

CIRCA

News *from* the University of Chicago Divinity School

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD “RELIGION” IS COMMONLY TRACED TO ONE of two Latin words: *relegere*, “to read over again,” or *religare*, “to bind.” The latter came to be favored as originary due to its demonstrable early connection with those monastic Christians who were bound by orders and were called “religious.” I instinctively demur from the conundrum: The religions call us to re-read, and they also bind us.

They ask us to return again to the expressions of truth that we take to be fundamental, and they draw us into a relationship of submission to them.

Perhaps no twentieth-century figure better embodied this dual phenomenon than Mary Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964), the writer who made the red clay and myriad personalities of rural Georgia the subject of searing, revelatory stories. A devout Roman Catholic residing in the Protestant South, O’Connor habitually reread certain authors—especially Thomas Aquinas—with religious zeal. In Aquinas she discovered the most apposite justification for her vocation as an artist: what Sally Fitzgerald felicitously termed “the habit of being,” the conviction that the artist serves truth by constantly rendering whatever it is that she sees to the best of her given abilities. This was no small consolation for O’Connor, because what she saw and rendered with considerable ability was grotesque and macabre, and became no less distressing when leavened with local dialect and deprecating humor. O’Connor “wrote what she knew,” and by rereading Aquinas she maintained the conviction that in doing so she was teaching us about God. Rereading clarified and strengthened her vocation. Like many prophets, she had to deal with the rather radical disjunction between her own sense of her art and its general reception. Rereading fortified her religious practice of writing.

At the same time, O’Connor was literally physically bound—with *lupus erythematosus*, the disfiguring neurological disorder that forced her to return to the care of her mother as a young adult,

Letter from the Dean



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and sapped the life from her over the two all too brief decades of her adult life. Readers of O’Connor’s correspondence can sense both her utter lack of pity and sentimentality about a disease that was not only painful but hideous. Indeed, O’Connor came to regard lupus as God’s gift to her. Bound physically to her immediate surroundings in the town she once wanted to leave forever, O’Connor only had sufficient stamina to write for short periods in the morning. Her resulting literary output tended toward the short story rather than to the more sustained effort required to produce a novel. Here again O’Connor faced an irony, for she very much aspired to write a, if not the, Great American Novel. Yet her physical circumstances literally rendered it impossible. Today, reading through her thirty-plus stories and her two novels, a strong case can be made that neither of the novels is especially accomplished; yet as a short story writer, she is virtually without peer in world literature. The binding of O’Connor was thus also the means of her finest art: In physical limitation she discovered her true talent.

Our understanding of religion can be enhanced by the study of lives, perhaps most especially lives that, whether they involve explicit affiliation with a tradition or not, display a penchant for rereading and are somehow duty-bound. In such lives we glimpse the complex fact that, with all due respect to the etymologists, religion is best understood as a matter of “both/and” rather than as a matter of “either/or.” It is a point not readily at hand in our world. Yet it is essential. □