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Literature, Region, Religion
Flannery O'Connor's Essays

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Abstract: The article discusses the main themes of Flannery O'Connor's essays collected in her posthumously published book *Mystery and Manners* (1969). The two eponymous words suggest a kind of dichotomy, but in essence they signify the inseparability of the social and the religious in O'Connor's writing. According to the writer, manners shape attitudes which in turn decide about the quality of collective life. The realm of manners, governed by logic, does not determine human life in its entirety because it possesses a hardly definable additional dimension, encapsulated in the term "mystery." O'Connor ascribes a religious meaning to it, but in her fiction it manifests itself through happenings that confront her characters with phenomena that transcend their familiar experiential territory. The notions of manners and mystery correspond with the literary categories of regional writing and Catholic writing, which O'Connor problematizes in her essays.

Keywords: literary regionalism, Catholic literature, literature of the US South, grotesque, race

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Literatura, region, religia
Eseje Flannery O'Connor

Streszczenie: Artykuł omawia główne tematy esejów Flannery O'Connor umieszczonych w wydanej pośmiertnie książce *Misterium i maniery* (1969). Dwa tytułowe słowa sugerują rodzaj dychotomii, w istocie jednak wskazują na nierozerwalność warstwy społecznej i religijnej w utworach pisarki. W pojęciu O'Connor maniery oznaczają kształtowanie określonych postaw, które decydują o jakości wspólnotowego życia. Sfera manier, która rządzi się jasną logiką, bynajmniej nie określa całokształtu życia człowieka, posiada ono bowiem trudny do zdefiniowania sens naddany – i tak należy rozumieć tytułowe misterium. O'Connor rozumie misterium w sensie religijnym, w jej prozie wszakże przejawia się ono poprzez wydarzenia, które stawiają bohaterów w obliczu rzeczy niewspółmiernych do ich wcześniejszych doświadczeń. Z pojęciami manier i misterium poniekąd korespondują literackie kategorie pisarstwa regionalnego i katolickiego, będące głównym przedmiotem rozważań O'Connor.

Słowa kluczowe: regionalizm w literaturze, literatura katolicka, literatura amerykańskiego Południa, groteska, rasa

Mystery and Manners (1969) is a collection of Flannery O'Connor's essays from the late 1950s and early 60s, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, the writer's friends who also prepared posthumous publications of her other works. The essays concern primarily literary topics, and they shed light on some of the key aspects of O'Connor's fiction. They give readers an insight into philosophical assumptions of her writing that are far from apparent if one refers only to the plots of her novels and short stories. O'Connor's fiction has been usually viewed through the lens of the grotesque as a characteristic strategy employed by writers from the US South: her protagonists often exhibit some kind of internal or physical deformation or succumb to fixations that fuel irrational actions. On the level of plot, such a construction of characters results in various twists – dramatic as much as mystifying in their implications – leading to final epiphanies. O'Connor's epiphanies are most often interpreted in religious terms, not only because the texts suggest this, but also because the writer herself repeatedly declared her attachment to Catholic dogmas. Religion influenced her understanding of the functions of literature and her own way of writing. The essays collected in *Mystery and Manners* provide a key, among others, to how she understood the nexus of religion and literature.

The two eponymous words appear time and again in O'Connor's essays, and although they suggest a dichotomy, they essentially point to the inseparability of social and religious realms in her fiction. The idea of manners pertains to the shaping of attitudes that significantly affect communal life. Raph C. Wood writes that O'Connor "knew that a democracy, perhaps more than any other polity, *requires* manners. Exactly to the extent that ancient inequalities have been overcome, there is an even greater demand for social restraint, for privacy, for the individual space which one grants to others because one knows one's own need for it" (Wood 1996–1997: 156, original italics). The sphere of manners, governed

by a clear logic, does not define human life in its entirety because human life possesses an elusive additional sense, the mystery. Of course, for O'Connor the mystery is a religious category, but this not so obvious in her fiction in which the mystery manifests itself through events that confront the characters with something completely at variance with their earlier experiences, something that exists "apart from the territory of motivation," as Mary Gordon puts it (Gordon 2003–2004: 2). The eponymous terms correspond, to a degree, with the categories of Catholic writing and regional writing around which O'Connor's literary discussions revolve. If the essays help define the paradigm underlying her literary creation, it consists in the fusion of tropes of these two kinds of literature.

