

An Eccentric Orthodoxy:  
The Contours of Flannery O'Connor's Literary Catholicism

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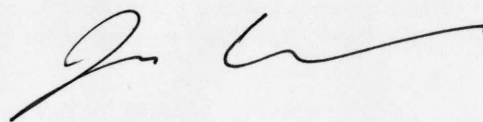
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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis.



## Section I

*I am no theologian, but all of this is vital to me, and I feel it's vital to you.*

*An Eccentric Orthodoxy: (6)*

***The Contours of Flannery O'Connor's Literary Catholicism***

Flannery O'Connor wrote in the morning. Much of her oddity as a fiction writer and as a theologian seems somehow embodied in her writing process. She would wake at sunrise, drag

herself to the typewriter and sit there writing and allowing herself no distractions until

about noon, at which time, her literary energies exhausted, she would begin the normal

affairs of the day. One imagines a bright Georgia morning, the land

still almost cool and the sun just rising. As she writes, the sun

goes higher; the day grows hotter. O'Connor's Visionary Aesthetic -13

Flannery O'Connor and Parabolic Theology - 16

There is almost no night in the stories of Flannery O'Connor. The violence, the

horror, and the grotesque things that we associate with darkness are played out in the full

intensity of the sun. Her characters are defined as clearly as objects would be. Her

vision is vigilant and the harsh light of her prose lets almost no character by unexamined. Those that do pass through

the crucible of her stories are radically altered. Characters that go in as recognizable,

everyday people come out with deformities suggesting their adaptation to a harsh new

reality.

The effect on the reader is supposed to be something similar. O'Connor's is a

world where illusions and happy clichés are very much not welcome. And the careful

reader, even if he is never fully persuaded by O'Connor's brand of Catholicism, cannot

help but marvel at her merciless critique of mankind. Flannery O'Connor acts as

Beatrice, leading her audience through a very strange purgatory where much that seemed

straight forward and even good becomes hazy or reveals its own futility.

**IV – O'Connor on Mankind & Concluding Thoughts – 44**

*Section I*

*I am no theologian, but all of this is vital to me, and I feel it's vital to you.*

- Flannery O'Connor (*Habit 366*)

Flannery O'Connor wrote in the morning. Much of her oddity as a fiction writer and as a theologian seems somehow embodied in that fact. She would wake at sunrise, drag herself to the typewriter and sit there writing and allowing herself no distractions until about noon, at which time, her literary energies exhausted, she would begin the normal affairs of the day. One imagines her at her desk on a bright Georgia morning, the land still almost cool and the sun coming through an open window. As she writes, the sun goes higher; the day grows hotter and brighter.

There is almost no night in the stories of Flannery O'Connor. The violence, the horror, and the grotesque things that we associate with darkness are played out in the full intensity of the sun. Human weaknesses, motivations, and failures are defined as clearly as objects would be on a bright Georgia morning. O'Connor's eye is vigilant and the harsh light of her prose lets almost no character by unburned. Those that do pass through the crucible of her stories are radically altered. Characters that go in as recognizable, everyday people come out with deformities suggesting their adaptation to a harsh new reality.

The effect on the reader is supposed to be something similar. O'Connor's is a world where illusions and happy clichés are very much not welcome. And the careful reader, even if he is never fully persuaded by O'Connor's brand of Catholicism, cannot help but marvel at her merciless critique of mankind. Flannery O'Connor acts as Beatrice, leading her audience through a very strange purgatory where much that seemed straight forward and even good becomes hazy or reveals its own futility.

This paper then is in part a pilgrim's report. There were a few places where I felt no better able to analyze my subject matter than a surgery patient is able to describe the medical intricacies of the operation he has undergone. At times I have used the works of other critics, other readers, of O'Connor to generalize from my own experience. For this paper is not only about O'Connor's Catholicism as it is demonstrated in her fiction, but about how this vision is delivered to and affects the reader. No discussion of the meaning of fiction can be separated from the experience of the reader, and this is perhaps even more true in the case of O'Connor, who, as we will see, wrote with a conscious goal of affecting her audience.

It is certainly debatable whether a practitioner of literary fiction can be a theologian in the sense that Augustine or Martin Buber is a theologian. Literary fiction often succeeds precisely because it allows multiple readings, and the genre leaves very little room for the exercise of philosophical precision. O'Connor is no exception on these fronts, and in discussing her as a theologian, I use the term to signify her interest in the questions of theology and the fact that her work addresses these questions, even if not with absolute clarity.

Some of O'Connor's characters come right out and ask traditional theological questions about the suffering of the innocent or the difficulties inherent in the doctrine of bodily resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Other characters, meanwhile, are made to represent certain heresies like the Manichean separation of spirit and matter or what O'Connor's sees as Protestantism's attempt to have Christianity without Christ. The questions of theology and religious doctrine pervade her work, and it thus becomes fair to ask if her treatment

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Violent Bear It Away*, 137 and 36, respectively.

of these questions is in keeping with accepted Catholic tradition. Is O'Connor, that is to say, practicing orthodoxy in her fiction, or heresy?

This paper addresses the question of O'Connor's orthodoxy by looking at those places where her version of Catholicism seems most divergent from common practice but stops short of trying to firmly define O'Connor as orthodox or heretical. Rather the paper attempts to identify different threads in O'Connor's work, some clearly based on accepted Catholic tradition and others that seem distinctively her own. With regard to the oddities of O'Connor's version of Christianity, a few overriding questions are asked: Where did this apparent eccentricity come from? Specifically, does it stem from a distinctive reading of Catholic tradition? In what ways are O'Connor's apparent eccentricities a product of her medium as a writer of fiction or of her desire to affect her audience in certain ways?

The first section of the paper deals with O'Connor's form – how it compares to more conventional theology structured around arguments and how it is intended to affect the reader. It is there also that I explore Sallie McFague TeSelle's idea of parabolic theology, which suggests that O'Connor's form is a common and even orthodox way of addressing theological concerns within the Catholic tradition.

The second and third sections focus on those places where O'Connor's fiction seems furthest from traditional Catholic doctrine. In the second section, I examine the action of grace in O'Connor's fiction with particular focus on the surprising link of grace and violence in the stories. I take this strange combination as the most unusual aspect of O'Connor's version of Christian reality, and as such, it receives the most elaborate consideration. The third section broaches the question of O'Connor's portrayal of

humanity and creation, places where her negativity has often led to charges of Protestantism or even nihilism, and then moves on to offer a few concluding thoughts

My hope is that this paper will embody an alternative to what I see as the myopic approach of many of O'Connor's critics, who too often point to a single aspect of O'Connor's situation or aesthetic philosophy as if it alone held the key to explaining the odd look of her fiction and the strangeness of her version of Catholicism. I contend that O'Connor's work is too complex to be reduced to any single common denominator and that the unusual aspects of her portrayal of Christian reality are best understood through a multifaceted approach that considers not only O'Connor's historical and geographic situation but also her unconventional reading of parts of the Catholic tradition and her almost prophetic desire to impact the way her audience sees the world.

## Section II

*I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement.*

- Flannery O'Connor (*Habit* 90)

Like any theologian, O'Connor is trying to convince the reader to adopt certain ideas and attitudes with regards to the world and God. Her genre, however, precludes her doing this by defining premises and leading the reader through an argument, rather, working as a writer of fiction, she must employ a different set of tools to defend her views and critique those of her opponents. We will see that most of what we would call "arguments" in O'Connor's work proceed through a negative treatment of the alternatives. As a means of introducing some of the tools by which O'Connor operates, we will look at one of her later and most successful stories, "Everything that Rises Must Converge." The goal of this examination will be to see how the story can be read as argument consciously tailored to O'Connor's expected audience.

