

Interpretation

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Review Essay

Henry T. Edmondson III, ed., *Flannery O'Connor: A Political Companion*.
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Flannery O'Connor's Augustinian Politics

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Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, James, Frost, Faulkner, Stevens—all the major imaginative writers of this “nation with the soul of a church,” as Chesterton called it, have been either vaguely religious at best or outright heretical at worst. (I count T. S. Eliot as more British than American.) This is not to demean or denigrate their work. On the contrary, our sub-Christian artists deserve their canonical status; indeed, they rank high among the eminent figures of the entire Anglophone tradition in literature. I also admit that Flannery O'Connor belongs to the second rank of American writers rather than the first. Her work has neither the volume nor breadth of theirs. Yet as our one unapologetically Christian author, she strikes depths and beholds realities that they do not. Thus must she be reckoned with at almost every level—the aesthetic and the religious, the cultural and the historical, but also the political.

This claim may seem wrongheaded, for she is often regarded as a non-political figure. “The topical is poison,” she declared. Fiction that seeks to offer commentary on political events is little other than propaganda. Rarely does she deal with conventional politics in her prize-winning fiction, nor in her magnificent letters (*The Habit of Being*), nor even in her fine collection

of essays (*Mystery and Manners*). Yet, as Henry Edmondson declares in his able introduction to *Flannery O'Connor: A Political Companion*, her work is political in the Aristotelian sense. For O'Connor as for Aristotle, politics has little to do with electoral or diplomatic matters. Rather is it "the overarching discipline, the inquiry concerned with all areas of study having relevance to the virtuous life and with those matters that contribute to 'human flourishing'" (1-2). This collection is thus a happy corrective to the notion that O'Connor's work sets its sights entirely on "the tree-line of infinity" without regard to the good life (*eudaemonia*) that stands on this side of the eschaton.

The consensus of the contributors to the *Companion* is that, as a Roman Catholic steeped in the theology of the church, Flannery O'Connor refused to separate the two realms. A Christian in politics, like a Christian in art, operates at what she called "a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. [The] problem is to find that location." John Sykes argues that O'Connor did not join the Vanderbilt Agrarians in locating this juncture within the southern past. For such important thinkers as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Lytle, the antebellum South united the sacred and secular in what they regarded as a virtual medieval polity governed, as Sykes says, "by tradition, a social hierarchy, a code of manners, systems of kinship, and love of the land" (26).

The Agrarians set their vision of this ideal society over against the grasping avarice of the industrial North, with its Yankee ethos of individualist competition and commercial enterprise. Hence their conclusion that the South was a superior "feudal society without a feudal religion" (26). O'Connor would have none of it. As Sykes shows, she rejected their utilitarian regard for religion. The Agrarians would have turned the Gospel into an instrumental means for saving what they regarded as classical southern culture. For her as for St. Augustine, the Incarnation requires Christians to put *all* earthly polities—lest they become demonic—under the transformative judgment of the City of God. Unlike the Agrarians, O'Connor was drawn to the God-drunk, Christ-haunted, folk believers of the Bible Belt, poor blacks and poor whites alike. Their wild and often comical fanaticism was a healthy reproach to the high-cultured denizens of both the dismissive northern Left and the nostalgic southern Right.

Understood as one but not the only element in a proper ordering of the polis, the question of racial justice dominated the public life of O'Connor's time. Three of the essays bear directly on her treatment of it. Benjamin Alexander, Michael Schroeder, and Margaret Whitt all deal with O'Connor and

the question of civil rights. They note that O'Connor was no sort of racist, that she in fact saluted the work of Martin Luther King Jr. as a necessary corrective to the inveterate racial evils of her region and nation. Two of her best stories, "The Artificial Nigger" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge," are profoundly antiracist in their moral and political implications; they deal with the deadly results of racial moralism as well as racial bigotry. Yet both stories are concerned primarily with *whites*, especially the damage that whites have inflicted on themselves by abusing Negroes—especially in blinding themselves to their own sin. Sykes argues that, at least in this one regard, O'Connor allied herself with the Agrarians. Like them, she conceived of the southern legacy—especially the Civil War and its awful aftermath—almost entirely in white terms. For a writer who admired the South as a culture drenched in scripture, she rarely attends to its many injunctions to seek the good of the earthly city (cf. Jeremiah 29:7) as it pertains to all of the oppressed, including the many injustices inflicted on southern blacks by southern whites.

