

Flannery O'Connor and Modern Literary Tradition--
The Metaphysics of A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

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One factor that keeps readers interested in Flannery O'Connor twenty-three years after her death is that no one attempt to label her as a particular kind of writer is completely satisfying. She is described as Catholic, fundamentalist, Southern gothic, Thomistic, existential, absurd, Chardinian, primitive, and so on. She is all of these, of course, and more. Perhaps it is the complexity of her vision that both intrigues and illudes readers and critics alike. A way of looking at O'Connor--one that few have considered and may help to see her as a whole--is to take a number of her stories and show how they weave a kind of philosophical web, each contributing in its own way to an overall pattern that is her view of mankind in a post-atomic age.¹ I would like to review several of these stories from her collection A Good Man Is Hard To Find (1955) to illustrate how she looks back to other 20th Century writers for themes and techniques, but then structures within her peculiar style a philosophical mosaic. It is one that has evolved from her own life, presents a fairly complete picture, and yet remains consistent throughout.

There is no doubt that O'Connor uses ancient or classic literature to underpin her stories. One thinks of Matthew's Gospel, for instance, as a natural source of the baptismal imagery in "The River." Or, a document written later in Christian history, Cyril of Jerusalem's Catechetical Lectures, a militant approach to the subject of baptismal renewal, most likely inspired her notion of the dragon-Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." "Artificial Nigger" finds its analogue

in Dante's Inferno, when Mr. Head and the boy Nelson journey through the hellish circles of Atlanta and, like their medieval counterparts, emerge aghast, but somehow mutually renewed, by what they have seen.² And the backdrop for O'Connor's primitive theme and setting in "A Circle in the Fire" may well be Sir James Frazer's Golden Bough, a collection of ancient beliefs and ceremonies that embodies age-old notions of matter, time, and space.³ In all these cases she seems to incorporate ideas as well as the tone of a particular work into her own stories so as to give them new depth and power.

But O'Connor is no less interested in modern writers. James Joyce's "Araby" and Portrait of an Artist may be models in reverse for her "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," where a child comes to appreciate material-bodily things.⁴ O'Connor's religious sensibility, though, is most akin to T. S. Eliot,⁵ and his poem "Ash Wednesday" is a natural paradigm for Ruby's cyclic climbing of the stairs as a means of spiritual purgation in "A Stroke of Good Fortune." Albert Camus is another important figure for Miss O'Connor,⁶ and I submit The Stranger is in the shadows of old General Sash's notion of "the present moment" in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy." Another work O'Connor admired is Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises,⁷ and there is little doubt his notion of the expatriate, indeed the place of place itself, lurks behind her complex development of the theme of displacement on many levels in her story "The Displaced Person." Finally, she actually toys with extremes of being and nothingness where philosopher-writers Jean-Paul

Sartre and Gabriel Marcel--"No Exit" and "Man of God"--become the two poles of existence in her rural drama "Good Country People."⁸ O'Connor use of modern analogues, however, is unique in that she most often reinterprets them within her stories to construct a philosophy of her own--one addressing such basic notions as the relation of spirit and body, the meaning of time and place, and the very process (however painful) by which human beings, no less than the universe itself, move toward new levels of being.

Let's look first to her use of Joyce. He was the first to define "epiphany" as a sudden and often traumatic awareness of new meaning--a technique O'Connor uses in nearly every story. Philosophically, however, Joyce is important to her because of his characters' view of something as basic as matter, especially as it relates to the human body. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Stephen's epiphany centers around the body of a girl which, instead of viewing as a source of impure thoughts, he idealizes as a young artist in love with the power of words. Language for him becomes primary, and because of its beautiful sounds and liberating sensations, he rejects his family, church, and country to pursue its ends. It is interesting that this change is done in the context of a Eucharistic hymn which, as created by the boy, is vague and romantic, for he has replaced his priestly vocation with a new religion of creativity, whatever the stage of his artistic growth at that time. It is true that Joyce himself examines the problem of

matter more extensively in Ulysses,⁹ but it is Portrait that is basic to so many 20th Century writers' views of the material world, including the body. Here the artist, as it were, replaces God as the center of creation, and the stuff of this creation is the physical world, quite apart from any ethical-religious judgments regarding it.