O'Connor objected to the labels that critics ascribed to her fiction, but her essays about Catholic writers lead to a conclusion that this is a label she would accept. She reiterates that one needs to properly understand the essence and aims of Catholic literature, and wrong assumptions are very frequent in this respect. For example, a Catholic writer may want to prove a religious thesis; in such a case, the result will be far from convincing because literature that elucidates dogmas relies on abstractions too much. A different mistake is to attempt to move the reader, to achieve a simple emotional effect. If a Catholic writer writes for readers who share his own beliefs, he undertakes an effort which is pointless. O'Connor meaningfully states that "The Catholic novelist doesn't have to be a saint; he doesn't even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist" (O'Connor 2014: 172). A novelist's gift consists in a specific way of seeing the reality, enabling his immersion in it. O'Connor speaks rather vaguely about this, and understandably so, as she cannot be very precise about literary qualities that will have different forms in works by different authors. For O'Connor, the unique, writerly way of seeing the reality has to do with the ability to recognize symptoms – or signs – perhaps imperceptible to most people. There is an echo of puritanism in such a view of literature as a vehicle of transcendence.

The Catholic novelist – O'Connor observes – "must decide what she [the Church] demands of him and if and how his freedom is restricted by her" (O'Connor 2014: 144). Likely enough, adherence to the doctrine entails such restrictions, but O'Connor sees this issue differently. To begin with, when she speaks about the Church, she does not mean its institutional dimension, through which restrictive mechanisms would manifest themselves, but treats it as the source of the truths of faith. The essence of faith is the longing to embrace the mystery, and the Church mediates such acts. The failures of Catholic writers often result from their false belief that the Church expects something from them. Whoever thinks so has fallen victim to "the parochial aesthetic and the cultural insularity" (O'Connor 2014: 145). At the roots of such mistaken thinking about the Catholic novelist's responsibilities lies the idea that Catholic literature functions within some kind of a closed circuit, in other words, it should be addressed to the public who subscribe to the same religious doctrine as the writer. A Catholic novelist who writes with the intention to please a religious audience cannot avoid embarrassing simplifications because an average Catholic reader tends to view things in a Manichean fashion, and "[b]y separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché" (O'Connor 2014: 147).

One of the biggest temptations faced by the Catholic novelist is sentimentalism, which yields false depictions of human innocence, completely ignoring the fact that the achievement of such a state requires redemption – and this in turn implies the inevitability of an earlier moral fall. In one essay O'Connor recalls a situation when she herself succumbed

to sentimental feelings – she is aware of it and sheds light on the circumstances. The writer was once approached by the Sister Superior from the Dominican Congregation in Atlanta, the organization that ran a home for cancer patients in the city. The nun shared the story of a girl named Mary Ann and hoped that O'Connor would agree to write it down. Mary Ann was sent to the cancer home at the age of three and lived there for nine years. She had a badly deformed face due to her illness, but she was full of joy and very kind toward others, and she suffered her illness with dignity. O'Connor did not take up this task, encouraging the nuns to write Mary Ann's story themselves, and they did, although the writer does not say a single word about the result. She focuses her attention on the nuns' daily work about which she speaks with utmost admiration. Thus, instead of the contemplation of individual suffering, O'Connor's text offers an emotionally phrased eulogy of a religious institution, as if the author allowed rhetorical excess to accentuate the nuns' virtues. Interestingly, this is the only essay in *Mystery and Manners* that concerns institutional activities of the Catholic Church.

The reader of O'Connor's essays occasionally comes across passages that sound like a confession of faith, and for that reason they tell a lot about the writer's outlook and also personality. In her essay "Novelist and Believer", originally delivered as a lecture at Sweetbriar College, Virginia, in 1963, she states that "[w]e live in an unbelieving age," but she does not despair over such a state of things, noticing that spiritual needs have not disappeared, however, they have been separated from doctrinal demands. She perceives manifestations of such needs outside the religious realm as "lopsided[...]" (O'Connor 2014: 159), and she is happy that evangelizers still have a lot of work to do. They can never be sure as to the effects of their work, but this does not undermine the purposefulness of their efforts. In "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor declares: "I shall have to speak, without apology, of the Church, even when the Church is absent; of Christ, even if Christ is not recognized" (O'Connor 2014: 155). To her, being a writer is a calling, and the Catholic novelist with a true literary gift has a mission to perform – this is how O'Connor understands her own work. Passages that sound like homilies can be seen as a specific expression of this.

Parallel to her discussion of the challenges faced by the Catholic novelist, O'Connor sketches a portrait of the Catholic reader, and it is far from flattering, as if this type of reader embodied the worst readerly tendencies. The Catholic reader all too often values literary production of the worst kind because of its explicit doctrinal meaning, thus reaffirming his own naive view of the functions of literature. In her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," O'Connor writes: "Many Catholic readers are overconscious of what they consider to be obscenity in modern fiction for the very simple reason that in reading a book, they have nothing else to look for. They are not equipped to find anything else" (O'Connor 2014: 188). She makes a similar point in her essay "The Church and the Fiction Writer": "Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels that they don't have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place, and often these are works that are permeated with a Christian spirit" (O'Connor 2014: 151). It can be said that a typical Catholic reader exemplifies a bad reader, that is one that reduces the value of literature to an unequivocal, predictable message. In essence, O'Connor takes an elitist view of literature: "Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it" (O'Connor 2014: 189). Elsewhere she writes tellingly: "For my own part, I have a very high opinion of the

art of fiction, and a very low opinion of what is called the 'average' reader" (O'Connor 2014: 95).

One of O'Connor's essays that deal with the subject of Catholic writing addresses the question of the influence of the Protestant South on the Catholic novelist. In her opinion, contrary to common misconceptions, within the literary realm the merging of Southern sensitivity with Catholic faith can be conducive to the creation of great works. Good literature draws from concrete experience, which it expresses, whereas bad literature brims with abstractions and generalizations. The Southern writer is rooted in his community, even if he takes a critical view of it and considers its attachment to "traditional manners" as "unbalanced" (O'Connor 2014: 200). In the case of a Catholic novelist, his belonging to "a non-Catholic but religious society" helps him revaluate a misconceived loyalty to the Church and "furnish[es]" him "with some very fine antidotes to his own worst tendencies" (O'Connor 2014: 205). Such a writer "liv[es] […] intimately with the division of Christendom," therefore he "is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him" (O'Connor 2014: 206). O'Connor believes that this is the kind of search that can lead to a renewal of the Catholic novel.

In her essays on regional writing, O'Connor devotes a lot of attention to correcting misconceptions regarding the literature of the US South, often taken for granted by readers from other parts of America. In her essay "The Regional Writer," she looks critically at the myth of the Southern writer who is radically estranged from his community and perceives it as a source of oppression. This supposedly accounts for the Southern writer's escapist longings, even though he is unable to cease to write about the reality that shaped him. Such a strong connection between imagination and place – contrary to what outside observers may think – does not result from individual obsession, but from the purely social fact of communal belonging. O'Connor claims that Southern writers do not renounce their roots, quite the opposite, they primarily write for readers who have been shaped by similar experiences as the writers themselves. Sometimes they are even cherished by their communities, in part thanks to the growth of academic institutions. If there is anything that O'Connor fears with respect to the development of Southern literature, it is that – as a consequence of the writers' striving to fulfill certain expectations – it can become too homogeneous in terms of literary quality and one-dimensional in its approach to the reality of the region.

"Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," one of O'Connor's best-known essays, sheds light on the false assumptions regarding the eponymous phenomenon. The writer observes that in the literature of the US South the grotesque, indeed, often constitutes the basis for the construction of the world presented, however, its use does not serve the purpose of defamiliarization, but it defines a specific variant of realism. It is attuned to the exploration of mysteries which are essentially religious, and this has to do with the Southern mindset: "The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" (O'Connor 2014: 44–45). The erroneous understanding of the grotesque in reference to Southern literature has to do with its treatment as a cultural symptom, and not as an element of an artistic design. When seen through such a lens, everything that differs from a standard image, lacks a logical explanation or finds no reflection in the statistics appears to be grotesque. But the mystery has little to do with logic or statistics, therefore the kind of fiction that aims to probe it "will always be pushing its

limits outward […] because […] the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted" (O'Connor 2014: 41–42). In O'Connor's opinion, the use of the grotesque in the literature of the US South exemplifies a more general striving, on the part of writers, to free their fiction from subconsciously felt imperatives, determined by the time and place to which a writer belongs. She mentions Nathaniel Hawthorne who described his novels as romances to distinguish them from European novels focused on social issues. The form of the romance was meant to free the imagination and help it embrace things that resisted rational cognition. O'Connor's references to Hawthorne are far from accidental; in a letter to John Hawkes, she wrote: "Hawthorne interests me considerably. I feel more of a kinship with him than with any other American, though some of what he wrote I can't make myself read through to the end" (qtd. in Kirk 2008: 337).

O'Connor concludes that the conviction regarding the crucial significance of the grotesque as a means of expression in the literature of the US South has to do with the entrenched narrow definition of realism, situating all defamiliarizing strategies beyond the margin of this poetics. Advocates of this kind of literature take an orthodox view and "associate the only legitimate material for long fiction with the movement of social forces, with the typical, with fidelity to the way things look and happen in normal life" (O'Connor 2014: 39). This view reflects scientific thinking, which lasts despite the skepticism that marks the first half of the twentieth century. A novelist who understands the functions of fiction in such a way "may produce a great tragic naturalism" (O'Connor 2014: 41). On the other hand, a novelist who "believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious" and "what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (O'Connor 2014: 41) looks closely at the unfathomable and the unlikely, and this entails literary solutions that are at variance with traditional realism. This is not to say that works of such writers lack truth – or realism. It is a different kind of realism – a realism "of distances," as O'Connor describes it (O'Connor 2014: 46) – aiming to capture the truths of human nature by going beyond standard expectations and exploring oddities.

It is interesting to notice that O'Connor's remarks about the limitations of realism resonate with a broader debate about the crisis of this model of literature that took place at the turn of the 1950s and 60s and in some degree facilitated the emergence of postmodernism. In his 1959 essay "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction," Irving Howe put forward a thesis that the abandonment of realism by some major authors was a reaction to the conditions of mass society, in which the disintegration of traditional social structures, such as the family, and of the sphere of mores based on these structures determined passive attitudes of individuals who felt helpless amidst the surrounding human mass. Among his examples illustrating this literary phenomenon, Howe named Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* (1955), and thus, when speaking about postmodernism, he did not mean experimental fiction, but a certain thematic variant of a more traditional novel (Howe 1959: 420–436). Two years later, Philip Roth published his essay "Writing American Fiction" in which he listed a number of recent strange or shocking events and stated that the reality overwhelms writers who want to describe it; in a word, too much happens that is beyond comprehension (Roth 2001: 165–182). Of course O'Connor speaks about the limitations of realism from a completely different perspective

than urban, liberal critics and writers, but the coincidence of the voices, anticipating the advent of postmodernism, and O'Connor's observations about the inadequacies of realism seems quite meaningful.

In the only narrative text included in *Mystery and Manners*, titled "The King of the Birds," O'Connor recounts how she came to own a flock of peacocks. The writer, who was known for her fascination with birds and kept birds of different domestic species on her family farm, once decided to buy peacocks. She bought six, and after a time the flock increased to several dozen – the owner stopped counting them for her own peace of mind. "The King of the Birds" abounds in very precise observations regarding the appearance and behavior of peacocks. O'Connor describes the cycle of a peacock's growth and how a bird's appearance changes at its successive stages, or differences in the habits of cocks and hens. She registers how the peacock behaves when alone and when in the flock. When observing the birds, she comes up with various strange associations, for example, a young peacock "appears to be wearing the short pants now so much in favor with playboys in the summer. These extend downward, buff-colored and sleek, from what might be a blue-black waistcoat" (O'Connor 2014: 8). O'Connor employs different registers of language, moving smoothly between behaviorist study, self-reflection, social observation and defamiliarizing image.

