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Breaking and Connecting in the Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor: "The Look of This Fiction is Going to be Wild" (Grace Minus Nature Equals Mystery)

John Benjamin Schwartz
Oberlin College

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Breaking and Connecting
in the Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor:

"The Look of This Fiction Is Going to be Wild"

(Grace Minus Nature Equals Mystery)

John Schwartz
Oberlin College
May 1989

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MATH

"The shortest path between two truths in the real domain passes through the complex domain."

-- Robert Young, in lecture

In 1545, the foundation-laying mathematician Girolamo Cardano observed that certain equations, if solved using traditional methods, yielded "extra" answers. The accepted solutions, if they existed, would always appear, but often additional puzzling solutions involving the hitherto undefined square root of a negative number would be the logical result of accepted solving techniques. Cardano noted that these new numbers actually did solve the equations in question: if he assumed that his new numbers obeyed the usual rules of algebra, he could always arrive at the correct answer. He considered his discovery interesting but, ultimately, pointless; he called his new numbers "sophistic" and wrote that his observation was "as subtle as it is useless" (Boyer, 314).

Raphael Bombelli, a contemporary of Cardano's, suggested manipulating these "impossible" numbers exactly as if they were the familiar numbers 1, 2, 3, et cetera. By pretending that Cardano's "impossible" numbers were possible, Bombelli hinted

that the analysis of these numbers could be useful in solving more concrete problems. He was manipulating unfamiliar objects in familiar ways and arriving at familiar conclusions, but he still had no understanding of what the new numbers meant. The square root of a negative number was as meaningless as it had ever been.

In 1637, the legendary Rene Descartes coined the name "real numbers" for our familiar 1, 2, 3, $1/2$, 2.76, and so on. He distinguished the "reals" from the as yet fuzzily defined "imaginary numbers," Cardano's mysterious quantities involving unattainable square roots of negative numbers. He believed, wrongly, that the "imaginaries" occurred only when the problem concerned had no real solution.

About 1700, the great mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the co-discoverer of modern calculus, became fascinated with imaginary numbers and analysis. He decomposed real numbers into sums that only involved imaginary numbers--that is, he found that he could express solid, real numbers using only imaginary numbers.

The ambivalent status of [imaginary] numbers is well illustrated by the remark of Leibniz, who was also a prominent theologian, that imaginary numbers are a sort of amphibian, halfway between existence and nonexistence, resembling in this respect the Holy Ghost in Christian theology. . . . He was so pleased with the idea that he wrote about it to the Jesuits, who had missionaries in China, hoping that they might use the analogy to convert the scientifically inclined Chinese emperor to Christianity. (Boyer, 444)

The analysis of imaginary numbers, now known as "complex analysis," became an increasingly important field during this time. One well-known application was in the proof of "Fermat's Great Theorem," a landmark result in number theory. These numbers

were becoming familiar mathematical tools while remaining unfounded in any recognizable arithmetic system.

By 1831, the study of imaginary numbers "had begun to acquire an air of sensibility" (Stewart, 4). In that year, Carl Friedrich Gauss, the boy wonder of modern mathematics, published a full treatise of an intuitive representation of imaginary numbers. Six years later, the great definer and labeler of modern mathematics, William Hamilton, published a complete definition of what were now called "complex numbers." Finally, the study of these numbers had a firm mathematical footing.

For the most part, however, Hamilton's work was anticlimactic. Mathematicians had been using complex numbers for three centuries without fully understanding them; by the time Gauss offered an intuitive understanding of them and Hamilton gave them a pedigree, the "foundation problem" was of trivial importance.

The early mathematicians were not so much seeking a construction of complex numbers as a meaning. . . . the development of complex analysis showed that the complex number concept was so useful that no mathematician in his right mind could possibly ignore it. The unspoken question became 'what can we do with complex numbers?', and once that had a satisfactory answer, the original philosophical question evaporated. . . . Once mathematicians had woven the notion of complex numbers into a powerful coherent theory, the fears that they had concerning the existence of complex numbers became unimportant and mathematicians lost interest in them.