For O'Connor, matter also has a metaphysical meaning. In "Temple" her child undergoes a mental change regarding the body too, and in the background is St. Thomas' Eucharistic hymn "Tantum Ergo," where the theme is the presence of the divine in the human, a notion that requires faith as well as reason. Here, however, the reader is asked to make several connections. In contrast to the child's cousins, who have been bodily manipulated by their suitors (a factor O'Connor treats humorously through mechanical images), the child comes to see a hermaphrodite at the fair--a male/female that has also been used by society, this time for money--as sacred because he-she-it is conscious of being a creature of God. So when the child sees the Eucharistic Body of Christ in the Host at the Benediction at the story's end, she is able to contemplate the significance of matter imbued with spirit--something that is to be revered with awe, not just manipulated for selfish ends. Joyce's novel is a bildungsroman, where the boy is liberated from old religious guilts in the name of artist-as-creator. The girl in O'Connor's story also "grows up," though she comes to see the human body not only as beautiful, but religious--holy in itself.¹⁰ To illustrate

this fact O'Connor as creator dedicates her art. Though her theme and techniques resemble those of Joyce, her notion of the divine as part of the human is different. For her the body is not only beautiful, it is of intrinsic worth.

Another philosophical topic in O'Connor is time. Here she looks back to Albert Camus, whom she admired as a man of great human concern, though the two differ on this issue. In The Stranger Camus' hero Meursault is found guilty of shooting an Arab several times, not because he was affected by the sun, but because (in the eyes of the jury) he did not weep at his mother's funeral, because he sleeps casually with a woman named Marie, and because he helped a friend of dubious reputation write a letter. Meursault refuses to confess his "sins" to a priest and accepts his death as part of a life he cannot regret. He is liberated because he finds "the present moment" more important than guilt over past actions, or needless concern over the future of his soul. Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus says one must live within the barriers of "the now" and not look to suicide or leaps of faith to solve present dilemmas.¹¹ His kind of existential thinking touched an audience that continues to find freedom and satisfaction in his perspective, and his art--the language and prose rhythms surrounding Meursault's decision--help define this point of view toward time. Camus' hero may be an outsider to society, but internally as a human being he is free.

O'Connor's "Late Encounter" is also about time, though

she does not isolate one moment from another. Here 102-year-old General Sash attends his 62-year-old granddaughter's graduation, but is more taken with "pretty guls," the Miss Daytona Beach types, than anything else. Tied up in "the present moment," he forgets the historic past he is supposed to represent on stage. As a result the words of the speaker--"If we forget our past, we won't remember our future and it will be as well for we won't have one" (p. 156)¹²--come at the old soldier like bullets, leaving him shot to death "a corpse" at the end. "Late Encounter" parallels The Stranger where shooting is also central to the novel, except O'Connor rejects "the present moment" as meaningful apart from "the living past." Actually, she opts for the primitive notion of time where, says Cassirer, the present is laden with the past and charged with the future.¹³ O'Connor's story, unlike Camus' novel, of course, is comic and grotesque, and in a way a parody of Camus' notion of "the now" separated from other dimensions of time. Time for her is also connected to "the body" and the material world, which--again in primitive thinking--is filled with spirit, something Meursault is indifferent to regarding Marie, and which old Sash neglects in his materialistic approach to girls and beauty contests. Thus, for O'Connor the body is not "king,"¹⁴ as with Camus, nor is time one-dimensional. Rather, the material is spirit-filled precisely because it is related to time in its totality; it is time which charges the body with spiritual meaning and accounts for its sacred and awesome nature.