On other matters concerning the welfare of the human city, O'Connor's politics are admirable indeed. Farrell O'Gorman devotes his essay to O'Connor's abiding regard for those who are allegedly unworthy of human existence. Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, published in 1932, had depicted the poor whites of rural Georgia as human refuse, as the off-scourings of the earth, multiplying like cats, fit at best to be despised, at worst to be sterilized. O'Connor's home city of Milledgeville was the site of a huge insane asylum where such enforced sterilizations were still taking place in the 1950s. The eugenics movement was alive and well in much of the nation, led by such figures as Margaret Sanger and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Rather than inveighing against their attempt to rid the world of its unwanted and unworthy, O'Connor offers telling fictional critiques of it in such stories as "Greenleaf," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "The Displaced Person," but also *The Violent Bear It Away*.

This novel features a school psychologist named Rayber who wishes his imbecile child Bishop had never been born and who in fact allows his son to be drowned. O'Connor answers such moral maleficence not with appeals to human rights, not even the right to life, but by creating convincing portraits of freaks and lunatics, delinquents and "white trash." Her rich characterization proves them to be irreducibly mysterious and free. They cannot be reduced to the calculations of social scientists because they are formed in the divine image. Hence her lapidary judgment about all attempts to "cleanse"

the human race of its allegedly “unworthy” members. It occurs in O’Connor’s introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, the account of an Atlanta child whose grotesque illness made her seem fit for euthanasia: “When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.”

Three other essayists treat O’Connor’s moral identification with outcasts and misfits—and with their rightful place within the body politic: Sarah Gordon, Gary Ciuba, and the present writer. Gordon shrewdly links Edith Stein and Simone Weil as two women whose work O’Connor admired. They were alike in having Jewish origins and being God-hungering mystics. They were different in that Stein became a Christian convert and Carmelite nun who perished at Auschwitz, while Weil came near to embracing Christianity but finally refused baptism, believing that such “consolation” would have spoiled the authenticity of her Christ-like identification with the world’s poor and outcast. O’Connor saw something slightly monstrous in Weil, but was drawn to her nonetheless: “I would like to write a comic novel about [such] a woman [as Weil]—and what is more comic and terrible than the angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth?” (130).

Had O’Connor lived long enough to have studied Weil’s work carefully, I believe that she would have discerned that Weil’s refusal of baptism had a deeply antipolitical character, since Weil repudiated citizenship in any polis whatsoever. Gordon quotes the crucial passage but fails to discern its disturbing gnosticism: “I do not want to be adopted into a circle,” Weil declared, “to live among people who say ‘we’ and to be part of an ‘us,’ to find I am at home in any human *milieu* whatever it may be.... I feel that it is necessary and ordained that I should be alone, a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle without exception” (133). For Weil, the earth and all of its institutions constitute a realm of unmitigated necessity and suffering that seems to be the work of an evil Demiurge. Hence her extreme envy of Christ. For Weil, God’s abandonment of Christ on Golgotha subjects him to the ultimate *malheur*—the affliction at work in the mindless necessity that drives all things human and natural. Thus did Weil seek to take such affliction upon herself, serving as a virtual savior in loving others without self-interest: “Wherever the afflicted are loved for themselves alone,” she wrote, “it is God who is present” (135). Her earlier rejection of the Eucharist may have been a portent of her final gnostic scorn for the most basic human sustenance. She died at age thirty-nine from illnesses exacerbated by her prolonged fasts, as

she refused to eat anything more nourishing than what French prisoners of war were being allotted.

Gordon's limits in assessing O'Connor's regard for Simone Weil are even more seriously marred by her obvious anti-Catholicism. She is disturbed, for example, that the Guizacs, the family of Polish refugees who have come to live on a Georgia farm in "The Displaced Person," are Roman Catholic rather than Jewish. Gordon claims that O'Connor thus ignored the overwhelmingly Jewish character of the Shoah—and of its analogous sources in the racist South no less than Nazi Germany. It matters not to Gordon that Holocaust images abound in O'Connor's fiction, that she and her mother offered refuge on their farm for such a displaced Polish family as the Guizacs, that she thus could enter their world existentially as well as imaginatively, or that she brings the complacent white landlady, Mrs. McIntyre, under fierce judgment for her treatment of the Guizacs.