(Stewart, 7)

For hundreds of years, mathematicians had been accepting a fundamental mystery and using it to arrive at elegant solutions. A path was needed to connect two truths in the real domain, and the shortest path required a rupturing of the plane. Clumsy

violence was done to the world of real numbers; mathematicians tossed around "impossible," intuition-defying complex numbers as if they understood them, and found the needed paths. The square root of a negative number--and, therefore, the foundation of all complex numbers--is as meaningless today as it was to Cardano in 1545. The inherent mystery in complex analysis has been defined and set aside: at first, mathematicians were uncomfortable with complex numbers, because the extent of their unknowability was itself unknown; as the exact bounds of what cannot be understood became clear, the concept as a whole could be applied. Once a line was drawn completely around the mystery of complex numbers (what does it mean to be the square root of a negative number?), the field as a whole gained credibility. In mathematics, a bounded mystery is acceptable.

The analogy should be inescapable by now. Connecting two points in a given fabric often requires a rupturing of that fabric. No matter what the makeup of that fabric, mathematical, philosophical, emotional, whatever, the image remains the same: drastic measures are often necessary to force a desired connection. The tools needed to effect such a disruption are often not entirely of this world. To break apart the familiar plane, a hybrid is required: a tool, like the complex numbers, that has enough in common with the familiar plane to be recognizable and meaningful there, but that embodies enough essential mystery to exert an irresistible pull toward the imaginary plane. An artist who intends to use such blunt tools must cultivate the skills of the great mathematicians: the

ability to understand that those tools can never be fully understood but can still be usefully applied.

Flannery O'Connor was not an author who was afraid to take drastic measures, or to be on familiar terms with a deep mystery. She, like the great mathematicians, had points she wanted to connect, and was willing to tear her fabric to connect them. In her fiction, the disruption she uses to forge her paths has many incarnations. The generating forces of that disruption, and the forces generated by that disruption, can be focussed into three immediately identifiable categories: comedy, violence, and the grotesque. In order to better understand O'Connor's fiction and the connections between the taxed analogy of complex numbers, her writing, and her philosophy, these three topics will be dealt with one at a time; though examples from all of her short fiction will be supplied, the discussion will pivot on three stories more or less spanning O'Connor's short-fiction canon: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1952), "Greenleaf" (1956), and "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962).

THE GOOD

"I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader."

-- O'Connor
(Mystery, 50)

Isolating the funny in Flannery O'Connor's stories is no easy task. The natural habitat of her humor shares a lot of territory with the darker elements of her fiction; her humor is intimately intertwined with anger, violence, and passion. Teasing apart the braid can be tricky. The initial approach, at least to get started, should be the Cat in the Hat's method: mark everything that isn't what you're looking for, and what's left is what you want. Or, in Sherlock Holmes's immortal words: "once you have eliminated the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth." A final introductory quote, from O'Connor herself: ". . . to know oneself is to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way round" (Mystery, 35).

The examination of humor in O'Connor should immediately be distinguished from the search for sympathetic characters. "Feel-good" humor was not what O'Connor was interested in; in fact, she

was at her most eloquent and unforgiving when responding to readers who asked her for more uplifting fiction.

I got a real ugly letter from a Boston lady. . . . She said she was a Catholic and so she couldn't understand how anybody could even HAVE such thoughts. I wish somebody real intelligent would write me but I seem to attract the lunatic fringe mainly.

(Habit, 82)

Whenever the public is heard from, it is heard demanding a literature which is balanced and will somehow heal the ravages of our times. . . . The novelist is asked to be the handmaid of his age. I have come to think of this handmaid as being very like the Negro porter who set Henry James' dressing case down in a puddle. . . . All through the South the poor man was ignobly served, and he afterwards wrote that our domestic servants were the last people in the world who should be employed in the way they were, for they were by nature unfitted for it. The case is the same with the novelist. When he is given the function of domestic, he is going to set the public's luggage down in puddle after puddle.

(Mystery, 46)

The search for sympathetic, uplifting characters in O'Connor's stories is a generally fruitless one. In the stories focussed on in this discussion, no happy protagonist stands forward; quite the opposite, in fact, O'Connor presents us with a bleak human landscape.

