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Through a Glass Lightly (Book Review)

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undertake to celebrate with the authors of *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace*. There is a certain joy in seeing one's own sense of a story or a novel repeated in a secondary work such as this; but if one reads Fickett's critical commentary first, then goes to the novels or stories, one may do a disservice to the literature, reading only for what the critic claims is there.

Reading O'Connor carefully is important, however. While it is true that literature students frequently bash English professors for reading too much into the text—dredging up all kinds of buried treasures beneath the lines—O'Connor regularly employed industrial-strength symbols to gain her ends. Fickett, thus, cannot be criticized for digging too deeply within the text. O'Connor demands it.

But what are the dangers of lauding your own (spiritual) sister's (or brother's) work? One can, of course, have his or her vision impaired by filial love. The question is, are there any limitations to O'Connor's work? Fickett's celebrative essay fails to mention some rather obvious problems.

One, it seems, is the repetitive rhythms in her work. At the end of the study, Fickett quotes O'Connor's own personal letter to a friend. In it she admits that she needs prayers because she knows she will have to move along to another stage of her development. "I've been writing eighteen years and I've reached the point where I can't do again what I know I can do well," she says, "and the larger things that I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing."

It would have been helpful to see Fickett mention the kind of *déjà vu* one feels when reading, story by story, through the O'Connor canon, the sense for a repeated pattern in her work—spiritually proud protagonists unable to see themselves clearly until finally confronted by a sometimes violent epiphany in which they see themselves cleansed miraculously.

Reading O'Connor is sometimes analogous to reading another great American humorist, Peter De Vries: one feels at times—even in a brand new work—that this ground has been covered somewhere before. The letter quoted above explains that she knew she had exhausted the possibilities for her own flavor of grotesque comic Christianity. I would have liked to see Fickett acknowledge as much himself.

Also, there is the matter of the difficulty inherent in "discovering" what O'Connor is up to. I have taught O'Connor's stories to a decade's worth of undergraduates, and (with the possible exception of the story entitled "The Artificial Nigger") I have yet to encounter a student who feels some sense of O'Connor's Christianity upon first reading. In class, we then go through a silly game.

"You think this story is about a simple old Grandma and escaped murderer? Well, you're wrong. It's really about being saved from sin," I tell them.

Students gasp, astonished.

We then look at all the hints O'Connor has planted into the narrative, and soon they see another level of meaning emerge, the moral lesson sharply and violently explained.

Granted, there is some joy in discovering a bonus idea embedded in the text, but the classroom process, the more often I go through it, has begun to remind me of a children's magazine puzzle—"can you find the seven pitchforks hidden in this drawing?" To be sure, O'Connor's craft has engendered a whole cottage industry of studies and dissertations. But not every reader makes her living doing literary research.

Nonetheless, Fickett and Gilbert's cause is eminently worth celebrating. No other Christian writer has done as much as Flannery O'Connor to make faith respectable in fiction in the twentieth century. I know several contemporary writers, including Raymond Carver, who, even though they do not claim to be Christians, feel that *Mystery and Manners* is the finest book available on the craft of writing.

Furthermore, O'Connor never skimmed on her commitment to Christ, either publicly, in her essays and speeches, or in the work itself. Her stories and novels, no matter how complex, are in fact a testimony, and Fickett is right in staging the kind of altar call for Christian writers he does at the end of the essay. He asks the readers to look to O'Connor's own unfinished work: "We who follow her must take up this challenge, further restoring the sense of the holy to contemporary sensibilities."

Little mention has been made here of Douglas R. Gilbert, whose photographic essay of O'Connor's rural South makes a significant contribution to the book. It would be easy to caricature Southern smalltown life, the region some critics have called "God-haunted"; television does it all the time. But Gilbert neither romanticizes nor satirizes his subjects. Unlike Richard Avedon's *The Way West*, for example, Gilbert's studies concern themselves less with starkness and immediacy of image. The photographs, however, don't blanch at the sight of ugliness, nor do they turn away when the truth seems something preferably not said. Moreover, Gilbert appears to have some sense for the shared humanity of his subjects; perhaps it's his own sense—and O'Connor's—for the image of God in all of us.

For those of us who know and love O'Connor, this book should stand on our shelves adjacent to *Mystery and Manners* and *The Habit of Being*. It is a loving tribute to the one who has, during this century, set the standards for Christian fiction.

Fickett and Gilbert's book *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace* admirably nominates this somewhat reclusive Southern lady for canonization. She deserves it.