Not only does Mrs. McIntyre declare that she is not "responsible for all the extra people in the world," but that "as far as I'm concerned...Christ was just another D.P." There are few more theologically astringent moments in the whole of Holocaust literature than in O'Connor's identification of Christ himself as the ultimate Jew who was either displaced or else crucified afresh at Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, etc. Ignoring the shattering implications of Mrs. McIntyre's confession, Gordon offers her own sourly obtuse judgment: "the story may be said to sidestep the horrific deaths of 6 million Jews in order to present a Christian—indeed a Catholic—narrative of the Fall....The Holocaust itself seems to function in this story as that nightmare 'over there.'" Nowhere in the story, she complains, does O'Connor remind the reader that "it is the Jews who [were] the object of Hitler's horrifying... vision of racial purity" (142). Gordon seems unaware that Hitler's systematic razing of Warsaw in 1944 was planned before the war, that it was aimed not at incinerating the handful of remaining Jews but at annihilating the whole of Roman Catholic culture as it was centered in Warsaw, thus breaking the back of Polish resistance to his monstrous scheme to create the Third Reich. Almost a million people—most of them Catholics, perhaps the Guizacs among them—lost everything when the Nazis flattened Warsaw.

Such opacity is compounded by Gordon's wondering why Robert Brinkmeyer, in his 2009 book entitled *The Fourth Ghost*, did not include O'Connor among other southern writers who were sympathetic to Fascism (135). Nowhere does Gordon cite any time or place in O'Connor's life and work where she exhibited any sympathy whatsoever with *il Duce* and his

ilk—because, of course, there are none. Worse still is Gordon's claim that Edith Stein's death has been exploited by Roman Catholics, who were allowed to establish a Carmelite convent at Auschwitz and to erect a towering cross in a nearby field. Without any regard for O'Connor's own high estimate of Stein, she approvingly quotes an ex-priest named James Carroll who is outraged at the raising of St. Edith Stein to the church's altars. According to him (and Gordon clearly agrees), "the canonization itself was based on a knowing deception at the highest levels of the Catholic Church," for it demonstrated the "lengths to which the Church was prepared to go to renegotiate its own history during the Holocaust." For him as for Gordon, this is yet another episode in the "long history of [the church's] contempt for Jews" (141). Starting with a wrong-headed complaint against a single short story, Gordon ends by leaving O'Connor behind in order to make a wholesale condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church as inveterately and intrinsically anti-Semitic. *Caveat lector.*

Gary Ciuba's essay presents similar difficulties, even as he offers an interesting interpretation of the friendship between O'Connor and Roslyn Barnes. They were both supporters of Pope John XXIII's attempt to establish a sort of Peace Corps for Catholics via an organization called the Papal Volunteers for Latin America (PAVLA). Barnes was one of Rome's "best and brightest" who volunteered as lay missionaries in this endeavor. They sought to confront what Ciuba names "socioeconomic injustices, government hostility, a critical shortage of priests, and possible threats from communism" (222). Barnes was trained for this work by Msgr. Ivan Illich at his celebrated Center for Intercultural Formation (CIF) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. O'Connor knew that Illich was something of a firebrand who sent home half of his volunteers because they could not withstand the rigors of his training. O'Connor congratulated Illich for holding fast. She confessed to Barnes that Illich's operation was "a school for sanctity." Invoking the title of her second novel, O'Connor declared that such steadfastness "is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward" (225).

Yet it is not at all clear that O'Connor endorsed the full anticlericalism of Illich's program. As Ciuba observes, Illich was a virtual missionary in reverse. He sought to undo what he perceived to be the missionary conflation of the Gospel with Western values. For him, the Catholic Church of Latin America had established a far too snug relation between the civil and religious realms. The church's "politics of benevolence," according to Illich, was based on good deeds that masked the assertion of ideological power. Drawing on the

Christian idea of *kenosis* (self-emptying)—which holds that the Second Person of the Trinity assumed human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth without ceasing to remain divine—Illich insisted that his students should repudiate their own bourgeois privileges in order to radically enflesh the Word in Latin America. “The missionary must leave behind not just his or her home,” Ciuba summarizes Illich’s teaching, “but also the language and culture that covertly or openly—sometimes even arrogantly—bear the values and economy of the evangelist’s native land” (227). Thus was *Nudum Christum nudum sequere* Illich’s own Latin motto: “Naked I follow the naked Christ.”

