**Review Essay**

**MCMULLEN’S CHOICE: A RECENT APPRAISAL OF FLANNERY O’CONNOR**

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The choice offered the reader in this book-length study of what the author terms in her sub-title ‘the Literature of Flannery O’Connor’ (although the number of stories examined, besides the two novels, is far from complete) is hardly more generous than the one Mr. Hobson offered prospective buyers in his particular line of business. Professor McMullen’s primary title sets forth as flatly as possible the critical tenets to be argued, and the conclusions (foregone) to be reached. We are quickly given to understand that she is open to interpretive discussion only within the narrow range she sets, and the abundance of bluntly declarative sentences in which she advances her findings would seem to rule out a priori any alternative options proposed by less self-assured readers and critics, let alone impudent disagreement with any of them.

By such dictatorial means and a pervasively hectoring tone, buttressed by a great plenty of intimidating linguistic and grammatical charts, lists, and columns of carefully counted and ‘analyzed’ instances of the artist’s “coded” symbols, syntax, and word choices—i.e., that “amazingly, O’Connor has almost the same number of verbs on the first page of each work (for uniformity the first 319 words . . .)”—this critic would ‘reveal’ to us the probability that O’Connor, regarded as a defiantly religious writer strongly Roman Catholic in belief and practice, deliberately chose to confound her readers by insisting privately and publicly that she was saying one thing in her fiction while, in fact, cryptically saying quite the opposite (27).

By this critic’s account, masterful *sic* linguistic techniques enabled her to accomplish what amounted to a sleight-of-word scam by speaking her
real meanings *sotto voce* through the particular kinds and forms of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs she chose and employed, syntacti-
cally and grammatically, with all cunning, as a means of conveying, to truly
discerning minds, her real (i.e., subversive) aims. Her motive was presum-
ably to keep her work being read and under discussion indefinitely.

McMullen cites O'Connor's complaint in a personal letter of the frequent
misreadings of her stories as "brutal and sarcastic," and as "horror stories,"
expressing some rueful amusement at this last "because the reviewer always
has hold of the wrong horror" (7). A mild enough observation hardly
deserving, even considered along with occasional others to the same effect,
of this critic's view of it as an indication that "O'Connor's concern with her
audience's perception of her as a writer dominates her private correspon-
dence" (7). 

McMullen goes on to inform us that "O'Connor would, of course, be
delighted to be considered a critical mystery and would be amused to think
of her work as continuing to engender controversy" (2). In that case, her
apparent dismay at being so often misunderstood must be regarded as feigned,
and she herself viewed as merely a brilliant literary gamester (rather a lesser
accomplishment than the one she avowedly aimed at in the use of her gifts).

Are we to infer, moreover, that she intentionally covered her trail
(thereby deepening the mystery, setting the critics a-bicker, and perfecting
the artistry of the sting) by composing essays and talks on her own work
and related matters of faith and art, and by a voluminous correspondence
with both friends and strangers in which she discussed her works and the
same related matters in illuminating detail? A great deal of strategic and tac-
tical energy would have been demanded of this short-lived, invalid artist to
have conceived and carried out (along with the laborious, perfectionist
making of her stories) such a complicated trick on readers in general and
critics in particular.

Moreover, such a feat would have demanded as much patience as ener-
gy, with both devoted to a rather uncertain outcome, since it was by no
means certain that these putatively misleading exegetical comments would
ever come to light on any wide scale. O'Connor's occasional prose was not
published until five years after her death, and if it had been left to her to
set it in order, would never have been published at all. Two or three of the
pieces had appeared in print—only one, on the side issue of peacocks, in a
large-circulation magazine; another, on the teaching of literature, in a week-
ly Jesuit newspaper; and a third, as the Introduction to a small book writ-
ten by a hospice nun, recounting the short life and death of a child afflicted
with disfiguring facial cancer. The remainder, for the most part eloquently