A third important notion is place. Now O'Connor turns to Hemingway. In The Sun Also Rises Jake Barnes and his friends are living in Paris after World War I as expatriates. Traditional values of love and marriage are gone, and what remains is a stoic community of men and women who exist, but for whom significant relationships have lost their meaning.¹⁵ Jake himself is emasculated, but takes pride in paying his bills and other acts that help maintain his dignity in spite of his wound. In this context Brett Ashley associates with Jake, but finds sexual satisfaction elsewhere; she becomes a kind of mythic Circe,¹⁶ whom the author highlights through the use of ritual and ceremony at the fiesta as though she were a goddess. The bullfighter Romero, whom Jake admires because he follows a code of discipline and honor, is a symbol of past values, though he too is seduced by Brett. In this novel, not only is the body king, and time divorced from the past or future, but place itself as a source of stability and tradition has disappeared. What remains is an ability to survive,¹⁷ and the novel ends on an ambiguous note, where Brett joins Jake after refusing to destroy Romero; she has a good feeling--something they have "instead of God." Ironically, though place is in one sense destroyed in The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway's simple and direct style stresses the importance of concrete reality, quite divorced from abstractions and idealizations related to past glory or future hope.

A disciple of Hemingway, Miss O'Connor is a realist who uses short descriptive sentences to catch telling details of

setting, as well as the speech and mannerisms of her area. As with Hemingway's novel, her story abounds in superb minor characters who help define the meaning of place. And both stories reflect a common structure--three parts moving toward an ambiguous ending. It is the main characters and theme, however, that set O'Connor apart. In "Displaced Person," taking place after World War II rather than World War I, a Pole, Mr. Guizac, is brought by a priest to the American South to work on the farm of a widow Mrs. McIntyre. She admires his efficiency compared to that of Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, employees whom she consequently lets go. But Mr. Shortley returns and Mrs. McIntyre changes her mind about Mr. Guizac when he wants to bring a cousin from Europe to marry a black on his landlady's farm. She won't hear of this and the Pole is killed by a tractor through a collusion of forces, including Mr. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre. As a result she has a nervous breakdown and all hands are dismissed, leaving her alone with the priest and a few peacocks. The peacock is crucial to the story; we first see it in a virtual ceremonial setting (p. 185), then Mrs. Shortley actually sees in the bird's tail a vision of the universe (pp. 191-2), and the priest constantly calls attention to its tail which he equates with the Transfiguration and Second Coming--realities which might have materialized had Mrs. McIntyre responded differently to the D.P.

Like Jake, Guizac works hard, and his presence pervades the story. Unlike Jake, however, who makes the best of a bad

situation, the Pole acts to combine continents. If Brett is a sex goddess, for O'Connor the peacock is a strutter, dancer and vocalizer,¹⁸ but its tail is also symbolic of the Incarnation, projecting the potential global community behind the D.P.'s intention. Brett's refusal to have sex with Romero, of course, helps her maintain her selfhood in a devastated environment; the peacock, on the other hand, is a sacramental sign--rooted on the farm, but with a history as old as the catacombs¹⁹--which invites action that could unite past with present, Europe with America, the divine with the human, in short "transfigure" a whole situation. Mrs. McIntyre, of course, is the fulcrum of the story, and she, too, is rooted in place--a bias Southern farm where her decision to affirm Guizac would amount to a virtual Second Coming.²⁰ She fails, and in the end is displaced psychologically and spiritually--far more devastating than the geographical displacement of the Pole. For Hemingway, Paris and Spain in the 20's are places to describe the consequences of the loss of values like love and deep human relationship. For O'Connor, the South in the 50's is a place to show how love and community sharing may be lost if we choose to objectify matter, deny the connection between past and present, and refuse to see physical place as a challenge to spiritual growth. For her the Mysteries of Christianity are always potentially here, and demand only our existential choice.