Through A Glass Lightly. John J. Timmerman. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 179 pp. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

One of the most charming ironies of Christian Reformed Church life is the fact that Calvin College maintains

denominational affiliation as *onze school*, despite the fact that most every self-respecting dominie since Kuyper's rise

to glory pays homage to the doctrine of sphere sovereignty. Even though it continues to live in sin, Calvin College remains the endearing denominational alma mater, the most visible manifestation of CRC identity, even with four other regional colleges now educating significant numbers of CRC students.

In Fred Manfred's wonderful story-forward to John J. Timmerman's *Through A Glass Lightly*, he claims this book is "must reading" to anyone "who has ever been associated with Calvin College." He's right. The word *association* is well-chosen, however, for Manfred knows the milieu of the CRC well enough to understand that it's not only Calvin graduates that "know" Calvin College. In the CRC, anyone who's read her *Banner* knows the institution—even its history—well enough to prepare a half dozen sketches for a *Who's Who*.

So *Through A Glass Lightly*, written by a Calvin Professor Emeritus, is not just a book for Calvin grads. It's a book for anyone who cares about denominational history, about its characters, and its own wonderfully colorful psychological profile. It is *our* book, in a tribal sense, not only because Calvin is still *onze school*, but also because the stories Timmerman remembers include anecdotes from churches and schools in Orange City, Grundy Center, and Paterson, in addition to Grand Rapids. Timmerman's memory of the early days at Eastern Christian Academy, for instance, is a New Jersey story with a far broader appeal; it belongs to anyone who's waged crusades for Christian education—in Hull, Iowa, or Sheboygan, Wisconsin, or Escondido, California. This loosely secured gathering of reminiscences belongs to all of us, and we owe Eerdmans our gratitude for making it available.

But Timmerman's book is not some generic history. It is our book, but it is also, certainly, his. The narratives are sequenced to follow Timmerman down his own life's path,

from his adoption, as an infant, into a parsonage in north-west Iowa, to his attempts to bring peace to chaos next door, to a neighbor who simply couldn't bring her life under control.

And the chronicles are tempered in Timmerman's voice. Anyone who has ever met him will feel him in the texture of the prose, always perfectly honed and smooth. One of the arts of writing, it seems to me, is the judicious use of surprise. Ultimately, surprise delights us, whether in plots or anecdotes. But even Timmerman's sentences beg you to chase them, like a mischievous kid might, towards some unseen hideaway: "We moved into a six-room apartment that we rented for \$20 a month from a Lithuanian woman who had a green thumb with roses but who surreptitiously stole our coal." That's apt and unforgettable characterization; but in addition, there's joy in following sentences like that, in not knowing exactly how the unexpected twists will turn.

But it's not Timmerman's cleverness that you're left with once the last page is turned; it's his commitment—to teaching students (not all of them geniuses); to literature (not all of it perfectly kosher); to the ethnic-religious heritage which is his (for all its foibles); and finally, to the Lord God Almighty, from whence comes, it's clear, this man's strength.

This is Timmerman's book because the voice is clear and loving and God-glorifying, whether he's remembering a one-hundred-and-twenty-car freight train or the unforgettable sound of horsehide against hickory; whether he's remembering novelist Peter De Vries or the catcher who rifled a pick-off throw into right field and, as they say, wrested defeat from the jaws of certain victory.

It's a fine book. I'm glad he's written it, and I'm happy that he's given it to all of us.

Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique. Thomas V. Morris. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987, 133 pp. \$5.95. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy.

For the past twenty-five years many American evangelicals had claimed Francis Schaeffer as their premier philosopher-theologian. Or as Jack Rogers of the Fuller Theological Seminary noted in a June 1977 *Reformed Journal* article, Schaeffer "is a symbol, an intellectual Daniel standing tall for [Christians] amidst the frightening lions of secular scholarship (J.R. p.19).

Jack Rogers, Arthur F. Holmes in a forward to this work by Morris, and Morris himself, all call attention to the fact that Schaeffer's apologetic proofs mostly are not tightly argued syllogisms that are logically valid. They are more of the nature of loosely fashioned appeals to common sense.

Morris first covered the apologetics of Schaeffer in a little 1976 volume titled *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics*. He was then a graduate student at Yale while now he teaches

Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame. Morris did not alter his perspective since then, and concerning Schaeffer's publication between 1976 and his death in 1984 Morris wrote:

The arguments and themes I address here were never substantially altered or displaced as the logical core of his apologetic efforts. It is for this reason that it is possible to reissue the present study of his apologetics and have it be just as relevant to an assessment of Schaeffer's work as on the day it was first released (p.9).

In Jack Rogers' 1977 treatment of Schaeffer's work, already alluded to, after his reference to the reaction of