There was something highly idealized, indeed radically romanticized, about Illich’s theology. Can one entirely abandon one’s inherited, formative past? What would remain but a cipher? One always begins with one’s own tradition, no matter how sharply one puts it under the judgment of other traditions one may encounter. Ciuba never asks whether Illich’s sharp critique of conventional Catholic missions was prompted as much by his quasi-Marxist ideology as by his love of Christ. There is no indication that O’Connor ever embraced Illich’s program, even though she despised all conflation of the Gospel with Americanism and other “isms.” Hence my doubt that O’Connor can be posthumously drafted into support for Illich’s enterprise, especially via the slender evidence provided by her letters to Roslyn Barnes. O’Connor had been dead for fourteen years when, in 1968, Illich was called to Rome to answer church complaints against him. Given his ever-leftward tendencies, O’Connor would not have been surprised that he left the priesthood and became a roving guru until his ideas fell out of favor in the 1980s, though he lived on until 2002.

O’Connor’s doubt about Illich seems to have surfaced when he warned Roslyn Barnes to cease trying “to be an Irish Catholic.” As a recent convert to Rome, Barnes had no clue that Illich was summoning her away from conventional Catholicism as (in his view) it was embodied in the faith of Irish immigrants, and so she asked O’Connor to explain the term “Irish Catholic.” “‘You are in the presence of one,’ says I, bowing” (*Habit of Being*, 497). That O’Connor was not merely jesting about her own traditionalism is made evident in a letter to Cecil Dawkins written three months earlier. O’Connor’s closest epistolary friend, Elizabeth Hester, had complained that Dawkins was “conservative.” “If she thinks you are conservative,” replied O’Connor, “what does she think about me?” (*Habit of Being*, 486).

Concerning O’Connor’s politics, one matter needs special clarification—namely, her attitude toward homosexuality, as I seek to make clear in my own

contribution to this *Companion*. It was worked out most thoroughly in relation to Elizabeth Hester, O'Connor's closest epistolary friend; in fact, O'Connor's richest, deepest, most theologically provocative letters are written to Hester. Yet theirs was an unlikely friendship. In her very first letter to O'Connor, written in 1955, Hester accused her of being a Fascist. Yet O'Connor discerned a keenness of intelligence and a depth of character in Betty Hester that should not be turned away. Gradually over the course of their nine-year friendship, Hester made it evident that she had "a horrible history." Her grievous past included the father's abandonment of his daughter and wife and the suicide of Hester's mother in the thirteen-year-old girl's presence, as well as Hester's own rejection by the lover with whom she had eloped. Hester had also been dishonorably discharged from the U.S. Air Force because of her open lesbianism. Unable to find work suited for her talent, Hester remained a brilliant intellectual—she corresponded with Iris Murdoch, for example—confined to mind-numbing work at a retail credit office in Atlanta. O'Connor's patient counsel and steadfast support led Hester to be received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1956, under O'Connor's sponsorship—only to lapse six years later and finally to end as a suicide in 1998.

Since O'Connor never had long-lasting romantic relations with men, and since several of her friends were confessed lesbians, many critics assumed that, with the 2007 opening of her previously unpublished letters dealing with Hester's lesbianism, O'Connor would be "outed" as a lesbian herself. Far from it, O'Connor follows Augustine's summons to embrace the sinner while rejecting the sin. Admitting her previous failures in works of corporal mercy, O'Connor promises nothing but charity toward Hester herself: "I have a tendency...to dismiss other people's torments out of hand, but this one, being yours, will have to be partly mine too. It only hurts me because it has hurt you and inasmuch as the temporal effects can still hurt you now." "I can see how very much grace you have really been given," O'Connor concludes, "and that is all that is necessary for me to know in the matter. What is necessary for you to know is my very real love and admiration for you" (October 31, 1956).

Flannery O'Connor's quiet acceptance of Betty Hester's lesbianism is remarkable in several ways. Surely the most obvious is that O'Connor neither condemns nor congratulates Hester. Instead, she summons her not to be defined by her sexuality. Just as O'Connor's identity was not fixated on her fatal illness, neither should Hester's identity be centered in her lesbianism. "The meaning of the Redemption," she tells Hester, "is that we do not have to be our history and nothing is plainer to me than that you are not your

history.” Accordingly, O’Connor does not promise Hester an easy freedom from her vexed condition. Instead, she calls her to join St. Paul in filling “up in [your] flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). What Augustine called the *ordo amoris* required Hester and O’Connor alike to redirect and reorder their loves to their highest end; that is, to the love of Christ by participating in his suffering through a sacrificial life of chastity.