The story is fairly simple. Julian, a longsuffering young man with intellectual pretensions, must take his small-minded but well-intentioned mother across town on the bus for her weekly reducing class at the YMCA. O'Connor introduces the source of Julian's annoyance with his parent in the first paragraph: "She would not ride the busses since they had been integrated, and because the reducing class was one of her few pleasures, necessary for her health, and *free*, she said Julian could at least put himself out to take her, considering all she did for him" (*Stories* 405). Perhaps understandably, Julian resents his weekly duty and particularly the sense of guilt and obligation that his mother employs, however unconsciously, to get him to perform it. In the course of their trip across town, his frustrations with his mother and his disabling personal insecurities

are redirected into a conflict over his mother's racial prejudice. This fight becomes an open war on the bus when Julian abandons the seat next to his mother and moves across the aisle to sit next to a black man. Julian then demonstrates the disjunction between his supposed concern for mankind and his actual ability to get along with individuals by awkwardly failing to strike up a conversation with his new neighbor (413). The man gets off, but, much to Julian's delight, he is replaced by a huge black woman and her young son who take seats so that Julian and the black woman are across the aisle from Julian's mother and the black woman's child. Julian revels in the recognition that the two women had "in a sense, swapped sons. Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it. His amusement showed plainly on his face" (415). He becomes even more elated when he realizes that the two women are wearing the same hat:

His eyes widened. The vision of the two hats, identical, broke upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit up with joy. He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw [...] For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh. His grin hardened until it said to her as plainly as if he were saying aloud: Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson. (416)



After they get off the bus, however, Julian's triumph turns to momentary fear when he realizes that his mother is going to give the little boy a nickel. He tries to stop her, but in her naiveté "the gesture [is] as natural to her as breathing," and she cannot understand the reasoning behind his panicked advice (417). As it turns out, she can only find a penny in her purse, but she makes the gesture anyway. The little boy's mother, however, who has been "rumbling like a volcano ready to become active" ever since she got on the bus (416), explodes, shouting "He don't take nobody's pennies!" and hitting Julian's mother with her oversized purse. The damage already done, Julian decides to press the moral lesson, saying "You got exactly what you deserved [...] Now get up" (418), but his mother is unresponsive and begins walking off in the wrong direction. "'You needn't act as if the world had come to an end,' he said, 'because it hasn't. From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up,' he said, 'it won't kill you.'" The tragic irony is that Julian's mother is having a stroke. When he realizes this, his attitude changes immediately: "'Mother!' he cried. 'Darling, sweetheart, wait!' Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, 'Mamma, Mamma!' He turned her over. Her face was fiercely distorted.'" She dies there on the pavement, and the story ends with Julian running towards a cluster of lights in the distance while the "tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (420).

Probably the most striking question about "Everything that Rises" is why it condemns Julian while seeming unconcerned about changing his mother's worldview, when they share almost exactly the same set of faults. Both are guilty of pride, Julian on intellectual grounds and his mother the basis of class and race, and both are at times well

meaning, even if their actions betray self-righteousness or smug self-satisfaction. This question, however, has a simple answer: Julian is condemned because he is the character with whom the reader has the most in common. The distinction here is not made in terms of ethical difference between the two characters but in terms of argument and narrative effect. Dashing the mother's illusions would be a frivolous exercise because the mother is not the sort of person likely to read the story, and while the reader can see the defects in mother's worldview, he may not be able to recognize them in the attitude that more closely resembles his own.

As part of her critique on the worldview held by her audience, O'Connor uses the character of Julian, whom she sets up as the representative of a purely secular hierarchy of values, to embed an attack on rational-humanist discourse in the story. In one of her lectures, O'Connor says that "we are afflicted in the modern era with the doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature by its own efforts" (*Mystery* 132). The "we" suggests that she saw this as a general affliction, and, indeed, there is evidence in the story and throughout her letters that she understood all people, Christian or otherwise, to suffer from it.<sup>2</sup> Julian, however, represents a heightened case of this "disorder". Throughout the story, he demonstrates his faith in rational ethics and human reason in a number of ways but most clearly by putting abstract moral notions over his mother's feelings. He

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is much in the story to suggest that O'Connor sees Julian as a partly autobiographical figure. Like Julian's mother, Regina O'Connor worked hard to support and take care of Flannery, and like Julian, O'Connor must have occasionally felt trapped and intellectually isolated living alone with a single parent. Similarly, O'Connor surely experienced, along with other broad minded people in the South, the frustration of living in an atmosphere of widespread prejudice and ignorance. Moreover, not only is Julian an aspiring writer (410), but O'Connor provides him with exactly her understanding of symbolism: In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," O'Connor argues that "the reader may not see them [symbols] but they have their effect on him nonetheless" (*Mystery* 72), while Julian thinks to himself that "[though] his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it" (415). Indeed, Julian is not the only character who bears surprising similarities to O'Connor herself. In fact, O'Connor admits that Hulga from "Good Country People" is a "projection" of herself into a different situation (*Habit* 106).

assumes, for instance, that “justice” and the liberal goal of ending prejudice entitle him to make his mother suffer. Throughout the story, Julian uses these humanist goals to justify his behavior and opinions. Similarly, Julian considers human development in the vocabulary of rational arguments, thinking that if his mother “had started from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her” (411). People for Julian have no absolute worth but are valued exclusively in terms of their development and their contribution to society. Thus we see that his humanism, while it may serve purposes of self-justification, does not provide him with any kind of firm underlying morality. For O’Connor this demonstrates the impossibility of a meaningful system of morality without a reference to the absolute worth of God. For O’Connor secularism even when it claims “human” principles is really just a screen for self-interest.

O’Connor calls attention to what she sees as a second failure of humanist values in Julian’s thoughts on love. At one point Julian hisses at his mother “True culture is in the mind, the *mind*” (409). His mother disagrees, responding, “[it’s] in the heart [...] and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you *are*” (410). This is another major point at which O’Connor takes issue with a purely rational understanding of the world: as she understands it, rational humanism leaves no room for love. Thus characters in her fiction who subscribe to a purely human worldview cannot understand and must fight against the love that they feel for others.<sup>3</sup> Thus Julian congratulates himself that “[most] miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity” (412). The last two paragraphs of the story prove this belief in the

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<sup>3</sup> The clearest example of this is Rayber in *The Violent Bear it Away*, who cannot understand his love for the retarded child Bishop.

objectivity of his worldview to be self-deception, but for O'Connor this is not just a personal failure on Julian's part but something built into his rational worldview. For O'Connor it is his illusions of rational progress and the improvement of men that inevitably lead Julian to deny love and hence his affection for, and dependence on, his mother. Importantly, this refusal to recognize the special status of his earthly parent corresponds with Julian's refusal to recognize his heavenly Father, and it is this prideful illusion of independence that assures Julian of O'Connor's condemnation. O'Connor emphasizes Julian's unwillingness to admit the existence of God through his description of fate: "He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson." Julian, for all his supposed secularism and belief in reason, seems aware of a conscious higher presence operating in history, and by capitalizing the word "Fate", O'Connor suggests that fate is secular people's euphemism for a God they cannot admit. A final acknowledgement of God is implied in the image of the lights towards which Julian runs at the end of the story. They suggest an answer to his own fallenness and the corresponding "world of guilt and sorrow" in which he must now reside.<sup>4</sup>

Julian's personal failings, his smug pride and callousness, are manifested in his attempt at humanist discourse, and Julian's unattractiveness as a character thus becomes O'Connor's means of calling attention to what she sees as the ugliness of a purely secular

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<sup>4</sup> One could read this story as a Catholic inversion of the epiphany-story form that James Joyce used in *Dubliners*. "Everything that Rises Must Converge" follows the structure of a Joycean epiphany story – but the epiphany is not considered in terms of the protagonist's purely internal, personal realization, but of his recognition of pre-existing state of dependence. Thus, in O'Connor we fall away from individuality into a recognition of our own failures and limitations. Joyce often uses very similar imagery, especially of light and dark, but always in a way that highlights the internality of the character's realization. Consider the last sentence of "Araby": "Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anger and anguish" (28). This comparison with Joyce's faith in the individual helps us differentiate between an author's use of literary devices and language, and the underlying point the writer is trying to make. Specifically, it confirms O'Connor's emphasis on the fall and her belief that man's self-sufficiency is an illusion.

understanding of the world. When Julian falls, the reader falls with him, for Julian is the representative of the audience's viewpoint. In witnessing Julian's error, we condemn ourselves exactly to the extent that we recognize ourselves and our own tendencies in him.

So O'Connor structures "Everything that Rises Must Converge" as a theological argument by identifying a character with a certain worldview and then using the character's failures to demonstrate what she sees as the failures and emptiness of his philosophy. This strategy, however, does not hold up very well by the traditional standards of rational argumentation. Like Julian's mother's understanding of culture, O'Connor's literary-theological arguments are usually more a matter of the heart and the gut than the head. Indeed, stepping back and considering the story from the purely rational angle of a non-participant, two things that undercut O'Connor's supposed logic quickly become apparent. First, it is difficult to separate Julian's general unattractiveness from the actual faults of his worldview. Had O'Connor made Julian just a little more sympathetic to his mother, his opinions and actions might appear beyond condemnation. And secondly, just in terms of intellectual depth of thought and self-awareness, Julian is hardly the strongest imaginable representation of a secular humanist. Indeed, judging the argument in exclusively rational terms we would have to accuse O'Connor of creating a straw-man representation of secular values against which her arguments could hardly fail. Fortunately for O'Connor, however, there is a tremendous gap between the perspective of a rational observer and that of a reader of fiction. O'Connor's argument remains effective because in the process of reading, her audience surrenders disbelief and rational skepticism and enters into the story.

*in Greek tragedy: As with the Greeks it highlights mankind's lack of self-sufficiency, but in a story like "Everything that Rises" this point*

about O'Connor's theological ventures are not rational. Her instruments – tragic irony, violence, and the grotesque – are tools of destructive criticism and are thus more capable of breaking down a reader's preconceived notions than of synthesizing a new worldview for her audience and characters to step into. Fittingly then, her stories are consistently inconclusive. Like Julian running towards the lights at the end of "Everything that Rises," her characters are left exactly at the moment of their turning point: The mental world that they occupied has been destroyed, but nothing has yet come to take its place. In ironic juxtaposition to his advice to his mother, it is Julian who has "to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change." Indeed, for O'Connor, the heart of the story is the reordering of Julian's vision. He may be ethically changed, but we as readers cannot see that, what we can understand is that the way Julian sees the world has been radically altered. The clear-cut secular and moral universe that Julian thinks he occupied is gone and previously unrecognized concepts like guilt and sorrow are now seen as the defining features of existence.