There are other stories that help see O'Connor whole. In Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" a persona mounts a stairs in a purga-

tive struggle. The poetic images--a lady, a "jagged-toothed" old man, a fountain--externalize, as in great mystics like John of the Cross,²¹ the internal dispositions of a soul moving toward divine reality. So in "Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby is a humorous grotesque struggling up the stairs of her apartment house; on one level of being she resists a pregnancy in her body, but related to this is deeper unconsciousness of a fundamental materialism in her soul. As with Eliot, the external forces on the stairs--Madam Zooleda who predicts her "moving fortune," an old man possessed with "the fountain of youth," another lady, Laverne, who "shoes" her into facing motherhood--all help unleash a subconscious self that seeks to emerge through Ruby's smug and self-satisfied ego.²² In the end a young brat, Harley Gilfeet, upsetting her on the stairs, enables her to face her inner struggle for self-knowledge and personal freedom. Again, it is a life-spirit in her body that needs recognition,²³ something which is connected with her past (her collective unconscious), and it is her place, the stairs, which provides the context for her slow internal redemption. In being displaced here--de Chardin speaks of atomic explosions which coalesce and reunite²⁴--she finds her inner place, or self, but only after a long and painful struggle upward.

If O'Connor is close in technique and thinking to Eliot, she balances the thought of two French existentialists, Sartre and Marcel, in another story, "Good Country People." This story, a virtual summary of her philosophy, asks whether

life is about "nothing" or "something"--something beyond mere matter, timeless, and yet real. For Sartre, "hell is other people." There is no such thing as love, but people who objectify each other through will power.²⁵ By contrast, Marcel sees love as a mystery of creative relationships, where individuals grow through openness, not manipulation of each other. For him, the sense of wonder and possible tragic loss are absent from Sartre's thinking, who he says reduces love to a function of the will.²⁶ In "Good Country People" Joy-Hulga, a rural girl with a Ph.D., believes in "nothing" and is seduced by a Bible salesman she thinks shares her philosophy. Ironically, he does, and she is consequently ravished by him in the hayloft, where he takes off her wooden leg--O'Connor's symbol of the girl's identity. In the process of losing herself, Hulga becomes aware of something "beyond wisdom"--a primitive as well as Christian experience.²⁷ With the reader she is left mysteriously contemplating the tragic consequences of her intellectualism. She discovers within herself a being that goes beyond time and comes through, not nothing, but a real body in a real hayloft.²⁸ As with Ruby, in fact with most of O'Connor's characters, Hulga's struggle ends in an epiphany about something important in life.

O'Connor, of course, is a writer, not a philosopher. But she is a student of many kinds of writers, including philosophers, ancient and modern. From Joyce she learned something about epiphanies and human growth. In Camus she must have admired the same thing, as well as his liberating descriptions

of nature, especially the sun. For her Hemingway undoubtedly provided a key to the power of pithy descriptions of real people in unusual environments. But she differed respectively with her mentors on such things as the awesome spirit within bodily things, which, by the way, so many of her own absurd characters simply lack. And she opted continually for an appreciation of time that bridged the ancient with the modern, biblical and contemporary, collective unconscious with immediate awareness; no matter that her characters do not usually make these connections. Discovery in her stories is usually a violent experience in a particular place, coupled with slow internal renewal--something she learned from such people as Eliot and de Chardin, and she admired the poetic instinct in both. Her end, of course, is not darkness and pain, as with Sartre, but eventually light and peace--indeed, Being in the fullest sense, the limits to which fallen man may aspire when he opens his whole self to the universe. Her stories are the work of an artist, but there is a philosophical rug beneath her furniture, one that she has woven stich by stich. Now it basic to her whole story.

Footnotes

¹Forest L. Ingran, "O'Connor's Seven-Story Cycle," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 2 (1973), 19-28. Ingran says O'Connor structures a particular group of stories so that the experience of reading one is affected by the experience of another.

²Gilbert Muller, "The City of Woe: O'Connor's Dantean Vision," Georgia Review, 23 (1969), 213. Muller's is one example of many who have noted O'Connor's analogy to Dante in this story. Here he explains that the trip to Hell is is a metaphorical journey on a real road.

