



Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation

By John D. Sykes Jr.

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With his mastery of modernist technique and his depictions of characters obsessed with the past, Nobel laureate William Faulkner raised the bar for southern fiction writers. But the work of two later authors shows that the aesthetic of memory is not enough: Confederate thunder fades as they turn to an explicitly religious source of meaning.

According to John Sykes, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy provides occasions for divine revelation. He traces their work from its common roots in midcentury southern and Catholic intellectual life to show how the two adopted different theological emphases and rhetorical strategies—O'Connor building to climactic images, Percy striving for dialogue with the reader—as a means of uncovering the sacramental foundation of the created order.

Sykes sets O'Connor and Percy against the background of the Southern Renaissance from which they emerged, showing not only how they shared a distinctly Christian notion of art that led them to see fiction as revelatory but also how their methods of revelation took them in different directions. Yet, despite their differences in strategy and emphasis, he argues that the two are united in their conception of the artist as “God’s sharp-eyed witness,” and he connects them with the philosophers and critics, both Christian and non-Christian, who had a meaningful influence on their work.

Through sustained readings of key texts—particularly such O'Connor stories as “The Artificial Nigger” and “The Geranium” and Percy’s novels *Love in the Ruins* and *The Second Coming*—Sykes focuses on the intertwined themes of revelation, sacrament, and community. He views their work in relation to the theological difficulties that they were not able to overcome concerning community. For both writers, the question of community is further complicated by the changing nature of the South as the Lost Cause and segregation lose their holds and a new form of prosperity arises.

By disclosing how O'Connor and Percy made aesthetic choices based on their Catholicism and their belief that fiction by its very nature is revelatory, Sykes demonstrates that their work cannot be seen as merely a continuation of the historical aesthetic that dominated southern literature for so long. *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation* is theoretically sophisticated without being esoteric and is accessible to any reader with a serious interest in these writers, brimming with fresh insights about both that clarify their approaches to art and enrich our understanding of their work.

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