An intriguing anthropological perspective emerges from O'Connor's study of peacocks, foregrounding examples of "negotiating" the rules of the coexistence of humans and birds and of human adjustment to the conditions dictated by the birds. O'Connor's flock of peacocks grows uncontrollably, and because of that her immediate reality becomes a real challenge for her imagination. She is the owner of the birds, and yet she feels as if she were their servant, especially that the peacocks seem to treat her exactly in such a way. Initially, she hopes they will show some kind of gratitude, but in the course of time she has to admit that she deluded herself. What's more, the peacocks use every possible occasion to demonstrate that the farm is their possession. They destroy flowerbeds because they eat flowers, and if they are not hungry they just cut them – O'Connor comes to suspect that peacocks are malicious by nature. However, their beauty is a compensation for all the discomforts caused by their presence: "The peacock likes to sit on gates or fence posts and allow his tail to hang down. A peacock on a fence post is a superb sight. Six or seven peacocks on a gate are beyond description; but it is not very good for the gate" (O'Connor 2014: 18). Miles D. Orvell observes that O'Connor loved peacocks for their unique combination of uselessness and grotesque beauty, which was virtually spiritual in its outlandishness (Orvell 2004: 123).

"The King of the Birds" blurs the border between O'Connor's life and literary creation insofar as the whole situation with the peacocks allows her to observe local people's behavior in the face of oddity – her short stories often present analogous circumstances. She writes: "Visitors to our place, instead of being barked at by dogs rushing from under the porch, are squalled at by peacocks whose blue necks and crested heads pop up from behind tufts of grass, peer out of bushes, and crane downward from the roof of the house" (O'Connor 2014: 12). Groups of schoolchildren visit the writer's farm, and it seems that only children react to the peacocks spontaneously, as when they try to describe those features of the birds that draw their attention. In the case of adults, on the other hand, the sight of a peacock usually makes them speechless, a sign of uncertainty, nervousness or even fear; they are too constrained by social mores to let their natural curiosity prevail. Symptomatically,

O'Connor does not say anything about how the people who saw the peacocks looked at her; either nothing worthy of attention happened or she decided not to mention such occurrences. This way or another, a woman-writer, surrounded by peacocks on a farm in Georgia, appears to be perhaps only slightly less strange than, for example, Hulga from "Good Country People," a philosopher with an academic degree and an artificial leg, living with her mother on a farm.

Apart from O'Connor's essays, the editors of *Mystery and Manners* included in the volume an appendix with two short excerpts: from a review and from an interview. The latter calls for a word of comment because it is the only passage in the book that touches upon the problem of race. Representation of race in O'Connor's fiction has been the subject of a heated debate among the commentators of her writing. Robert C. Evans, the author of a recent study of the reception of O'Connor's literary output, points out that her critics can be divided in to those who attack her, and those who defend her. The former accuse her of racism, most often referring to her opinions expressed in her letters, the latter claim that the writer's controversial statements about race relations were meant to shock and even make fun of liberal-minded thinkers and did not express her actual views. Her most uncompromising critics emphasize that what she said about African Americans had nothing to do with Christian mercy about which she talked so much, and her defenders insist that her writing be interpreted in relevant contexts, and not from a present-day perspective (Evans 2018: 188–189). Issues of race have been a recurrent subject of critical discussions of O'Connor's fiction since the late 1980s–early 90s, when new historicism, with its focus on symbolic constructions of power relations, became a major tendency in literary studies (Evans 2018: 197). The editors of *Mystery and Manners* could only intuit that such a turn in the reception of O'Connor's writing would take place. Whether or not they aimed to perpetuate an appropriate image of the writer, they included her statement about race for a reason; the fact that it is the only passage in the book devoted to race makes its implications even stronger.