³Charles W. Mayer, "The Comic Spirit in 'A Stroke of Good Fortune,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 16 (1977), 73. Mayer calls attention to the ancient fertility rites and ritual drama of agricultural life behind the comic element in this story. In "A Circle in the Fire" these ceremonies are indigenous to the story's theme.

⁴Gabriele Scott Robinson, "Irish Joyce and Southern O'Connor," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 5 (1976), 82-87. Though the two stories end differently, Robinson argues that there is a moral and intellectual affinity between the authors of "Araby" and "Temple," since both tales are about the social and spiritual decay of societies from which their children are displaced.

⁵Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), xxviii-xxx.

⁶Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. 159-60.

⁷Carter Martin, "Comedy and Humor in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 4 (1975), 11. Martin stresses the fact that O'Connor wrote for the same audience as Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway, and "other serious writers who had something to say about the moral and spiritual concerns of man."

⁸Carter Martin, The True Country (Kingsport: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 63-65. The author discusses O'Connor's use of Sartre, especially the despair the accompanies the realization that one is turned into a thing.

⁹David Aiken, "Flannery O'Connor's Portrait of the Artist as Failure," Arizona Quarterly, 32 (1976), 252-53. Aiken explains that Stephen's viewpoint in Portrait is not a moral portrayal, and that in Ulysses he pales beside Bloom, his moral and spiritual superior.

¹⁰Suzanne Allen, "Memories of a Southern Catholic Girlhood: Flannery O'Connor's 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost,'" Renaissance, 31 (1979), 91-92. For Allen the girl's acceptance of the physical world with all its limitations is basic to O'Connor's sacramental view of life.

¹¹Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 30, 40.

¹²O'Connor, A Good Man Is Hard To Find (Garden City: Image Books, 1970). Page numbers are taken from this edition.

¹³Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), II, 111.

¹⁴Camus, p. 60.

¹⁵O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 41, 161. O'Connor says Hemingway represents the spirit of modern times, but classifies him as a "tragic naturalist."

¹⁶Sheridan Baker, Ernest Hemingway (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 49.

¹⁷Baker, p. 51. For this critic the novel is about a shattered world and Jake is educated to its ruin.

¹⁸O'Connor, p. 175. For O'Connor this bird, though male, fills the role of a human female, and his actions on the farm resemble those of a Circe.

¹⁹The peacock appears on the walls of the catacombs (e.g., St. Pricilla's in Rome) as a symbol of the Resurrection.

²⁰Sister M. Joselyn, "Thematic Centers in 'The Displaced Person,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 1 (Winter 1964), 86. Sister Joselyn says that on the thematic level there is a relationship between the bird, Guizac, and Christ.

²¹St. John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, Doubleday, 1961), pp. 33-34.

²²Carl G. Jung, Modern Man In Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), pp. 123-4, 192. For Jung the psyche is a whole which embraces both conscious and unconscious life.

²³Mayer, p. 73. For this critic the story celebrates the defeat of illusions and pretense in their unequal confrontation with the forces of youth and life.

²⁴Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 46-52, 296-98. Chardin relates the rising and converging of the physical world to man's growth thorough permeation with "Christic energy." John Burke notes that this takes place by "hominisation," or "growth in the ability to reflect." "Convergence of Flannery O'Connor and Chardin," Renaissance, 19 (Winter 1967), 43.

²⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Wash. Square Press, 1966), pp. 484, 595.

²⁶Gabriel Marcel, The Philosophy of Existentialism, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), pp. 74-75, 88, 113.

²⁷Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), p. 157. The world beyond is consistent with Marcel's demand for a sense of wonder and with Wheelwright's primitive notion of "Something Beyond."

²⁸David Eggenschwiler, The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne St. Univ. Press, 1972), p. 57. This critic says it might be Hulga now accepts "her own body with its deformity and sexual desire," and "the ironies inherent in man's spiritual-corporeal nature."