"Bleak human landscape" begs the associated term: "black comedy." From the beginning, critics have tried to paste the label of black comedy on O'Connor, but black is just another example of what her comedy is not. When we laugh at "black comedy," according to the generally accepted definition, we laugh at human suffering, at bleakness, at the vacancy of the human condition. When we laugh at Doctor Strangelove, we laugh at the mangling of motives for and lighthearted treatment of nuclear holocaust; when we laugh at Waiting for Godot, we laugh because

we are drained of all other reactions to the unashamedly empty place where we have always assumed a soul, an essence, should be. These two works, over the last few decades, have been central to the definition of black comedy. O'Connor shares nothing with Kubrick, Beckett, and their ilk.

A recognition that must be made at this point is that, unlike the black comics, O'Connor's redemption is spelled with a capital R:

For I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means for me that the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world, I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway. (Mystery, 32)

In clear contrast with O'Connor, the artists listed above and others defined under the nebulous term "black comedy" are concerned with redemption on a solidly human level, with exposing folly or madness and not allowing the intervention of divine Grace. All the salvation we need--and certainly all the salvation we should expect--comes from within, from ourselves.

However, this discussion is not a theological one. We need to understand O'Connor's religion only as it illuminates the topic in question: the bleakness we may perceive in O'Connor's stories is not an element of her philosophy. O'Connor was unequivocal on this point: quoting Wyndham Lewis, she wrote, "'If I write about a hill that is rotting, it is because I despise rot'" (Mystery, 31). O'Connor was not trying to expose our madness; she was, instead, casting light on bleakness only to present Redemption in starker contrast. "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we

live," she wrote (Mystery, 33).

So O'Connor's humor is not black. It is also not comic, in the generic sense. Generically speaking, O'Connor's work is regularly comic--that is, she generally supplies a traditional comic resolution: a character experiences a moment of insight, a revelation, a sudden awareness of some essential personal flaw. Less traditionally, O'Connor usually follows this resolution with a death, maiming, or less familiar form of spirit-breaking. The expected location for humor, the comic ending, the resolution, is the single place where O'Connor is brutally unfunny.

One particular incarnation of O'Connor's disruptive approach to comic resolution is a less-than-typically (for her, of course) violent variation on the disruptive theme: in "The Artificial Nigger," "Revelation," and "Parker's Back," three of her strongest stories, the resolution is theologically clear-cut but with unfamiliar details. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head and Nelson experience a grueling trial by fire as they stumble through the city, which takes on various bizarre mythic forms: among other associations, Nelson "connected the sewer passages with the entrance to hell" (220). The two play out the familiar story of Peter's denial of Christ in a ludicrous context:

"He's a juve-nile delinquent! . . . Your boy has broken my ankle!" the old woman shouted. "Police!"

Mr. Head. . . stared straight ahead at the women who were massed in their fury like a solid wall to block his escape. "This is not my boy," he said. "I never seen him before." (226)

Finally, exhausted, the two find a common source of contempt that reconciles their anger: a chipped, cracked, altogether miserable "artificial nigger" (229).

They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. (230)

The plaster effigy becomes an absurd, misplaced Christ figure, absolving Mr. Head and Nelson of all their sins. The resolution occurs, and the characters survive: this represents an atypical strain of O'Connor story. These themes of misunderstood holy imagery and resulting epiphany are echoed in "Parker's Back," in which Parker tattoos an image of the face of God on his back as a solution to his spiritual frustration, and in "Revelation," in which Mrs. Turpin's small-minded association between social class order and eternal salvation is shattered by an angst-ridden college student who bites her and calls her a "wart hog from hell" (650). The disruption in these three stories is more of a misinterpretation, a more subtle form than is usually found in O'Connor's work. She considered this gentler approach better, somehow--perhaps because of its subtlety--than her usual no-holds-barred mayhem: "The Artificial Nigger is my favorite and probably the best thing I'll ever write" (1027).

A pattern of resolution and disruption more typical of O'Connor's fiction is found in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In that story, the grandmother experiences a comic revelation, which O'Connor expained in an essay about her writing:

The grandmother is at last alone, facing the Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture. (Mystery, 112)

This moment in the story deserves closer examination:

. . . she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. (152)

The grandmother's revelation, her "right gesture," is instantly followed by her death. This is certainly an unconventional approach to the comic ending. Traditionally, comedy has been a human rewriting of mortality: the author grants a second chance to erring characters. Leontes mourns for Hermione, but she comes back to life; the highwayman is Tom Jones's father; