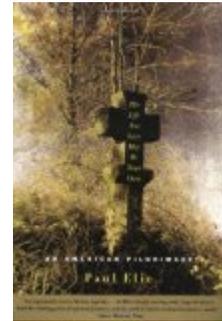


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Paul Elie. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003. xiv + 555 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-25680-7; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-374-52921-5.

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Reading the Way To Heaven: On Pilgrimage During the Catholic Moment

As educators, we often complain that our students do not read. That is a shame, for as Paul Elie argues in this sometimes quirky, always fascinating book, reading saved the souls of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor. These four very different Catholic writers—a journalist cum social radical, a religious mystic and Trappist monk, an existentialist novelist, and a southern short story writer with a fascination with the Protestant grotesque—had only limited contact with one another. Yet they shared a religious pilgrimage, “a journey undertaken in light of a story” (p. x). Writers as diverse as William James and Jacques Maritain, Thomas a Kempis and James Joyce helped them answer questions about their place in modern society and understand and process the story of their pilgrimage. The wonder of Elie’s book is that four such prominent and identifiably Catholic writers shared this pilgrimage “with such intensity that American Catholicism, through their work, came to seem a creative misreading of Catholic Europe” (p. xii). Although the four were Catholic, if Elie is correct this is not necessarily a Catholic story. It is an American and religious one. This may be the book’s chief strength as well as its weakness. Elie does a fine job explaining how these literary figures produced profoundly religious work. But he barely tries to explain what makes them uniquely Catholic. This seems like a lost opportunity, yet it helps underscore how these Catholic writers could be both marginal because of their faith and American at the same time.

The biographies of these four are well known, and

at least three of the four enjoyed widespread popularity during their careers. O'Connor, whose life and career were so short and whose National Book Award came posthumously, may have been the single exception. Equal parts biography and literary criticism, this book shows that as they engaged deep religious questions, they also engaged society and culture. The individual and universal came together in their reading and writing, to underscore, Elie believes, how profoundly religious twentieth-century American literature is. What might be most striking is how four people who were so fundamentally weird, self-absorbed, and marginalized could embody the spirit of America’s largest denomination—indeed, of modern America as a whole. All four addressed and lived the alienation and marginalization of mid-twentieth-century society. They shared a preoccupation with the self, which confronted modernity and sought truth that could be simultaneously individual and universal. Like other twentieth-century converts—Allen Tate comes to mind—they needed the orthodoxy and certitude that mid-twentieth-century Catholicism offered. But their search for the Church was merely part of the pilgrimage, answering important questions but then raising others.

Three of the four—Day, Merton, and Percy—were converts, drawn to the Church by their experiences with literature and ideas. All three began their pilgrimage by grappling with longings for a sense of place and belonging that could fill the void left by modern anomie. Both Merton and Day shared an Augustinian awareness

of their own sinfulness that sent them ever deeper into the written word. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* demonstrated for Day the need to take conversion seriously and led her to the writings of St. Teresa of Avila; and Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* taught her a simple, honest, direct piety. Given her background and the impact that the novels of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky had on her, her attraction to the Catholic Church is not surprising. A self-styled radical, she wanted to associate with the masses, and in the first third of the twentieth century the American Catholic Church comprised a variegated assortment of immigrants and children of immigrants—the masses in every sense of the word. Day experienced the Church as the others did, as “a place of pilgrimage, a home and a destination, where city and world meet, where the self encounters the other, where personal experience and the testimony of the ages can be reconciled” (p. 29). She became a Catholic without knowing any Catholics; she was too religious for her radical friends and too radical for the Church that had accepted her. Elie writes that Peter Maurin, her partner in the Catholic Worker movement, was the first Catholic to take her faith seriously, to treat her as someone who owned the faith no less than he. Maurin's philosophy was “a personal synthesis of workaday poverty and Franco-Russian anarchism and the writings of the recent popes, in which the robber baron and the needy immigrant were said to have a basic equality before God” (p. 68). Most importantly for Day, the French tramp cum philosopher taught her how to imitate Christ.

While Day sought her place in the Catholic Church, Thomas Merton experienced the heady, worldly life of New York City in the early 1930s. Born in France, Merton lived on the social and cultural margins of American society. His father died when Merton was sixteen. That independence, the reality of being accountable to no one, made him, as he wrote, “the complete twentieth-century man.” That independence also opened the door on a life of sinfulness. Sexual sins revealed a young man searching for meaning in personal relationships. His sinfulness, however, became a way to genuine faith; the desire for God followed his sin. When Merton was a student at Columbia University, Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*—despite its imprimatur, which Merton initially found offensive—revealed to Merton a vibrant, living God. Then, ironically enough, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* led him to the Church. Merton read in Joyce an abiding respect for Catholic tradition, despite the main character's apostasy. His religious life—followed by his Catholic one—had begun.

Like Merton's, Percy's biography is familiar—raised by his uncle, poet William Alexander Percy; attended Columbia Medical School; contracted tuberculosis. While recovering at an upstate New York sanitarium, he abandoned plans of practicing medicine. He used that time to read. Jean-Paul Sartre, Thomas Mann, Soren Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky challenged the scientific positivism Percy had absorbed at Columbia. Kierkegaard especially pointed the way toward Christian truth and down the path Percy would follow. “He would be an existentialist, not a systematizer; a believer, not a knower; an individual, not a type” (p. 143). His religious conversion, Elie argues, “seems only incidentally religious. There is no moment of grace, no mystical experience, no sense of the divinity of creation” (p. 156). As he developed into a novelist, the Catholic Church provided an objective standard by which to judge the human condition.

Independence is important to the pilgrim, yet it could be experienced in different ways, as point of departure or destination. For Merton, it was the starting point. For Percy independence was the goal to be sought, the destination of a search that would separate him eventually from the cultural baggage of his southern heritage. For Flannery O'Connor, the only cradle Catholic in the group, the death of her father when she was not yet sixteen left her also “an independent,” alone and confident (p. 135).

Still she had to find her own way to God and pursue her own calling. As with Merton, independence was the point of departure, when free of restraint and full of talent she could make her way on her own terms. Jacques Maritain had influenced Merton, although Elie argues that Merton actually misread the French philosopher. Maritain, properly read, also shaped O'Connor's calling. His writings convinced her that the religious artist must not dwell in necessarily “religious” material. Christian art is art made by the Christian believer, she learned. This knowledge enabled her to dwell among southern grotesques and to write about Protestants without even a hint of condescension.

Good reading helps make good writers. Day and Merton wrote as voraciously as they read. Day the journalist and Merton the inadvertent spiritual director to modern Americans seemed to write almost instinctively, and they especially seemed to put their lives on display through their writings. And it is to Elie's credit that he takes Day seriously as a writer rather than as just a radical activist. Percy's and O'Connor's novels and short stories obviously were different creatures. Their characters—

O'Connor's Hazel Motes and Percy's Binx Bolling in particular—embodied postwar alienation; they were Camus' "stranger," caught between belief and unbelief. Besides their published books and articles, these four writers also left behind a large body of correspondence that Elie correctly treats as part of their literary legacy. Elie uses this correspondence to demonstrate that even after finding their place in the Church, their pilgrimage continued. Day, Merton, and O'Connor especially sought God in other relationships. In letters back and forth Day and Merton disagreed over topics such as pacifism and the antiwar movement. O'Connor's letters to her "counterpart," an Atlanta woman whom O'Connor never met in person, reveal, in O'Connor's words, "a besieged defender of the faith" (quoted, p. 270).

Elie's primary concern here is with religious pilgrimage, and he does not always connect these writers' pilgrimage to the Church at large. Vatican II, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War make important appearances, to be sure, but the American Catholic Church followed its own pilgrimage concurrently with Day, Merton, Percy, and O'Connor. Indeed, in the early- to mid-

twentieth century the Church shared the preoccupation with its identity (its "self"). The issue for the Church was how to be both marginal and American at the same time. The trajectory of the story is not as simple as moving from the margins to the mainstream of American society, and Elie resists that narrative in his rendering of these writers' careers. A more important question was how to engage society and provide Catholic answers to American questions. Catholics did that, often for themselves and independently of the Church hierarchy. In that regard, these four writers were more typical than we might otherwise believe.

Day, Merton, Percy, and O'Connor were influenced by European thinkers, yet they helped to craft a body of work that was, in turn, shaped by distinctly American versions of the European Church. These writers then have become for later generations what Maritain, Gilson, and Dostoevsky had been to them. Elie is pleased with that development, and he would have today's students and searchers read the way Merton learned to read in a Columbia Shakespeare class: "with his whole self, his whole life" (p. 80).

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