O'Connor This process, which I take to be one of the primary means by which O'Connor evangelizes in her fiction, has perhaps its closest analogy in the working of Greek tragedy. In a preface to a reading of one of her stories, O'Connor makes the comparison herself: "I Don't have any pretensions to being an Aeschylus or Sophocles and providing you with a cathartic experience out of your mythic background, though this story I'm going to read certainly calls up a good deal of the South's mythic background, and it should elicit from you a degree of pity and terror[...]" (*Mystery* 108). In O'Connor's work this pity and terror is more pointed than it is in Greek tragedy: As with the Greeks it highlights mankind's lack of self-sufficiency, but in a story like "Everything that Rises" this point

<sup>4</sup> For example, the theme of whites and blacks in the story parallels the treatment of Jews and Gentiles in Galatians. See particularly *Stoner* 545. Also telling is the reference to Corinth in the final paragraph.

about man carries with it clearer references to a religious solution. What O'Connor sees as the illusion of self-sufficiency embodied in a humanist, secular worldview and the tragic faults in this are supposed to drive the reader closer to O'Connor's conception of Christian reality. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Julian and the reader have their understandings of the world turned upside down. Where they had put faith in themselves they now recognize that they are at the mercy of greater forces. Paradoxically, it is only in Oedipus' blindness and Julian's groping in the darkness that they actually see reality for the first time.

This idea of transformed vision is at the heart of all O'Connor's fiction. Characters don't undergo clearly defined moral growth or demonstrate their virtue through action, rather they experience revelation and the only question is whether or not they will "get it". At the same time that O'Connor's stories center on characters having their visions reordered, she consciously structures these narratives to affect the vision of her readers: Like the characters in the stories, the reader witnesses the revelation and O'Connor asks the reader to judge himself on the basis of whether he "gets" the revelation just as the story judges the character. We will look more closely at how O'Connor tries to change the reader's worldview in the next section, but before we do that I want to take a look at O'Connor's aesthetic philosophy and the way she understood her job as a writer.

### ***O'Connor's Visionary Aesthetic***

"Judgment Day", the last short story that O'Connor completed before her death in 1964, contains a long series of references to the apostle Paul,<sup>5</sup> all of which hinge on one

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the theme of whites and blacks in the story parallels the treatment of Jews and Gentiles in Galatians - See particularly *Stories* 545. Also telling is the reference to Corinth in the final paragraph.

critical moment where the lead character experiences a vision: "And then he looked directly at Tanner and grinned, or grimaced, Tanner could not tell which, but he had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it" (545). These references to Paul and the repeated mention of eye glasses and the covering of eyes that occur throughout the story pay final tribute to the theme of changed vision. Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the significance of this story for understanding O'Connor's work: In writing the story that she likely knew would be her last, O'Connor chose not to break new ground but to return to her most consistent theme and pronounce it more loudly than ever. For O'Connor the idea of disrupted vision was not one theme among many but the very center of the writer's duty.

O'Connor's aesthetic philosophy puts tremendous emphasis on revealing a new way of seeing reality. She believed that the same old world can be seen in a new way, and that this transformation of vision is the province of art. In a letter, she quotes with approval her friend, the poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald, who said "it is the business of the artist to uncover the strangeness of truth" (343). This statement echoes Joseph Conrad, who along with Edgar Allan Poe stands as O'Connor's primary literary influence,<sup>6</sup> and in another one of her letters, O'Connor delivers her philosophy of literature as a Christian restatement of Conrad's: "I suppose when I say that the moral bases of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God, I mean about the same thing that Conrad meant when he said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe" (*Mystery* 128). What Fitzgerald's and Conrad's statements share is the assumption that the visible world contains something hidden and

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<sup>6</sup> See *Mystery* 99.



that our normal way of seeing reality often obscures a truth or a secret that the artist can unveil. Elsewhere in his “Preface” to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, the source from which O’Connor drew her quote, Conrad makes this assumption and his goal as a writer more explicit: “My task,” he writes, “which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your desserts [...] all you demand; and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask” (Italics original) (xlix). O’Connor shares with Conrad this assumption that through art reality can “disclose its inspiring secret” and also his belief, demonstrated throughout his works, that this hidden reality might be something threatening, that its means might be violent, and that the process of making the reader see will necessarily be one of assault rather than gentle coercion.

O’Connor’s formal understanding of aesthetics comes primarily from Jacques Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism*, which she called “the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on” (*Habit* 216). Much like Conrad, Maritain associates the successful work of art with the unveiling of “the brilliance of mystery” (23). This emphasis on revelation and altered vision is perhaps the most important thread in O’Connor’s understanding of art, but Maritain also provided O’Connor with her understanding of art as a virtue of the practical intellect. For O’Connor this meant that the artist should be comfortable working within the confines of his or her individual talent. Thus O’Connor did not see herself as an artist as a transcendent figure with unlimited vision but as a workman laboring under the obligation of a very specific set of gifts. At many points in her letters and essays she explains the oddities of her fiction – why so much violence, why such pathetic characters

– in terms of the nature of her individual talent. At times this seems like an excuse on her part, but we will see in the next section that O'Connor's literary eccentricities coincide so neatly with her religious eccentricities and the aims of her work that any apologies about the look of her fiction seem unnecessary. At the same time, some critics have suggested that parts of O'Connor's individual talent are not as singular as she sometimes assumed and that many of her peculiarities tie her to longstanding traditions in Catholic thought.

***Flannery O'Connor and Parabolic Theology***

Sallie McFague TeSelle offers means of understanding O'Connor and her emphasis on disrupted vision as part of a wider tradition in Christian thought through the concept of parabolic theology, which TeSelle describes as a form of theology that “insists on uniting language, belief, and life – the words in which we confess our faith, the process of coming to faith, and the life lived out of that faith” (“Parable” 631). TeSelle includes O'Connor among the practitioners of this brand of theology “that is not itself parable and, on the other hand, not systematic theology, but a genre of theology which attempts to stay close to the parables” and also other famous Christian writers, such as Paul, Augustine, John Wooman, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Teilhard de Chardin - a list that includes many of the Christian thinkers that O'Connor read frequently and discussed in her letters. TeSelle's concept of parabolic theology provides a very useful lens for the analysis of O'Connor's fiction because it suggests that O'Connor's literary form is itself part of a widely acknowledged tradition within Catholic orthodoxy. In addition to helping situate O'Connor's work and many of the things that look eccentric about it within a tradition, in most areas TeSelle's theory of parabolic theology is remarkably close to the way that O'Connor understood her own writing.

For one thing, TeSelle's understanding of a story's meaning is very similar to O'Connor's. TeSelle explains that parabolic theology functions through a certain sort of metaphor "in which knowledge and its expression are one and the same; there is no way around the *metaphor* it is not expendable" [italics original] ("Parable" 632). Similarly, the necessity of the process of the story itself is one of O'Connor's pet subjects. She puts it with characteristic humor:

People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were the like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken-feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction. [...] The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. (*Mystery* 96)

O'Connor's language of embodiment in the passage gets at another point of continuity between her thoughts on her own work and TeSelle's theory of parabolic theology: the idea of her fiction as an incarnational art. As TeSelle explains it, "We do not live in a secular world that must be discarded when we become 'religious,' nor do we live in a 'religious' world which has no truck with the secular: the parabolic world shows us another possibility (and this is what the incarnation is about) – that 'God is with us' in, through, under, and for our human, historical, temporal world" ("Parable" 633). O'Connor too, is highly conscious of what she calls a "Manichean" tendency in the modern mind that separates grace and the natural world, and that the "incarnation art" of

fiction seeks to counteract (*Mystery* 68). In a lecture, she ties the struggle against this kind of divided thinking, to the very core of Christianity, just as TeSelle when she adds “this is what the incarnation is about”: “Redemption is meaningless,” O’Connor writes, “unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live [...]” (*Mystery* 33).

