Flannery O’Connor described herself as “a Catholic peculiarly possessed of a modern consciousness” (HB 90). What makes her such a fascinating author is that she was almost uncannily sensitive to what Charles Taylor identified in his large study A Secular Age as the “fraught” spiritual cross-currents of late modernity. Decades before Taylor described the modern secular social imaginary as a haunted space, O’Connor wrote in an essay that “if the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted” (MM 44). She interpreted the freak “as a figure of our essential displacement” (45). What Taylor works out about the late modern zeitgeist in close to a thousand pages of dense analysis, O’Connor memorably puts before her reader in a few vivid strokes.

She was a modern who, as a Christian believer, opposed the self-sufficient spirit of modernity. She held to original sin as fact, not mere symbol; and she believed that its only answer was redemption by a costly grace. Her fiction is her prophetic critique of the project of Enlightenment modernity. It is much more than that too, but it is that.

This is a comparative study of some of the contexts that informed the author’s approach to her art. My argument in these pages is two-fold: 1) O’Connor’s fictional poetics cannot be separated, as some critics seem intent on doing, from its theological rootedness in the Christian dramatics of sin and grace; and 2) O’Connor was profoundly nourished in working out her “theology of art” by the resources available to her in the twentieth century French writers and artists of the Catholic Revival. Her personal library testifies to her long and deep interaction with these contexts. I have singled out Jacques Maritain, Georges Rouault, François Mauriac, and Blaise Pascal, who enjoyed a revival in the context of existentialism. What unites these figures is that, like O’Connor, they are moderns who critique modernity from common Christian commitments. This results in interesting formal affinities of thought and aesthetics.

O’Connor wrote her stories on a semi-secluded farm in Middle Georgia, but her bookcases and friendships opened her to contexts far afield. In the decades after World War II, the French exercised a special prominence in the thought of American Catholics. As O’Connor’s late friend William Sessions and Sarah Gordon have pointed out, these contexts which fed her thought and art deserve more attention than they have received.

O’Connor was a literary bricoleur. She had the creative knack for using the material at hand to craft her stories. Her habit of reading, painting, and conversation provided the grist for her writing. She joked that she had a “food-chopper brain.” She borrowed from many; what came out of the process remains wonderfully unique.

Chapter three is not specifically French in focus, though I consider it to be a necessary prelude to the comparative discussion of Rouault’s visual aesthetics in chapter four. It is an exploration of the author’s lifelong symbiotic engagement with visual art.

My primary concern in this dissertation is to think about some of the ways in which O’Connor interacted creatively with these resources. Broader comparative considerations are necessary prolegomena to more detailed readings of her fictional works. I will touch on her fiction here, but what I have in mind is an invitation to readings. A more detailed application lies beyond the scope of the present project.

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