Flannery & Other Regions*

This personal article by Guerrilla Girl Alma Thomas on one of O'Grady's key authors, Flannery O'Connor—who wrote as a Catholic in the Protestant South—discusses O'Connor's meaning for later "minority" artists in a pluralized world.

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To say that I am a black woman artist using the name of Alma Thomas—a black woman artist who is dead—so as to "fight sexism and racism in the art world" (the official line of the Guerrilla Girls) is to tell you almost nothing, either about the me who makes art or the me who reads Flannery. It reduces me to the very thing I am fighting, a stereotype.

Flannery understood that no one is a cipher, the mere "representative" of a category. She more than most would have realized how limiting it is not to reveal the date and place of my birth, the accent in which my parents spoke (different from mine), the style of their manners (more refined), the peculiar psychic and social history they passed on to me (if only they hadn't); or, to peel the onion further, not to be able to tell you who I married, how I've earned a living, my education.... I'm

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* From Sarah Gordon, ed., *Flannery O'Connor: In Celebration of Genius*. Athens, GA. Hill Street Press, 2000. pp 73-78. "In memory of Mary Flannery O'Connor, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of her birth. March 25, 2000."

convinced Flannery would have sympathized and would read these global statements remembering their missing nuance, and that gives me the courage to proceed. However, I'll have to restrict myself to her nonfiction; responding with less than my whole self to her fiction, even if it were possible, would be too disheartening.

The thirty-five years since Flannery died have been so critical for the culture, a period in which the magnitude of change in society has seemed even greater than that for individuals. It's hard to avoid a "presentist" project with respect to her. Five years before she died, I had my first encounter with Flannery, in a yellow cloth book with *Wise Blood* in big letters on the cover that a friend had bought me from a remainder bin—a first edition I no longer have and wish I did. Looking back, I think that in most ways, I haven't changed much since then, and perhaps in the basics not at all. Yet the culture has changed so greatly that backwardly interrogating Flannery about this or that new perspective is like asking one of those historical impersonators, "What would Mr. Jefferson think?" There is always the danger of either giving her the benefit of every doubt, based on the love one had at first sight, or dismissing her as irrelevant.

For years after my first encounter, I read Flannery "bi-optically," interpolating my reality into hers. How could it have been otherwise when I did not feel I was part of the audiences she anticipated? Peeking through a keyhole, "overhearing" the work, seeing but not being seen, turned the work into a secret all the more delicious. But two decades later, having consumed most of her fiction, I confess that picking up her essays and lectures came as a relief. Here was an explicit statement of authorial intentions that provided me a firm handle; instead of evanescent images, there were concrete ideas with which I could agree or disagree, and best of all, an explanation of the love I continued to feel.

For me, *Mystery and Manners* came at a crucial moment; I found it shortly after I'd "come out" as a visual artist. I felt I was standing inside a room we shared—not engaging with Flannery as an equal, of course, but getting there. Still, two decades had passed since my first reading of her fiction, and now the room

looked different; it had been rearranged by shifts in the culture—not the least of which had been the black women's writing that had created a new audience for literature. I wondered: would Flannery's work and ideas survive the changes I could now see? The answer was an unequivocal yes, but with massive ironies I hoped she was enjoying.

To get the negative out of the way first, in a 1959 letter to Maryat Lee, Flannery wrote something that at this distance feels frankly embarrassing. Responding to a proposed meeting with James Baldwin, she said: "No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia."

When you imagine the plane of intellectual comaraderie on which the out gay and black Baldwin wanted to meet the virginal O'Connor, it's hard not to be sad that she couldn't rise to his level. She was sick, of course, and conserving her energy, not just choosing her battles but no doubt trying to avoid them. Still, it makes me cringe.

For all Flannery's interest in the eternal, the transcendent, the universal, she understood the need for distinctions; she tried to see through them, not overcome them. She said to an interviewer: "I have a talk I sometimes give called 'The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South' and I find that the title makes a lot of people... nervous. Why bring up the distinction? Particularly when the word Christian ought to settle both.... The distinctions between Catholic and Protestant are distinctions within the same family, but every distinction is important to the novelist. Distinctions of belief create distinctions of habit, distinctions of habit make for distinctions of feeling. You don't believe on one side of your head and feel on the other."

Times would change, "distinctions" would become "differences." But between distinctions of belief and differences in experience there is a short distance, one it's clear that Flannery was large enough to encompass.

She once said, "The best American writing has always been regional." But since she wrote this, the concept of "region" has itself been redefined; it now includes not only geographic but cultural borders. It's hard for some of us to lament television's flattening of the old Southern and Midwestern literatures when so many new regions of black, gay, and immigrant writing have since vibrantly entered the space. I believe the writer who made even black readers love "The Artificial Nigger" could have become reconciled to this change.

There's no need to rewrite the past. Flannery could never have predicted that those who would need her more than air would be readers and writers so marginalized she couldn't imagine them as part of her audience. It is her embattlement as a believing writer in a secular world and the morality of her aesthetic standards that have instructed generations of artists who have been "othered." Whenever I reread *Mystery and Manners*, I picture dozens of artists underlining, writing in the margins, changing the word Catholic to Asian, lesbian, Latino. This is an irony I feel Flannery would relish in time.

In addition, political similarities have resonated in aesthetic solutions. From the Southern grotesque that Flannery's work embodied and described to the postcolonial magic realism of García Márquez and Rushdie seems a hop, skip and a jump. She wrote: "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." This could be sisterly advice to Toni Morrison.

I grant that many aspects of O'Connor's thought (perhaps even her fiction, though I think not) may appear superficially dated. Though I believe she deserves infinite reading generosity, others may find their patience tried. What remains that is irreducible? As a nation, we have become aware that competing narratives broaden and deepen our understanding, that inflecting the story of Thomas Jefferson with that of Sally Hemings (and

vice versa) helps us see both more clearly. And we realize that O'Connor's art and thought have been strengthened by—but can never be replaced by—Morrison's.