O'Connor talks about race cautiously, even diplomatically, and it seems that such a tone bespeaks an attitude of uncertainty. In a sense, she veils the problem by phrasing her thoughts in religious terms. For example, she states that "[i]t requires considerable grace for two races to live together" (O'Connor 2014: 233). Mercy – as a communal value erasing racial divisions – can constitute the basis for such forms of social life that can help define the proper course of changes. In other words, agreement on a spiritual and emotional level should precede actual changes in the realm of social relations. Forms – or manners – help shape the necessary "social discipline" (O'Connor 2014: 234), because the very fact of the equality of races in the light of law does not guarantee anything. In O'Connor's view, the equality of races is about charity, which enables white and black Southerners alike to define their new identities with mutuality in mind. According to O'Connor's description, in the early 1960s the South achieved a transitory stage, when "the old manners" became "obsolete," and "the new manners" did not yet take shape (O'Connor 2014: 234). The writer believes that white and black Southerners still have spiritual and intellectual work to do that will give direction to this process and ultimately will allow the two races two coexist without any tensions. O'Connor's vision of the coexistence of races in the South illustrates a rhetorical strategy which, according to Claire Kahane, disregards black people's anger and

white people's guilt, and thus undermines political reasons for a possible rebellion (Kahane qtd. in Hemple Prown 2001: 71).

In one of the more problematic fragments of her interview, O'Connor observes that "[t]he uneducated Southern Negro is not the clown he's made out to be. He's a man of very elaborate manners and great formality, which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy" (O'Connor 2014: 234). A social asymmetry between white and black Southerners is inevitable, however, it is symptomatic how the writer perceives it. She first corrects false imaginings about African Americans, and she uses formulations that should flatter them. It can be surmised that the feature she values the most in them – although she does not specifically name it – is caution. In a way, black people have a better awareness of the social conditions in the South than whites, therefore, ironically enough, they should be able to accept a greater responsibility for the general state of affairs during the process of social transition. What attests to their maturity is that they know when to withdraw in a situation of conflict. The significance that they ascribe to privacy, something that O'Connor puts stress on, can be perhaps seen as a sign of their "proper" understanding of their place within the social hierarchy.

O'Connor's social intuitions with respect to the problem of race, verbalized in her interview, seem to correspond with her literary construction of blackness. Critics unanimously observe that in her fiction black characters play only secondary roles. Timothy P. Caron points out that even in those of her short stories that directly address the subject of race relations in the South the presence of African Americans in some way facilitates the redemption of the white characters (Caron 2009: 66). According to Julie Armstrong, for O'Connor, blackness is a given and as such it is not subject to critical reflection (Armstrong 2001–2002: 83). Armstrong refers to Toni Morrison's seminal study *Playing in the Dark*, in which the author argues that major works of American literature usually feature black characters in the role of the catalysts of various kinds of transformation that white protagonists undergo (Morrison 1992: passim). Armstrong borrows Morrison's term "enabler" to describe the function of African Americans in relation to whites in O'Connor's fiction. One can risk a thesis that O'Connor's imaginings about race, which are exemplified in her fiction by individual cases, in her interview are translated into categories of collective life. Her "diagnosis" leads to a conclusion that black Southerners have achieved a certain satisfactory state of manners, which cannot be said about white Southerners. O'Connor's suggestion that what calls for attention is the very process that will lead to the emergence of white Southerners' new manners can be seen as an attempt to veil existing racial tensions.

Paul Elie, the author of a widely discussed article "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?," published in *The New Yorker* in 2020, writes that O'Connor considered her essays and letters as part of her literary design. Anticipating her own death, she wanted to create a commentary that would "shape the posthumous interpretation of her fiction" (Elie 2020: n.p.). Personal statements made by writers often contain hidden meanings, but O'Connor seems to have been in control of her public image, and there is not much that can be read in-between the lines in her essays. The critics who remind us that she was a product of a specific time and place and for natural reasons some of her opinions are unacceptable from a contemporary perspective do have a point. Robert Coles thus describes the writer's self-creation in her letters: "Her strength of personality is constantly evident. This is one writer not haunted by whiskey or crazy voices or a quicksilver emotional life. This is one

writer who felt no need to display herself anywhere. This is one writer whose opinions were strong, but circumscribed" (Coles 1979: 5).

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