The continuities between TeSelle’s theory of parabolic theology and O’Connor’s understanding of her own work help validate the model of parabolic theology as a lens through which O’Connor can be read. And indeed, it is a model that throws considerable light on how the stories work. For one thing, the comparison with New Testament parables helps us understand the moral universe in which O’Connor sets her fiction and the effect it is supposed to have on the reader. TeSelle writes, “The parables again and again indicate that it is in the seemingly insignificant events of being invited to a party and refusing to go [or] being jealous of a younger brother who seems to have it all his way [...] that the ultimate issues of life are decided” (634). The same statement would hold for any of O’Connor’s stories, and “Everything that Rises Must Converge” is a particularly good embodiment of this phenomenon. Julian’s moral failures are all born out of a petty bitterness with his mother and are all demonstrated on a very small scale, but it is on the basis of these small failures that Julian’s life is changed forever. As TeSelle puts it, the parable begins with “a way of believing and living that initially seems ordinary, but is so dislocated and rent from its usual context that, if the parable ‘works,’ the spectators become participants, not because they want to necessarily or simply have ‘gotten the point’ but because they have, as the new ‘hermeneuts’ say, ‘been interpreted’” (634). As we have seen this, exactly how a story like “Everything that Rises” works on the reader: the reader, like the characters, undergoes a process of revelation and a

reordering of vision that works not as a rational argument but because the reader has identified with the everyday concerns of the story and entered into the narrative, thereby making the critique of the characters a form of self-criticism. In seeing the character's vision reordered, the reader finds his own everyday modes of thought interrupted.

O'Connor This type of narrative theology is more concerned with affecting the internal life of the reader than making assertions about the divine. It uses the experience of characters and readers as a means towards an intimation of God. Thus Julian's fallenness and insufficiency become a statement about the power of the divine. As TeSelle points out, "we must be precise when we speak of how assertions are made about God in parables. They are made not in direct propositions but with what Philip Wheelwright calls 'soft focus' or 'assertorial lightness'" (633). What is said about the divine is said only indirectly through metaphor. Thus the closest we get to God in "Everything that Rises" is the cluster of lights towards which Julian runs at the end of the story. We assume that these lights represent a solution to the "world of guilt and sorrow" of authentic earthly existence, but this point about the divine is never explicitly confirmed. When O'Connor said that she wrote "about the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil," she roughly admits that the action of grace is only visible because of the contrast with everything else. In this story there is almost no definite action of God. What we do get is O'Connor's argument for why she considers our typical, secular worldview to be territory in the devil's possession. So when we talk about O'Connor's work as a theological enterprise we have to keep in mind that O'Connor asserts almost nothing about God in Himself, but deals instead with the relationship between God and man.

So TeSelle's model provides a helpful lens for reading O'Connor's fiction. The concept of parabolic theology has much in common with O'Connor's understanding of her own work and can help us situate the fiction within a tradition and understand how it handles theological questions. TeSelle's model is very strong and especially pertinent to O'Connor's work, and in many ways her way of reading fiction parallels O'Connor way of writing it. There is, however, one critical point at which TeSelle's theory seems incompatible with O'Connor's work. Importantly, while TeSelle maintains that parabolic theology describes "the words in which we confess our faith, the process of coming to faith, and the life lived out of that faith" ("Parabolic" 631), O'Connor's fiction never treats the appropriate lifestyle of the faithful. Her characters may come to faith, but as soon as that happens, they are either killed off or the story ends.

We have looked in this section at the outlines of Flannery O'Connor's literary vision. Her fiction works by exposing the cracks in the everyday worldviews of her characters and her audience. Through her use of violence and the grotesque O'Connor turns these fissures into genuine breaches through which her characters and her audience are supposed to experience a new way of seeing. This approach to fiction writing corresponds with O'Connor stated goal of opening up a new mode of vision and is one of the things that TeSelle uses in characterizing her as a practitioner of parabolic theology. In the next section, we will see in greater detail the religious motivations behind this artistic form. Preoccupied as O'Connor was with her artistic duty, this alone did not breathe life into her works. Rather her artistic life, like her life generally, revolved around one overriding spiritual concern: the action of grace.

grace operating in the O'Connor's stories *Section III* coping with Augustine's understanding

of grace. So far we have been discussing the tools of O'Connor's art more than the tenets of her faith. Even TeSelle's argument for O'Connor being a religious writer working within a recognizable Catholic tradition pays insufficient attention to what O'Connor herself saw as the spiritual heart of her fiction. "The different orientation towards life" (645) that TeSelle considers the endpoint of parabolic theology is not for O'Connor something contained entirely in the story's plot or its effect on the reader, though both of these suggest it: It is the action of grace. We have seen in the last two sections how O'Connor's fiction revolves around the idea of reordering the vision of her characters and her audience. Importantly, O'Connor understood this change in vision, not as in purely worldly or philosophical terms, but in the Catholic language of grace. O'Connor almost invariably describes her fiction in terms of this divine interruption of everyday human life and the reordering of vision it brings about. Thus she says, "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc." (*Habit* 275). For the typical pious reader, it might be difficult to see how O'Connor's violent and disturbing visions of human action reflect the grace of God. "Pious," however, is a word that O'Connor consistently applies with scorn, using it to label those who allow their sentimentality to mislead them into thinking of the nature of faith as "a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross" (*Habit* 354). Though the action of grace in her stories appears very strange, both her fiction and her explicit discussions of grace in her letters and speeches – and it is a subject of which she never tires – are in keeping with standard Catholic thought on the subject, such as one finds in Augustine. In this section I want to argue that the theory of

grace operating in the O'Connor's stories is in keeping with Augustine's understanding of grace, but her emphases are very different. That is to say that while her vision of grace is compatible Augustine's thought on the subject, no one reading Augustine would assume a grace that looks like O'Connor's. This difference can be explained partly by looking at some of the distinctive features of O'Connor's Catholicism and also by looking, as we did in the last section, at the effect that she is trying to have on her reader.

O'Connor's short stories and novels are structured towards the action of grace. The bulk of any given story is taken up with apparently mundane affairs intended to reveal the nature of the protagonist's pride, which is invariably the thing preventing him or her from loving God. In the last few pages, however, this relatively quiet and comic exposition is utterly disrupted either by a grotesque image or a crescendo of violence. Through this violent disruption, the characters will experience their moment of grace, to accept or refuse as their wills dictate. Those who accept their moment of grace will achieve a new way of seeing the world, one compatible with their recognition of God's presence and their own condition.

A particularly unmistakable example of this kind of climax of grace occurs in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In this story, a family driving to Florida for vacation takes a wrong turn onto an abandoned country road and soon finds itself at the mercy of a small group of escaped convicts led by the Misfit. The family members are taken a couple at the time into the woods to be shot until only the grandmother and the Misfit remain in the clearing where the family's car crashed into a tree. "Jesus! the old lady cried. 'You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I got!'" (*Stories* 131-

<sup>1</sup> See *Grace and Free Choice*, section 37.



32). After the grandmother brings Jesus into the conversation, the Misfit launches into his doubts about whether or not Christ raised the dead, which in turn pushes both characters to their moment of grace:

“I wasn’t there so I can’t say he didn’t [...] Listen lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had been there I would have known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out to put her hand on his shoulder. The Misfit sprang back and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. (132)

Notably, the grandmother’s head has to clear for her to make what seems like an absurd and patently false statement about the Misfit being her child, but O’Connor’s stories are not structured around rational insight but the power of grace and its transformative effects. The spontaneous love she shows the Misfit suggests that the grandmother has indeed accepted her moment of grace, because in the work of traditional Catholic thinkers like Augustine, charity and love are possible only through God’s grace.<sup>7</sup> O’Connor seems to confirm the old woman’s salvation in the final image of the grandmother’s body lying “in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (132). This image suggests the grandmother’s return to innocence and a renewal of the easy loving relationship between man and God that, for Catholic writers

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<sup>7</sup> See *Grace and Free Choice*, section 37.

like Augustine, was lost in the Fall.<sup>8</sup> At the same time a subtler but still meaningful shift has occurred in the Misfit. His eyes are “red-rimmed and pale and defenseless looking” (132-133), and the wiping of his glasses seems to suggest a reordering of his vision. These things are evidence of what Augustine calls “prevenient grace,” which Mary Clark defines as the instrument “whereby God gives power to those not willing to believe to make them willing to believe” (45). It is with reference to prevenient grace that Augustine writes “Let us pray, then, for our enemies, that [God’s] mercy may go before them” (*Faith, Hope, and Charity* 294), and indeed it seems that through the grandmother’s gesture, God has begun to prepare the will of the Misfit. In presenting the story to a lecture audience, O’Connor expressed optimism regarding the action of grace on the Misfit: “I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that’s another story” (113).

Had O’Connor written the story about the actions of the Misfit turned prophet, it would have been a unique addition to her work, for, contrary to what Sallie TeSelle says about parabolic theology, O’Connor almost never presents the reader with the sort of life one lives out of faith. Instead O’Connor presents her characters with the opportunity to grasp faith, shows how they accept or reject this offering of grace, and then these characters are either killed off or the story ends. O’Connor’s fiction is emphatically not about the proper lifestyle of the faithful, but about disruption, loss of self, and the new vision that she thinks are necessary to recognize the presence of God and thus live out one’s truest humanity. Her stories are consistently modeled on what on what Augustine

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Augustine’s doctrine of the grace of friendship see Clark 44.

calls operative grace. This is the grace of conversion, which J. Patout Burns explains as the mind's "turn[ing] away from the senses and attend[ing] to the interior light which God bestows on it" (18). And O'Connor's stories do indeed deal with this sort of internal transformation, climaxing when characters like Julian and the grandmother break through the pride and illusions that have prevented them from recognizing God and their true natures. Thus the basic features of O'Connor's portrayal of grace correspond with Augustine's concepts of prevenient grace, operative grace and the relationship between grace and charity.