The key to O’Connor’s politics of human sexuality lies in her concern with *purity*. “I am always astonished,” she declares to Hester, in an early letter, “at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified. I have always thought that purity was the most mysterious of the virtues.”¹ O’Connor owned two of Josef Pieper’s books, and from him she may have learned the link between bodily purity and spiritual truthfulness. Pieper vigorously rejected the Cartesian split between soul and body that turns the soul into a fabled ghost haunting its machine-like corpus, so that what we do with our bodies does not really matter. They have no essential relation, for Descartes and his latter-day disciples, to our spiritual core. O’Connor seems to be getting at Pieper’s counterclaim that we do not merely *have* bodies, but that to a great extent we *are* our bodies, so that what we do with them determines who we are. Our spiritual condition is thus inextricably bound with our physical acts—the most intimate of which is sexual. “Sex is not simply the functioning of a biological appetite,” writes George Sim Johnston. “It is a deep bonding between two individuals. It is an exchange of persons, and not simply an exchange of pleasure between consenting adults.”

Purity, O’Connor tells Hester, “is an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances. Now to accept renunciation, when those are your circumstances, is not cowardly” (CW, 976). Such self-abnegation entails neither cringing passivity nor gelatinous quietism. “Resignation to the will of God,” O’Connor writes Hester yet again, “does not mean that you stop resisting evil or obstacles. It means that you leave the outcome out of your personal considerations. It is the most concern coupled with the least concern” (CW, 1137).

The politics of O’Connor’s art also had a decisively Christian and Catholic shape. Though O’Connor claimed, slightly in jest, that she read Aquinas for twenty minutes every night before bed, she seems to have acquired her

¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 953.

knowledge of St. Thomas indirectly through Jacques Maritain, especially *Art and Scholasticism*. From Thomas mediated by Maritain, she learned that art is a virtue of the practical intellect, and thus that its excellence lies in the quality of the thing made rather than in the character of its maker. This freed O'Connor from thinking that her work should serve as her sort of evangelism in behalf of the church. Hence her desire not to be known as a Catholic writer but simply as a writer. Yet John Roos demonstrates that O'Connor may have absorbed a good deal more of Thomas than we have previously thought. He thus offers a strong Thomistic and quasi-Aristotelian reading of "The Displaced Person" by showing how the story turns Mrs. MacIntyre's farm into a microcosm that opens up large political questions: What constitutes a properly ordered society? Who shall hold power and for what ends? What is the role of civil religion? Is grace prior to virtue? Should society be based on a contract for the sake of mutual benefit? What is the place of competition in determining the fundamental mode of human relationships? How might an unjust regime be reformed?

There is not space to pursue such questions in detail. Suffice it to say that the story reveals that O'Connor was no mean student of politics. Roos demonstrates O'Connor's keen (if implicit) critique of Hobbes and Locke and Jefferson. The Guizacs are a dire threat to the MacIntyre farm because they seek, in their own untutored fashion, the true polis as defined by Thomas and Aristotle—namely, that "material wealth is bounded by the common good, in which the whole is for the benefit of all the parts." Mrs. McIntyre and the Shortleys, by contrast, have defined the good as "the maximization of individual utility." Operated as such a regime, the farm becomes a countrified version of a death camp: "Humans become interchangeable, substitutable, and ultimately expendable" (285). In a discerning footnote, Roos observes that O'Connor was seeking for alternatives to "the optimistic view of unchecked progress in the enterprise of mastering nature and transforming it into our own image" (299). Long before St. Pope John Paul II was to name the horrific results of such "progress" "the culture of death," O'Connor's work resonated with other such counterprogressives as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Jacques Maritain, and Eric Voegelin.

Fr. George Piggford's essay on O'Connor and Baron von Hügel gets at the core of her politics by showing how she wrestled with the modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. Her reading of Michael de la Bedoyère's biography of von Hügel revealed to her that there are two kinds of modernism rather than one. The first modernism was condemned by Pius X in 1907

under the heading of “agnosticism” as “the synthesis of all heresies.” At its heart lay the modernist claim that “God is immanent in man” (103), and thus that Christian theology need begin not with divine self-revelation but with human self-understanding. When immanent reason is made the foundation of things, then the transcendence of God and much else is called into question: “the authority of scripture and tradition, the divinity of Christ, and the conscious institution by the historical Jesus of the episcopacy and the papacy” (102). The most well-known exponents of this condemned kind of modernism were Alfred Loisy, George Tyrell, and Friedrich von Hügel.

How can it be that O'Connor was such a great admirer of the papally censured von Hügel? The answer, according to Piggford, lies in the difference between the early von Hügel, who mistakenly fell under the sway of Loisy, and the later von Hügel, who came to espouse the other and healthier kind of modernism anticipated by John Henry Newman. Unlike the former, the latter never questions Dogma as the *constituted* faith of the church, but it does remain open to the ongoing *constitutive* development of doctrine according to what von Hügel called “the best and most abiding elements in the philosophy and the scholarship and conscience of the later and latest times” (110). O'Connor was drawn to the mature von Hügel, Piggford argues, with his insistence on (1) the difference between imperfect nature and perfect supernature; (2) the revelation of supernature in historical events (what he called its “happenedness”); (3) the nature of true freedom as the liberty not to sin, even to be unable to sin; and (4) the costliness of salvation through heroic charity and “painful encounters through nature with God/supernature—encounters that are experiential, real, and partake of the eternal” (117).

There is neither world enough nor time to follow Piggford's deft analysis of O'Connor's fiction according to such premises, though one can detect how a visionary politics would issue from them—as we shall soon see. For the nonce, it is important to correct one error in his essay that courses throughout almost all of the other essays in this companion—namely, the notion that O'Connor was an uncritical admirer of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She at first regarded him as a sort of Catholic Darwin, a latter-day Aquinas who had achieved a synthesis of Christian revelation and evolutionary science. When in 1961 the editors of the *American Scholar* asked several artists and intellectuals to name the single most important book published in the last three decades, O'Connor nominated *The Phenomenon of Man*: “His is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it. Teilhard's vision sweeps forward without detaching itself at

any point from the earth.” She likened his theology to St. Paul’s, quoting Teilhard’s claim that humanity “is very far from being created, neither in its individual developments nor, above all, in the collective terminus toward which it is directed.” Teilhard refers to his celebrated concept of the Omega Point, the mystical Christic culmination beyond time wherein the increasing development of human consciousness engendered by the evolutionary processes shall issue in the final concord of all things. O’Connor finds in Teilhard a healthy antidote to the pious otherworldly idea that human perfection consists “in an escape from the world and from nature.” We are meant to cooperate with nature so as to complete and fulfill its purposes, as she had learned from St. Thomas—not to liberate ourselves from matter.

Yet gradually O’Connor’s ardor for Teilhard began to cool. In her review of *The Divine Milieu*, for example, she salutes Teilhard for the spirit more than the substance of his work. She praises the intensity of his passion in seeking to take the Gospel into the very bastion of secular science—but not his success in doing so. She says he is more poet and mystic than scientist and theologian. In a later review, she acknowledges the criticism that Teilhard may not have distinguished “adequately between the supernatural action of Christ and the purely natural ascent of evolution.” In her final commentary on Teilhard, published in 1963, she salutes his absolute loyalty to the church, despite the suffering and exile that it cost him, when his work had been condemned and he was silenced. His attempt to reconcile evolution and revelation was a failure, she admits, though “the failure of a great and saintly man.” We may still emulate “his life of faith and work,” she concludes with muted praise, “even though his books remain incomplete and dangerous.”

Hence my own conviction that O’Connor’s readers have missed the sly irony at work in the Teilhardian title of “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” It is taken directly from his essay entitled “Omega Point,” found in *The Future of Man* (1950). Far from being an echo of St. Paul’s eschatological vision of the final cataclysmic triumph of good over evil at the Parousia, Teilhard’s claim is all too reminiscent of Polonius’s juvenile advice to Laertes. Edmondson quotes it here: “Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge!” In the eponymous story, it is not “greater love” that triumphantly arises and then converges. Instead, an ingrate son commits virtual matricide against his racially prejudiced but well-meaning mother. Their calamitous clash of wills converges in

his harrowing vision of her death, as he finally enters “a world of guilt and sorrow.” O'Connor suggests that such inveterate evils will persist, both politically and personally, until the End.

Even if I am right about her ironic, indeed parodic, use of Teilhard in this story, I remain puzzled that so many eminent Catholic theologians have endorsed his work without severe reservation: Avery Dulles, Henri de Lubac, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, St. Pope John Paul II, etc. None of them, so far as I can tell, ever complained about Teilhard's belief that war is an intrinsic energizer of the earth's evolutionary process, that the Holocaust exhibited the necessary freedom of humanity to “try everything” if it is to achieve greatness, or that there is no intrinsic dignity and equality among the human races. “When he was in Ethiopia,” Teilhard's biographer notes, “he described the natives as ‘magnificent bronze animals,’ and he maintained the right of more developed nations to assist, forcibly if need be, the progress of more primitive peoples.”

Hence my own question: What must Flannery O'Connor, as well as the numerous theologians who have endorsed Teilhard's work, have registered when clapping eyes on his call for eugenics? We must cease to rely, he wrote in his signature work, on “*the crude forces of natural selection*” (his emphasis), and to replace them with “a nobly human form of eugenics.” Surely she or someone with her keen theological discernment might have stood athwart Teilhard's evolutionary juggernaut shouting STOP! upon reading such quasi-Nazi/Soviet/Maoist claims as these (emphasis in the original):

Eugenics applied to individuals leads to eugenics applied to society. It would be more convenient, and we would incline to think it safe, to leave the contours of that great body made of all our bodies to take shape on their own, influenced only by the automatic play of individual urges and whims. “Better not interfere with the forces of the world!” Once more we are up against the mirage of instinct, the so-called infallibility of nature. But is it not precisely the world itself which, culminating in thought, expects us to think out again the instinctive impulses of nature so as to perfect them? Reflective substance requires reflective treatment. If there is a future for mankind it can only be imagined in terms of a harmonious conciliation of what is free with what is planned and totalised. Points involved are: the distribution of the resources of the globe; the control of the trek towards unpopulated areas; the optimum use of the powers set free by mechanisation; the physiology of nations and races; geo-economy, geo-politics, geo-demography; the organisation of research developing into a reasoned organisation of the earth. Whether we like it or not, all the signs and

all our needs converge in the same direction. We need and are irresistibly being led to create, by means of and beyond all physics, all biology and all psychology, *a science of human energetics*.

This brings us to the final and most important matter to be considered with regard to O'Connor's politics—namely, her regard for the work of Eric Voegelin. There is no doubt that Voegelin decisively shaped her Augustinian vision of the rightly ordered polis. She reviewed the first three volumes of his five-volume *Order and History* for her diocesan newspaper. The first of these, *Israel and Revelation*, enabled her to discern, as the late Marion Montgomery here notes, that Israel and Christianity mark a sharp break, not only with archaic cultures of the Near East, but also with the high civilizations of Greece and Rome. Prior to the biblical era, time was seen largely in cyclic, repetitive, virtually deterministic terms. But with Israel as God's elect People, with Christ as their prophesied Messiah, and with the church as the true human community, time was no longer regarded as circular. In a very strict sense, history was born; that is, time was understood as a unilinear, even if jagged, movement. No longer spinning repetitively in its own orbit, time becomes a forward-moving albeit also a rough process and tense drama. As with Augustine, so with Voegelin: everything—from each individual person to entire cultures—must now be measured by the Christian phenomenon, whether they are undergoing a transcendent ordering or disordering of their existence.

It is not difficult to discern why O'Connor the orthodox Catholic would be drawn to Voegelin's vision of the divine as definitely and uniquely irrupting into human existence, setting everything else in relation to it. John Desmond has written most definitely on this matter, and here again he emphasizes the Voegelinian character of O'Connor's work. He contends that her prophetic stance is grounded in what Voegelin called "the leap of being"—that is, the personal and objective encounter of human beings with Christ in what Voegelin called "an ontologically real event in history." "Revelation and response," he added, "are not a man's private affair; for the revelation comes to one man for all men, and in his response he is a representative of mankind" (339). O'Connor also drew on Voegelin, as Desmond argues, because he identified many modern malignancies as Gnostic.² By this he meant that, like the ancient Gnostics, ideologies such as Communism and Nazism seek to transcend the world's disorder by *gnosis*—that is, extraordinary insight,

² Gerhard Niemeyer has rightly challenged Voegelin's conflation of ancient and modern gnosticism, showing that they differ as much as they overlap. See Niemeyer, "Loss of Reality: Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism," *Modern Age* 22 (Fall 1978): 338–44.

special learning, esoteric knowledge. Accordingly, they then aim to “immanentize the eschaton,” to use Voegelin’s most famous phrase. They try to make the eschatological Kingdom immanent within history through various abstract proposals of social reform, all of them done in the name of good, but all of them also wreaking huge horrors, by ignoring fallen humanity’s radical embeddedness in the particulars of time and place and tradition.

As with O’Connor’s putative endorsement of Ivan Illich’s revolutionary politics, so with her link to Eric Voegelin: it is problematic at best. Montgomery notes that O’Connor did not live to witness Voegelin’s drastic turn in volume 4 of *Order and History* entitled *The Ecumenic Age*. He quotes a sentence in which Voegelin virtually disavows his earlier claims about the uniqueness of biblical revelation and the birth of linear history: “History is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man’s participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction” (351). Gerhart Niemeyer, in an essay vindicating Voegelin’s project as essentially Christian, nonetheless identifies the movement of revelation in Voegelin’s vision as always from man Godward, not the other way ’round—as in all orthodox accounts of the divine self-disclosure. Rather than speaking of God’s own determinative act of self-identification in the nation of Israel and the person of Jesus Christ, Voegelin returned to the Platonic notion of man’s “erotic tension toward the divine Beyond.”³

Lee Trepanier is far more astringent than Niemeyer in noting the differences between an Augustinian and a Voegelinian vision of history:

When the fourth volume of *Order and History* was published in 1974, scholars expected Voegelin to complete the ascending branch of his project’s great cycle with a study of Christianity and then proceed down the slope with an exploration of modernity. To everyone’s surprise, Voegelin broke with his initial program, revising his theory of history so as to drop many of the Christian elements, ignoring Christian civilization after Paul, and admitting that he himself had been engaged in a project of “historiogenesis”: a unilinear and progressive construction of history where material is rearranged to allow only one line of meaning to emerge. . . . The arrival at a completeness in meaning in the unfinished process of history was impossible for Voegelin, as a philosopher, to accept. All we had was the search itself: the only absolute truth that humans could obtain is the search for the *histories* of order with no finality of meaning ever possible. Voegelin’s new project

³ Gerhart Niemeyer, “Christian Faith, and Religion, in Eric Voegelin’s Work,” *Review of Politics* 57 (Spring 1995): 103.

would not construct a narrative of meaningful events arranged on a timeline but rather analyze a web of meaning with a plurality of nodal points and patterns. Although this new approach was open to tracing genuine Christian strands of significance, it precluded any effort to interpret history in terms of a single, Christian meaning.⁴

It hardly needs saying that Flannery O'Connor could never have endorsed "the search for the *histories* of order with no finality of meaning ever possible." The problem was not that such a flattening kind of historicism was too threatening, but rather that it was too comforting. It turns the created order into an endless flux which has neither Origin nor End. Though Voegelin fought valiantly against the notion that order in history is humanly constructed, especially as such a notion ended in Communism and Nazism, he found no ultimate ground for opposing them. To speak of the divine flux lands us back with Heraclitus at best, with Heidegger at worst. The Augustinian way is far more difficult precisely because it depends on the *scandalon* that even so irenic a thinker as Aquinas clearly affirmed: revelation/grace/church do not destroy reason/nature/history; they complete and perfect them precisely by transforming them.

Flannery O'Connor's politics were scandalously Augustinian because they set the earthly and heavenly cities in drastic opposition by their respective loves: "In the former," declared Augustine, "the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love." In the *civitas Dei*, competition and domination are not the rule, he adds: "possession of goodness is in no way diminished by the arrival, or the continuance, of a sharer in it." As in Cain's murder of Abel, so in the murder of Remus by Romulus, the *civitas terrena* is built on rivalry, on the need to establish power over others. Denying any final sharing of goods, the earthly city depends on enemies for it to function properly, so that war comes to play a creative no less than a destructive role, as we have seen in Teilhard and (to a lesser extent) in Voegelin.

Yet neither Augustine nor O'Connor sets the two cities in easy binary opposition. William Cavanaugh observes—in a sentence that could be used to define the Augustinian quality of Flannery O'Connor's fiction—"evil is often a parody of the good,...vice imitates virtue, and...sin is often committed by those seeking after real goods, even if in the wrong way." Even the search

⁴ Lee Trepanier, "Eric Voegelin and Christianity," *First Principles*, <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=1162>.

for unity within the earthly city imitates God's own desire for the unity of humankind. Again, Cavanaugh puts the matter clearly:

For Augustine, the unity of people is the goal of both the heavenly and the earthly cities. The heavenly city sees that God's purpose in history is to gather humanity into the unity of Adam before the fall. God's creative purpose is for unity—since Adam has fallen and shattered, like a china doll, into countless pieces, the purpose of redemption is to bring them all back together in the body of Christ.⁵

In a single lapidary claim, Henri de Lubac declares what O'Connor embodies, ever so subtly, in her fiction: "The world was made for the church." Her characters often get only a glimpse of this saving vision, often only in the moment of death, but a millisecond of prophetic truth suffices to save not only persons but also nations, states, kingdoms, empires. This surely is the heart of Flannery O'Connor's politics.

⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, "An End to Every War: The Politics of the Eucharist and the Work of Peace," *Religion and Ethics*, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/01/19/4390491.htm>.