accuracy set elsewhere in *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*. The only lapse I noticed was the recurrence of the title "A Circle in the Fire" as "A Circle of Fire" (81-87, 263).

While one might have hoped for more aesthetic judgments, more stylistic analysis, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* in every way satisfies as religious interpretation.

Maria Tatar

THE HARD FACTS: GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Pp. 277

Jack Zipes

*THE BROTHERS GRIMM: FROM ENCHANTED FORESTS
TO THE MODERN WORLD*

London: Routledge, 1988. Pp. 205

Reviewed by Josef Schmidt

Professor Tatar's study has many qualities; but unfortunately it is weak in what the title so enticingly suggests: new facts! Also missing are articulate feminist analyses of the violence and cruelty in Grimm's fairy tales, like Andrew Dworkin's interpretations of a series of "hard" classics like "Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Rapunzel," etc. (*Woman Hating*, Chapter 1, 1974). But apart from these minor reservations, this is a commendable study, stimulating, very readable, often witty (if sometimes excessively punning), it is exquisitely illustrated and highly recommended for an informed overview of recent Grimm's fairy-tales research.

The "hard facts" are summed up in the concluding sentence (192) which argues that the influence and the popularity of the collection is due to the fact that "the hard facts of fairy-tale life offer exaggerated visions of the grimmer realities and fantasies that touch and shape the lives of every child and adult." Rather than summarize the overall structure of the book, celebrate the masterly coverage of a wide range of pertinent topics (for example, the editing premises, reaction to popular taste, the feminist side-theme of how women often appear victimized in this collection, etc.), or applaud the comprehensive review of the main secondary sources, I would like to concentrate on the main theme of this book. It is the "hard fact"-theory of Maria Tatar as developed in chapter 3, "Victims and Seekers: The Family Romance of Fairy Tales" (58-84).