While the actual process of grace on individuals in the stories is in keeping with Augustine's thought, much of what looks odd about O'Connor's version of grace, specifically the violence, is actually separate from the action of grace itself as O'Connor understood it. Though O'Connor's language on the subject is not totally consistent, it would be a mistake to regard the violence in her stories as a part of the action of grace. Indeed, O'Connor, like Augustine and the Catechism, portrays grace as an internal energy rather than an external or worldly force.<sup>9</sup> We can see this in the way that O'Connor uses blood as a symbol. The grandmother who invokes the mercy inherent in the Misfit's "good blood" is part of wider pattern in O'Connor's work of recognizing God's redemptive action within man's corporeal form.<sup>10</sup> In explaining the fate of the protagonist of her first novel, fittingly titled *Wise Blood*, O'Connor writes, "Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people's means of grace – they don't have no sacraments" (*Habit*

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<sup>9</sup> The *Baltimore Catechism*, which would have been standard for an American Catholic of O'Connor's time, describes grace as "a spiritual quality infused by God into the soul" (95). For a summary of Augustine's thoughts on this topic see Clark 46.

<sup>10</sup> See also *The Violent Bear It Away*: "Good blood flows in his veins [...] And good blood knows the Lord" (59).

350). This imbedded relationship with God is what Augustine calls the ontological link that exists between God and His creation, even for people outside the Church. The critical thing that this blood imagery alerts us to is that O'Connor differentiates between the violence in a story and the action of grace within her characters. Indeed, she talks about violence primarily as the means of preparing a character to accept his or her offering of grace (*Mystery* 112).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, there does seem to be an active divine hand applying this violence at just the right time. Because it would destroy the realism of the stories, these actions of God are never identified directly, but the course of events in most of the stories seems clearly contrived by a higher power to lead the character to his or her moment of grace. To this apparently premeditated nature of events O'Connor assigns the term "mystery". The language of blood and mystery confirms that O'Connor differentiates between the mystery of God's will, which may subject a character to violence, and the action of grace which is a purely internal process. The sole purpose of the violence in this scheme is to strip characters of the pride and distractions that normally keep them from addressing what O'Connor sees as the ultimate concern of life. Thus the Misfit says of the grandmother, "She would have been a good woman [...] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133).

Also like Augustine, O'Connor has to deal with the complaint that her version of grace does not leave individuals with free will, and she provides a response very similar to what Augustine uses in book eight of *The Confessions* when he says "My inner self was a house divided against itself" (170). Likewise, O'Connor points to competing

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<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, she is not completely consistent in maintaining this distinction. From time to time, she slips into language about grace itself being violent (see *Habit* 373). This, however, is the exception rather than the rule, and never appears in her lectures, where she probably is more concerned about being misunderstood by those who do not share her doctrinal background.

“psychological pulls” in characters as a demonstration of their freedom (*Habit* 488). Her overall conception of true freedom, however, comes straight from Augustine’s definition of *libertas*, which, as E. M. Burke puts it, “is the grace of Christ [healing] the effects of original sin and personal sin and so [freeing] men to live a genuinely Christian life” (“Grace” 386). O’Connor reveals a similar understanding of the relationship between sin and freedom when she says that “the Catholic novelist believes that you destroy your freedom by sin; the modern reader believes, I think, that you gain it that way” (116).

So we can say that on the basic questions of grace and free will O’Connor’s fiction is compatible with traditional Catholic thinking on the subject. To stop there, however, would be to deny O’Connor’s eccentricity and reduce her to something that she is not. While O’Connor was respectful of theological tradition, in that she did not attempt to redefine grace, the emphases in her work, especially her use of violence, are very different from what one would expect based on the tradition. Part of this stems from the fact that O’Connor’s characters do not have access to conventional means of grace – the sacraments and community of the church – as O’Connor’s quote about “wise blood [having] to be these people’s means of grace” makes clear. At the same time, given O’Connor’s fixation on violence and the grotesque, we have to assume that her consistent use of these things was more than a means out of a difficult plot situation. None of her characters, for example, ever goes marching into a Catholic church to receive his moment of grace, and even the one story that contains a priest and makes reference to the Eucharist, does so in a way that is comic and only accidentally responsible for the protagonist’s access to grace. So, indeed, we have to look beyond the situations of her characters to find an explanation for O’Connor’s strange-looking, violent grace. Most of

O'Connor's critics answer this question by looking at her as a representative of the Southern literary tradition or by considering her fiction as a reaction against her time period. I will look briefly at these commonly given explanations before moving on to what I think is more complete way of explaining O'Connor's portrayal of divine action in human life.

### ***Region and O'Connor's Violent Art***

One commonly given explanation for the association of violence and grace in O'Connor's work is to consider it a product of the literary traditions associated with O'Connor's region. Both the United States and the South in particular are associated with violent literary traditions. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, two of the most important figures in the tradition of American fiction, both combined violence and religion in ways somewhat similar to O'Connor. More important to O'Connor's development and identity as a writer, however, is the trend of violence in the Southern literary tradition that runs from Poe through O'Connor's contemporaries, Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and Walker Percy. O'Connor is very conscious of her role in perpetuating this trend, and often feels obligated to explain the Southern preoccupation with violence and the grotesque. She usually does this with reference to the Bible: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (*Mystery* 44). Whether O'Connor's theory about the origin of the Southern interest in the grotesque is correct, one has to admit that she makes sense as a member of this tradition. But even in a literary tradition that commonly

employs violence and the grotesque, O'Connor still stands out as especially consistent in her use of these things. O'Connor may have been inspired by the violence in the work of her regional forbears, but she uses it in ways that they do not. So, as much as her use of violence confirms O'Connor as part of the Southern literary tradition, the same feature of her work reveals how far she went beyond her predecessors.

### ***O'Connor's Historical Situation***

Another comparison commonly employed to explain O'Connor's interest in violence and the grotesque is by comparison with other writers of her time. Just as O'Connor understands the oddities of her fiction as part of a Southern literary tradition, she also suggests that she understands it as a sensible response to her time. In a letter to a friend O'Connor said of Christian humanism that "[the] times do seem a bit apocalyptic for anything so sane" (*Habit* 360). For O'Connor, as for many other writers and thinkers, the first half of the twentieth century, with its world wars, mass genocides, and racial tensions, seemed to have rendered any hope of human progress absurd, and she was prone to argue that the strange aesthetic of her fiction was necessary given the state of the times:

I am often told that the model of balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory, and paradise. There can be no objection to this, but also there can be no reason to assume that the result of it in these times will give us the balanced picture that it gave in Dante's. Dante lived in the thirteenth century, when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age. We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way

<sup>12</sup> For one of the many places where O'Connor confesses this respect to her letters, see *Habit* 196.

and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself. (*Mystery* 49)

Here it might be worthwhile to see how the “felt balance” that O’Connor found within herself resembles that of one her contemporaries. Specifically, a comparison of O’Connor and Simone Weil will allow us to see that many parts of O’Connor’s worldview and of her portrayal of grace in particular stem from the concerns associated with her historical situation. We will thus make a short detour to examine the similarities between these two thinkers before moving on to what I see as the best overall explanations for O’Connor’s odd treatment of grace in her fiction.

### ***Flannery O’Connor and Simone Weil on Violence***

Simone Weil was a Catholic concerned, as O’Connor was, with the extremes of violence and social incoherence that modernity had brought with it. O’Connor’s feelings on Weil were mixed. Weil took a more progressive, socially oriented view of Catholicism than did O’Connor. And while O’Connor respected her courage she rejected what John Desmond calls Weil’s “hyper intellectualism” (101), and at one point in the letters, O’Connor refers to Weil as “the angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth” (*Habit* 106). This is not to say, however, that O’Connor did not have a very deep respect for Weil’s life and work,<sup>12</sup> and their very disagreements make their commonalities, especially in their response to violence, all the more meaningful.

In her essay “*The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*” Weil grapples, as O’Connor did, with the search for meaning in violence. Published in 1939 with war about to envelop

<sup>12</sup> For one of the many places where O’Connor confesses this respect in her letters, see *Habit* 196.



Europe for the second time in 30 years, it is often read as a pacifist manifesto, but much more than just a political statement, the essay is a thoughtful Catholic's attempt to come to terms with the apparent inhumanity of her times. The remarkable similarity between Weil's conclusions and O'Connor's aesthetic provide grounds for understanding O'Connor's fiction as part of a common response to her historical situation.

Weil's main point in the essay is that force, rather than being a thing that man can possess and command, is in fact its own entity beyond human control, like a tornado blowing through the ranks of men. "Force," she writes, "is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it" (11). Two responses to the ideals of the previous century stand out in Weil's reading of Homer. The first of these is that the eighteenth-century ideal of rational human progress has proven itself bankrupt, and the second is Weil's absolute contempt for Nietzsche's philosophy of the strong man. For Weil the possession of strength is an illusion and a very dangerous one in that it leads the supposedly strong man to revel in his assumption of invulnerability and to treat the less powerful without mercy. O'Connor shares both of these comments about eighteenth century illusions and the misguided nature of man's pride with Weil. In one of her essays, O'Connor relates this distrust of nineteenth-century illusions with the history of the South: "Because we lost the war [...] we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence [...] In the South we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols" (59).

The similarities between Weil and O'Connor become even clearer when one compares Weil's theories about the impact of violence on individuals with the way that O'Connor's grace works on her characters. Weil contends that imbalances with regard to force lead to feelings of pride and shame that make it impossible for individuals to recognize their common human condition:

Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men's eyes. The strong are, as a matter of fact, never absolutely strong, nor are the weak absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this. They have in common a refusal to believe that they both belong to the same species: the weak see no relation between themselves and the strong, and vice versa. (14)

This illusion of individual superiority is a consistent theme in O'Connor's stories and for her, as for Weil, suffering was the primary means by which people lose this illusion. We can see this illusion at work and its eventual destruction as a result of suffering O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger," in which an old man, Mr. Head, takes his grandson, Nelson, on his first trip to the city since the boy was born there. Mr. Head prides himself on his wisdom, especially with regards to the African Americans they will encounter in the city. After much heated discussion of the topic, the pair encounters its first black person:

"What was that?" [Mr. Head] asked.

"A man," the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted.

"What kind of man?" Mr. Head persisted [...]

“A fat man,” Nelson said [...] “That was a nigger,” Mr. Head said and sat back. [...] “I’d thought you’d know a nigger since you seen so many when you was in the city on your first visit,” Mr. Head continued. “That’s his first nigger,” he said to the man across the aisle. (255)

However, both Mr. Head’s pride in his own wisdom and his illusion of racial superiority are to disappear when the pair finds itself lost in the black part of the unfamiliar city. After several hours of wandering in the hot sun, the pair stumbles across the grotesque image of a Negro that permanently shatters their pride and their illusions of superiority. “He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a look of wild misery instead” (268). Their suffering and the recognition of it that they find in the statue allow Mr. Head and his grandson to come together for the first time in the story in a way that is not spoiled by a competition of pride. This is exactly the conclusion that Weil draws from the *Iliad*, that suffering can penetrate the “armor” of self-deception, and that “the sense of human misery is a precondition of justice and love” (34). And so too it is through the experience of suffering and violence as embodied in the grotesque image that O’Connor’s characters find their moment of grace:

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children [...] He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy

covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought of himself as a sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him to despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise (270)

“The Artificial Nigger” proposes no progressive solution to the problem of racism, but it does find a sense of purpose behind suffering and injustice, for it is only through the experience of these things that individuals can move beyond their own pride and illusions. Thus both O’Connor’s story and Weil’s reading of the *Iliad* demonstrate a loss of faith in nineteenth-century humanism and also represent attempts to answer the twentieth-century problem of finding meaning in the violence that seemed to pervade the times.

Aside from her surprising similarity with much of Weil’s thinking, O’Connor’s preoccupation with the holocaust, which is mentioned prominently in several stories, might be taken as evidence of her worldview as a response to the horrors of the twentieth century. Rachel Carroll, for example, has used the images of stacked corpses in one of O’Connor’s stories to argue for a model of “history as trauma” within O’Connor’s fiction. Much like the comparison of O’Connor and Weil, this reading puts O’Connor against any notion of human progress: “O’Connor’s texts demonstrate a powerful problematic: that the Holocaust not only explodes a liberal myth of history as progress, but is itself enlisted by reactionary impulses in a renunciation of history as a process of change” (99).

Thus it is clear from a number of angles that, much like the protestant neo-orthodox theologians of the twentieth century many of whom she read and appreciated, O'Connor was reacting partly against what she saw the excessive optimism with which many in the nineteenth century regarded human nature.

Thus far we have looked at O'Connor's Southern roots and her situation in the midst of the violent twentieth century as possible explanations of her odd combination of grace and violence. O'Connor's critics have a tendency to adopt one of these or the other and pay insufficient attention to the singularity of O'Connor's religious worldview. Carrol, for example, sees things very simply: "The violence of O'Connor's texts has its origins in history" (112). Other literary critics see O'Connor's religion as an important part of her artistic framework, but fail to notice anything unconventional about her understanding of her faith. Thelma Shin, for example, writes that O'Connor's artistic oddity can be explained in terms of "her heritage as a Christian and as a Southerner both [of which] stem from redemption achieved through suffering" (60). However, to act as if fiction like O'Connor's were an unsurprising outgrowth of Christianity is to grossly downplay the strangeness of O'Connor's Christian vision. Indeed, most Christians and even many Catholics would probably be very surprised to hear that they subscribe to the same system of belief that operates in O'Connor's fiction.

***The Oddities of O'Connor's Catholicism as a Explanation for Her Portrayal of Grace***

There are probably as many Christianities as there are believers. Many of these share certain assumptions regarding belief and practice, but they all assign different priorities and emphasize different parts of the tradition. O'Connor's Christianity, while within the realm of Catholic orthodoxy is decidedly her own, and emphasizes parts of the

tradition that most Catholic believers and theologians do not. It is in relation to this individual understanding of her faith, in addition to her geographic and historical context, that the portrayal of grace in O'Connor's fiction is best understood.

O'Connor's Catholicism is odd first of all in the emphasis that it puts on the prophets. Strangely for a Catholic, O'Connor almost never mentions the saints in her letters or lectures. On the other hand, references to prophets and the role of prophesy abound. O'Connor understands many of her characters as prophets, as we saw in her idea of the Misfit as a prophet gone wrong (*Habit* 110), and in one letter to a friend, she extends Catholic doctrine regarding saints to the prophets so as to better explain the people who inhabit her fiction: "The prophets in the Bible are the only great ones but there is doubtless unwritten sacred history like uncanonized saints" (342-3). This revision of the Church's doctrine on saints suggests the extent to which her interest in the prophets had eclipsed the normal Catholic focus on the saints.

At the same time that O'Connor understands many of her characters as prophets, she also sees her own art as closely allied with the prophetic tradition and often explains her use of the grotesque in corresponding terms: "In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus seeing far things close up. The prophet is the realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque" (*Mystery* 44). This emphasis on the prophetic tradition, especially as a replacement of the normal focus on the saints, underscores the visionary rather than ethical focus in O'Connor's Catholicism and thus helps explain why her portrayal of grace is based around radical changes in vision rather than charity or some other indication of moral improvement. Indeed in her letters and

essays, she repeatedly calls attention to this non-ethical nature of prophesy. She says at one point, "I have found a lucky find for me in St. Thomas's sections of the *Summa* and the *De Veritate* on prophecy [...] St. T. says that prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet, not his moral life" (*Habit* 367).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, one of the most important features of prophets in O'Connor's eyes is that they are often called to their position against their will, as opposed to saints who are commonly thought of as possessing some sort of personal virtue. Like her response to her historical situation, O'Connor's focus on prophecy rather than saints underscores her profound distrust of the ethical capabilities of man and the corresponding need for shock and violence as the only sufficient means of change.

This focus on prophets, who do not necessarily embody virtue, corresponds with one of O'Connor's main preoccupations in her fiction – the sinfulness of man. She once presented her first collection of stories as "Nine stories about original sin, with my compliments" (74), and many of O'Connor's best critics have called attention to this focus in her writing. Her friend Thomas Merton, for example, treats this as the most important feature of her writing, ending his "Prose Elegy" of O'Connor saying, "I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and his dishonor" (42). This well-noted emphasis on man's fall confirms once again that O'Connor's most significant theological point has more to do with man's condition rather than anything about God in Himself. Indeed, the relationship of God and man in

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<sup>13</sup> O'Connor calls this passage a "lucky find" because she had been operating on this assumption for years. Indeed, the moral lives of many of her prophets are almost entirely repugnant, with one of them, Marion Tarwater, accepting his call to prophesy through the dual drowning-baptism of a mentally handicapped boy. Thus O'Connor's reference to Aquinas represents a very clear example of her independent theological convictions finding formal justification after the fact.

O'Connor's stories is the one commonly associated with the Old Testament prophets.<sup>14</sup> Early in her career as a writer, she quotes with approval the insight of one of her acquaintances who said "that the best of my work sounded like the Old Testament would sound if it were being written today – in as much (partly) as the character's relation is directly with God rather than with other people" (*Habit* 111). Thus, O'Connor's unconventional preoccupation with the prophets underscores some distinctive aspects of her brand of Christianity, most importantly her focus on vision and internal transformation rather than ethics and her focus on the fallenness of man, and these in turn help us understand why O'Connor thinks that violence is necessarily part of the solution to the spiritual problems of her characters.