Although Flannery valued regional writing, she also noted that "to be regional in the best sense you have to see beyond the region." This *beyond* did not mean *outside*: neither Sophocles, Murasaki, Chaucer, nor Tolstoy saw *outside* their region, or had to.

"The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets," she wrote in *Mystery and Manners*. The *beyond* that is a *beneath*, the openness to the unexpected and availability to mystery, which she practiced in her art and preached in her essays, stands, I believe, as her warning beacon to the regional artists who continue to come after her. It's one we will always be guided and daunted by.

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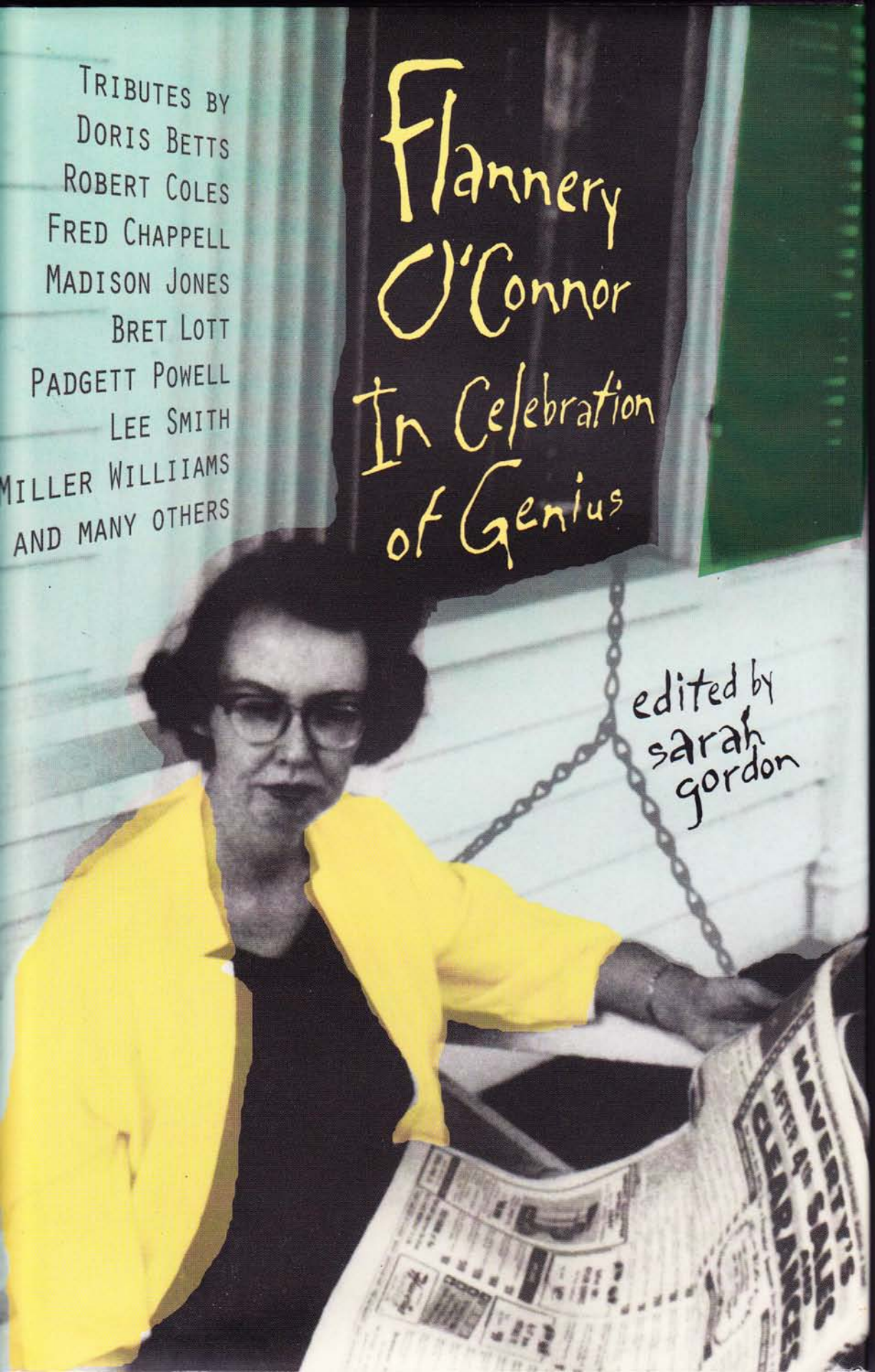
Flannery O'Connor

In Celebration of Genius



edited by
sarah gordon

This collection
is an acknowledgement of the
genius—the very present spirit—
of Flannery O'Connor.

SARAH GORDON

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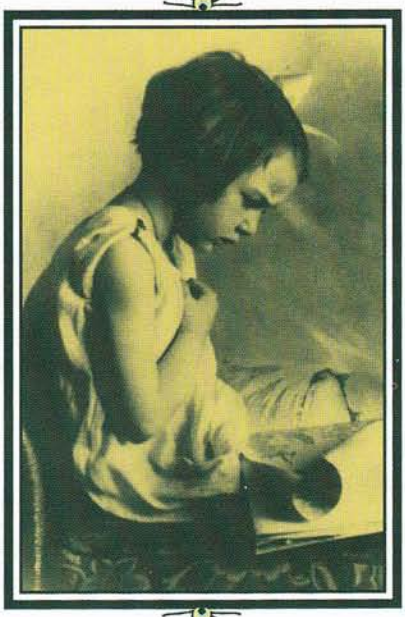

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Fifteen

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