

W. FLANNERY O'CONNOR: A LIFE

Jean Cash

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(by Gretchen Dobrott Bernard. UNED)

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When Sally Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor's close friend and official biographer died in 2000, scholars and admirers of O'Connor's work were abruptly denied the long-awaited and forever "imminent" publication of a full-fledged biography of this author. Fitzgerald had been researching her friend's life for years, and what is most important, had been on excellent terms with both Flannery's mother, Regina O'Connor, and O'Connor's family and heirs, who had proven to be solicitous when writing the biographical notes for the Library of America's 1989 publication of *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*. Thus, the disappointment increased as the months passed after Fitzgerald's death, and it seemed that no formal plans had been made to bring this eternal project to a satisfactory end. Fortunately, ten years ago, university professor and O'Connor scholar Jean Cash, perhaps suspecting that Fitzgerald's venture might never see the printing press, decided to take on the task herself. Her biography, *Flannery O'Connor: A Life* is the most thoroughly documented and valuable contribution to readers and researchers of this writer's work to date.

During its elaboration, Cash's biography was not free from obstacles. Towards what appeared to be the final phase of her project, she was forced by O'Connor's literary executors to paraphrase all direct extracts of unpublished material (Mankowski 1). The rewording of letters and other essential sources inevitably causes her prose at times to seem awkward and ruins some of O'Connor's greatest quotes. However,

Cash cannot be blamed for not belonging to the Milledgeville, Georgia faction of accredited fans and scholars. In fact, no doubt aware of the difficulties she was bound to encounter, she should be commended for her tenacity and overall successful achievement.

O'Connor once wrote, "There won't be any biographies of me because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy" (in Johnson 1). Yet, at least five critics have dedicated substantial parts of their works to her life, and most O'Connor scholars pore over her hundreds of letters edited and published by Fitzgerald in 1979 in *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*, which can be read, in a sense, as an epistolary autobiography. O'Connor's life, although short and relatively unexciting, as she herself states, if we compare it to those of her contemporaries Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty, was shaped by several significant events which make for very interesting biographical material and more importantly provide insight into the complexities and the uniqueness of her narrative.

Jean Cash has rightly focused on these events, affording them more thoroughness and page space than any other biographer has up to now. Her mastery of the subject does not go unnoticed as she relates and comments on the death of Flannery's father from systemic lupus erythematosus when she was just sixteen, the confirmation at age twenty-six that she would have to endure the same illness, her forced retirement to her mother's home town of Milledgeville, Georgia and her, at times, strained relationship with her mother, Regina, and finally, having to come to terms with the implications of an increasing physical diminishment and the acknowledgement of her encroaching death.

Thanks to Cash's research, scholars are provided with the possibility of interpreting episodes of O'Connor's life from a different perspective. And while we do not, and should not accept the veracity of all of Cash's manifestations, we can at least contrast her version of O'Connor's life with that of the "official" version dispensed by Fitzgerald. Confronting, and at times questioning, what has been accepted by many as the most accurate portrayal of O'Connor is, no doubt, a challenge, especially since Fitzgerald's biographical notes and commentaries happen to be included in what are probably the two most widely-read publications of O'Connor's work: *The Habit of Being* and *The Complete Works of Flannery O'Connor*. However, despite having to intrude upon Fitzgerald's territory, disturbing an apparent monopoly on her friend's life, Cash's efforts are ultimately worthwhile. By offering readers a different point of view, she encourages them to consider the notion that perhaps the perspective of a close friend is not always the most objective.

For, glancing at Cash's bibliography, several things stand out. First, the large number of entries, which confirm the solid documentation of this work. Then, on closer examination, one can count over forty interviews carried out by mail or telephone, or personally. It seems that a great part of the ten years of research invested by Cash has been spent speaking to or maintaining written correspondence with Flannery O'Connor's friends and acquaintances. Finally, her lack of contact with O'Connor's heirs appears to be confirmed by a complete absence of references to interviews or conversations with the author's family members. Thus, the nature of Cash's bibliographic references is entirely different from that of Fitzgerald's, and surely one of the most significant reasons for the importance of this biography resides precisely in the fact that many of the sources of these two women do not coincide.

Scholars will especially appreciate the enlightening accounts on two issues which have been discussed over the years by numerous critics and continue to be the grounds for controversy: her precipitated departure from the writers' colony "Yaddo", and her manifestations regarding racial issues and her own sexuality. Cash proves to be much more rigorous in her assessment of the former episode than Fitzgerald was, judging by the number and diversity of the sources she draws her conclusions from. In 1979 Fitzgerald tells us, in detail, how O'Connor was naïvely convinced by the poet Robert Lowell along with three other writers-in-residence to expose Agnes Smedley as a communist and, in turn, to accuse the colony directress of favouritism towards the author of *Daughter of Earth*. Fitzgerald claimed that O'Connor "fell behind this compelling Pied Piper [...] unable to withstand his blandishments" (1998: 415). Cash, on the other hand, does not absolve her of responsibility in this episode, despite her apparent passivity. In fact, interviews with two of O'Connor's friends confirm that she fully supported Lowell's role as "delegate for Yaddo guests" and the subsequent uprising against Smedley, an "active communist" (120). To document the account of this episode, Cash, apart from drawing from a number of sources, has carefully read and cited the minutes of several board meetings that were held to resolve the conflict.

However, when Cash has had to turn to sources which, belonging to the O'Connor estate, are subjected to certain restrictions, she runs into more difficulties. This is the case with O'Connor's personal correspondence, most of which is on file at the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia College and State University, but cannot be quoted without permission from the family. Once again, and in all fairness, at the request of O'Connor's mother, Fitzgerald made an unfortunate editorial decision, at least for scholars, anyway, when she chose not to include letters which she thought might be "read out of context" and "would have been seriously misleading as to Flannery's deeper attitudes and convictions" (1998: 424). Thankfully, Cash labors through these letters, paraphrase after paraphrase,

because she knows that the value of their content will compensate for what at times is a tedious account of O'Connor's feelings towards African-Americans and the civil rights movements and her references to her own sexuality. Cash successfully transmits the ambiguous and often contradictory views of the writer on issues which are prevalent in her fiction, trusting the readers' ability to assess, or perhaps merely accept the idea that O'Connor may not have known herself how she felt about race and sex, primarily because her isolated life in rural Georgia and her illness did not provide her with enough experience to reach any definitive conclusions.

Consequently, Cash has managed to circumnavigate the lack of collaboration on the part of the writer's heirs satisfactorily. And what could be seen initially as an obstacle ultimately works in her favor, since she is not bound by the need to protect or anticipate harmful interpretations of the sources she refers to. Not being a native Georgian or part of Milledgeville academia, and being far removed from any type of rapport with the O'Connor family have afforded her an objectivity that Fitzgerald would likely never have achieved. Nevertheless, the worth of the latter's biographical notes should not be underestimated. On the contrary, only by contrasting both women's accounts will scholars be able to formulate their own opinions. Hopefully, sometime in the near future Sally Fitzgerald's work will be completed, along with other biographies which are in the making. Cash informs us of the existence of a set of letters written by Betty Hester to O'Connor, a close friend of the writer's, which will be available to the public in May 2007 (330). If these letters are at all like those written from O'Connor to Hester and published in *The Habit of Being*, they are certain to shed more light on the, up to now, one-sided conversations in which the women discuss topics such as the process of writing, their faith and their sources of inspiration. Until the impact of these letters is assessed, Cash's biography is a welcome contribution towards the study of Flannery O'Connor, the woman, and Flannery O'Connor, the writer.

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