Similar to her near obsession with the prophets, O'Connor's focus on unconventional parts of the New Testament may help us understand her use of violence and the strange contours of her distinctive brand of Catholicism. The title of her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, is especially revealing. It is a reference to Mt. 11:12, which the King James renders a bit more clearly than O'Connor's Douay-Rehims: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." O'Connor returns to the passage in several letters to friends, usually emphasizing a continuity of violence between the Old and New Testaments that she considers significant and too often overlooked:

One thing I observe about the title is that the general reaction is to think that it has an Old Testament flavor. Even when they read the quotation, the fact that these are Christ's words makes no great impression. That this

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<sup>14</sup> In the interest of consistency with O'Connor's letters, I will use "Old Testament" instead of "Hebrew Bible" throughout this paper.



is the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands, of an asceticism like John the Baptist's, but in the face of which even John is less than the least in the kingdom – all this is overlooked. I am speaking of the verse, apart from my book; in the book I fail to make the title's significance clear, but the title is the best thing about the book. (*Habit* 382)

For O'Connor the defining feature of the New Testament, like that of the prophets is the experience of violence. And indeed, violence is the metaphor she uses for any genuine religious experience; hence religion is the "cross" rather than the "electric blanket".

O'Connor's understanding of violence as the metaphor for the personal religious experience is spelled out very clearly in another reference to Matt 11:12 written a few years after the one above: "This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward" (*Habit* 486). This internal violence is unmistakable in O'Connor's characters, who are torn between belief and unbelief, and God's will and their own. For example, Mason Tarwater, the aged prophet who dies in the first sentence of *The Violent Bear It Away* but appears in flashbacks throughout the novel, spent days in the woods "while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord" (8). The same character differentiates between the sufferings "that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the lord and burn the prophet clean" (5). Throughout *The Violent Bear It Away* and elsewhere, the metaphors used for God's action within the individual are those of violence. Thus the prophet describes himself as being "torn by the lord's eye" and adds, lest his nephew think prophecy a glamorous vocation, "even the mercy of the lord burns" (20). Thus external violence becomes only

Indeed the understanding of external violence as only a metaphor for internal violence goes so far as O'Connor's thought that actual violence between characters becomes ethically meaningless. This explains how O'Connor can say of the murder of a retarded child in one of her novels that "the murder is forgotten by God" (*Habit* 343).

a shadow or sign of internal struggle.<sup>15</sup> It is in this light, as a metaphor for internal, spiritual violence that that O'Connor's use of violence and the grotesque in her fiction is best understood.

So while O'Connor's geographic and historical situation can provide some insight into why her portrayal of grace and all genuine religious experience is so closely tied to violence, these explanations are very much incomplete until one examines O'Connor's unusual understanding of Catholic tradition, specifically her emphasis on the prophets and her understanding of violence as something central to God's action in the New Testament. Indeed, once one considers O'Connor's situation and the oddity of her personal brand of Christianity, there is only one piece missing from a full explanation of O'Connor's use of violence, and this is the effect she is trying to have on her audience. We can see this attempt to use violence against her reader most clearly demonstrated in the oddities of O'Connor's prose style.

### ***Violence, the Grotesque, and the Reader***

O'Connor's use of violence and the grotesque is not only a manifestation of her own understanding of religion as a process of internal disruption and violence it is also a means of inflicting this kind of disturbance on the reader. When one thinks of her writings, a peculiar set of images come to mind: burning tractors, old women held at gunpoint, people gored by bulls. These images are frightening because they depict danger and physical suffering, but, more importantly, because they herald critical moments for the souls of characters. Inseparable from O'Connor's violent imagery is her

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use of symbolism, which she employs to achieve a similar twofold sense of danger, one danger being physical and the other spiritual. In her imagery and symbolism, it is clear that O'Connor's fictional world points to another world yet to come. Interestingly, the violent application of grace can also be found in her style, a level of writing more fundamental than either imagery or symbolism. Her style, and her use of similes in particular, helps O'Connor provide the full effect of her unsettling vision to the reader, not by describing but by acting out a form of violence on the reader. Just as charging bulls and escaped convicts enact violence on O'Connor's characters, she uses her style to enact this on her audience, thus preparing them for the character's moment of grace and causing an analogous disordering of the reader's worldview.

Her abnormal application of similes and comparisons is probably the most disturbing part of O'Connor's literary technique. Rarely does she use similes as an aid to the physical description of an object or to improve the evocative quality of her writing generally. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example, we run into sentences like "He [Bailey] had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it and his face was as yellow as the shirt" (125). What is interesting here is that, as the reader has never seen the shirt, it cannot provide any reference for yellowness. The purpose of the comparison has little to do with the actual color of Bailey's face; rather, the juxtaposition of the cheerful design of the shirt and the horrifying situation of the character, who is being held at gunpoint, provides a subtle comic touch that, in light of the horrors being described, serves to further disturb rather than lighten the mood. This sort of juxtaposition between opposite states of mind, like cheer and terror or tranquility and

spiritual change is a common device used by O'Connor's critics, who more often

violence, is found in many of O'Connor's similes and serves to constantly jar the reader out of any emotional complacency.

We see this again in the same story where O'Connor describes a character as "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears" (117). Of course, cabbages are known neither for their breadth nor their innocence. Thus this simile cannot function in the traditional sense as an aid to physical description; instead, it serves as part of O'Connor's attempt to develop a certain tone towards the family, every member of which she portrays as absurd. At the same time, the incongruity between the two things under comparison, people and produce, is intended to seem unbalanced and to leave the reader off-kilter. Indeed, her similes are often downright violent in their use of incongruous images. She once wrote, "In my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (*Mystery* 113). Her similes effect a similar preparation on the reader, preparing him to accept as reasonable the character's final moment of truth.

"In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense" (*Mystery* 31). To her credit, O'Connor's dramatic sense does coincide with her moral sense and specifically her sense of grace. This sense of grace, we have seen is both traditional and peculiar. Its basic outlines come from Augustine, but one has to look beyond traditional Catholic theology to find an explanation for the close relationship between grace and violence in the stories. This conflation of worldly violence and spiritual change is a common stumbling point for O'Connor's critics, who, more often

than not, point to her literary heritage or her response to modernity and ignore the oddities of her version of Catholicism. While examinations of O'Connor's regional traditions and, even more so, of her response to modernity can reveal a great deal about her fiction, it is only with reference to her distinctive reading of sacred history that we can make sense of the content and form of O'Connor's work. Both of these revolve around grace, its action on her characters and its action on the reader. In the next section, we will look briefly at the way that O'Connor understands the human beings who inhabit her fiction before moving on to some concluding thoughts.

Edward's sermon than the writings of an orthodox Catholic. And more than ever, more has stopped to ask himself, "Is Flannery O'Connor, for all the language about grace and all the concern over Augustine and Aquinas, really a closet Calvinist?"

Some critics have argued that even this interpretation attributes too much optimism to O'Connor. In "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor", Andre Bleikasten argues that O'Connor's Catholicism is just her "alibi for misanthropy" and "a savage indictment of the human race" that is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith. As Bleikasten, the Christian themes in the stories only confirm how much O'Connor's Catholicism was already distorted. "She was not," he concludes, "a Catholic novelist. She was a writer, and that is what she belongs to: no other parish than literature" (117).

Both of these readings of O'Connor, as a Calvinist or an outright atheist, hinge upon a single point: the gap between the sacred and the profane in the sermon. If the sacred is some intellectual conception or purely spiritual force completely detached from matter and human life, then arguably O'Connor was closer to Calvinism than Catholic orthodoxy. Alternately, if no characters never actually have access to the sacred at all,

## Section IV

*I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to show is irritation. In some this produces hives, in others literature, in me both.*

- Flannery O'Connor (*Habit* 164)

It is clear that Flannery O'Connor did not hold mankind in very high regard. Most of her characters are subjected to such intense satire that they are reduced to little more than ashes. Her men and women have absolutely no ethical potential and must be saved by the grace of God alone, which comes in a storm of violence and claims them, if it does, largely against their wills. This world, one might argue, looks more like a Jonathan Edward's sermon than the writings of an orthodox Catholic. And more than one reader has stopped to ask himself, "Is Flannery O'Connor, for all the language about grace and all the concern over Augustine and Aquinas, really a closet Calvinist?"

Some critics have argued that even this interpretation attributes too much optimism to O'Connor. In "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor", André Bleikasten argues that O'Connor's Catholicism is just her "alibi for misanthropy" and "a savage revilement of the human race" that is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith (142). For Bleikasten the Christian themes in the stories only confirm how much O'Connor's Catholicism was already shattered. "She was not," he concludes, "a Catholic novelist. She was a writer, and as a writer she belongs to no other parish than literature" (157).

Both of these readings of O'Connor, as a Calvinist or an outright nihilist, hinge upon a single point: the link between the sacred and the profane in the stories. If the sacred is some intellectual realization or purely spiritual force completely distinct from matter and human life, then arguably O'Connor was closer to Calvinism than Catholic orthodoxy. Alternately, if her characters never actually have access to the sacred at all,

then presumably she must have been a nihilist. In fact, both of these readings point to important tendencies within O'Connor's work. In many stories, perhaps even most stories, she seems to be pressing towards one or the other heresy. Indeed, almost without exception her stories seem to act on the Protestant assumption of the irrelevance of human works. Somehow, however, (and contrary to what many critics have argued) this total emphasis on grace does not correspond in O'Connor's thought with a belief in the absolute transcendence of God. God, as he reveals himself in O'Connor's fiction, works through the structures this imperfect world. He is not an utterly transcendent spirit but a force engaged with the world and active even within individual human beings.

O'Connor's theology is far too incarnational for her to be a protestant or a genuine hater of creation. She once said that "if the Eucharist is just a symbol, then to hell with it," and indeed, the way we know that human nature is not evil in itself in O'Connor's work is because the action of grace occurs as an almost bodily process that finds an open receptacle in human nature. If sin and the fall are inherent in the human condition, O'Connor seems to say, so too is the restoration. O'Connor demonstrates this belief and defends herself from both heresies in one of her last and most powerful stories, "Parker's Back." Looking at this story, we will see that O'Connor is clearly not a Protestant and that, for all of her satire, there is an underlying respect for the human condition.

"Parker's Back" is the story of O.E. Parker, who falls off a tractor and gets a Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back and of his wife, Sarah Ruth. In the story O'Connor dramatizes both what she sees as the heresy of absolutely separating nature and God and

also the correct attitude in which God's mystery is recognized as something concretely present in actual human experience.

Sarah Ruth is O'Connor's parody of Protestantism. Her father is a "straight gospel preacher," and the most sacred thing she can think of to swear upon is "God's holy word" (517). Moreover, she's a thorough legalist – "forever sniffing up sin" as Parker thinks to himself – and she likes to proclaim things, even churches, idolatrous (518). When Sara Ruth sees Parker's tattoo she says "God? God don't look like that! [...] He don't *look* [...] He's a spirit. No man shall see his face" (529). O'Connor, in contrast, seems to see God's presence everywhere, and her criticism of Sarah Ruth's attitude is that in her fear of sin and her desire to distance herself from creation, she cuts herself off from the real presence of God.

Parker, in contrast, with his tattoos of plants and animals is firmly tied to the created world, and O'Connor underscores a parallel connection to the sacred by tying his body to the whole course of sacred history, culminating in his symbolic crucifixion at the hands of his wife.<sup>16</sup> After he gets the tattoo on his back, he goes to the local bar where his friends jeer him and subject him to a symbolic stab of the lance before deserting him altogether (526). Then comes the physical abuse of his wife, her broomstick landing across his shoulders like a crossbeam (529). Parker is last seen with his back to a tree, the site of his fall and of his salvation. He, with his tattoos and "his soul like a perfect

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<sup>16</sup> While in the navy, Parker represents the uncreated chaos: "It was as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare" (514), until, that is, he is put into the brig for nine months. These nine months suggest the period of gestation and establish the post-navy O.E. Parker as the creation in its pre-fallen state. It is in this condition that Parker, "selling the fruits of the earth" (519), becomes an agent in Sara Ruth's fall, tempting her with his tattoos, to which she responds "as if she had accidentally grasped a poisonous snake" while "two circles of red appeared like apples" on her cheeks (512). At the tattoo parlor, the "Artist" correctly diagnoses the situation, telling Parker "You've fallen off some" (521). From innocent nature, Parker has become aware of his shameful condition, and like Adam searching for leaves to cover his shame, Parker is compelled to go into the city and cover his back with a tattoo.



arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (528), is all of creation restored. Sarah Ruth, on the other hand, couldn't think herself any more superior to the created order. After hitting Parker with the broom, she goes "to the window and [shakes] it out to get the taint of him off it" (530). The word "taint" here refers to two things at once: It is Parker's and also Christ's, for when Sarah Ruth was hitting Parker, she was also hitting the image of the lord "until [...] large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ" (529), and in cleansing herself of her husband's dirt she is also denying God. Thus Sarah Ruth's disgust with human beings and the created order carries with it a willful separation from the sacred.

In her fiction and letters O'Connor consistently dismisses Protestantism as Christianity that does not grasp the significance of the crucifixion.<sup>17</sup> In one of her letters she summarizes what she takes as the Protestant attitude: "I get the notion that you may dip largely into your head. This would be in line with the Protestant temper – approaching the spiritual direction instead of through matter" (*Habit* 304). And, similarly, she dislikes the wider society for missing what for her was the crux of all existence.

In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, O'Connor writes, "Of course I hear constantly the complaint over and over that there is no sense in writing about people who disgust you. I think there is; but the fact is that the people I write about certainly don't disgust me entirely though I see them from a standard of judgment from which they fall short" (*Habit* 221). This, however, is at best a half answer. What causes the sense of anger in

<sup>17</sup> Consider the following exchange from *Wise Blood*, O'Connor's first novel:

He said he was a preacher.

The woman looked at him thoroughly and then she looked behind him at his car. "What church?" she asked.

He said the Church Without Christ.

"Protestant?" she asked suspiciously, "or something foreign?"

He said no mam, it was Protestant. (*Wise Blood* 106)

Elsewhere, O'Connor admitted that this was not completely fair, see *Habit* 69.

the stories is not the fact that the characters fall short, that is inevitable given the standard by which they are being judged, but the fact that they don't recognize their failures. They are like Parker before he is beaten by his wife making "as much noise as possible to assert that he was still in charge" (*Stories* 527). Their pride and self-absorption, not their moral failures, are the things keeping them from recognizing the action of the sacred and winning O'Connor's approval. Thus it is exactly when Mr. Head realizes that "no sin was too monstrous for him to claim it as his own" that "he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (270).

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

In the same letter, O'Connor goes on to say something much more insightful about her own work: "I take the Dogmas of the Church literally and this, I think, is what creates what you call the 'missing link.' The only concern, so far as I see it, is what Tillich calls the 'ultimate concern.' It is what makes the stories appear spare and what gives them any permanent quality they may have" (*Habit* 221). This same quality, I think, is what makes O'Connor so hard to live with. There is no meeting her half way: one either dismisses her beliefs out of hand, as many secular critics are inclined to do, or one accepts her thoughts without reservation and with little attention to how peculiar they are. It is very difficult for the reader or critic to enter into a dialogue with O'Connor, conceding some points and asking her to yield on others. Her literary vision maintains a single focus and a single tone in a way that is almost intimidating. O'Connor never takes her eyes off the sun, never flinches from the "ultimate concern" as she puts it.

I think that this single focus of her vision and the fact that she cannot be argued with suggests that O'Connor is best read as a prophet rather than a theologian. Her focus

after all is not really on questions of God but on the condition of man, and, while looking at her treatment of theological questions reveals important, sometimes competing, strands in her thought, the overall vision is not suitable for dissection or rational argument. At the same time her most important theological points – the focus on reordering vision and the relationship between grace and violence which the stories enact on the reader – all bend towards a focus on her audience not the subject of God.

As much as O'Connor would hate the suggestion, her singularly focused vision must be attributed in some way to the fact that she did all her best writing while terminally ill. The day-to-day diversions and the illusion of immortality that are permitted to most of us were never permitted to O'Connor. Like the grandmother in the Misfit's suggestion, O'Connor did have someone there to shoot her every minute of her life, and true to form she recognized this as a blessing: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies" (*Habit* 163). It is true that the reader will never know the inner turmoil or personal agony out of which O'Connor's art was born, but through her fiction she does indeed impart some of her suffering to the reader.

She once said of a friend of hers who committed suicide, "His tragedy I suppose is that he didn't know what to do with his suffering" (*Habit* 287). O'Connor certainly knew what to do with hers, and yet to say only that is to miss the profound and terrible comedy with which she lived and wrote. She said that her task was the accurate naming of the things of God, and she accomplished this goal with such dry, hot wit that she often

seems like a demon working on the Lord's side, but she handled her personal tragedies and her limitations, artistic and otherwise, with such humor and grace that any charges of bitterness or contempt for human life look frivolous. Once, laid up with an outbreak of the lupus that would kill her a few years later, she ended a letter to a friend with the following:

Today it is snowing here & were I not confined to my bed taking two-toned pills I would be painting a snow scene. This would be appropriate as I have this large tube of white and snow is white. On this truth, I will leave you. (*Habit* 378)

Like the white paint for the white snow, O'Connor seems to see the brushstrokes of her scathing prose as the only appropriate expression of human experience. There is a sense in which, however her critics might point to theological influences or aspects of her situation, what O'Connor wrote was a personal inevitability and a vision so stark that considerations of subtlety are totally out of place. It is as Mr. Head thinks towards the end of "The Artificial Nigger":

Mr. Head turned slowly. He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like with out light and what man would be like without salvation. He didn't care if he never made the train and if it had not been for what suddenly caught his attention, like a cry out of a gathering dusk, he might have forgotten there was a station to go to.  
(268)

More than anything else, that's what O'Connor was and remains: a cry out of a gathering dusk.

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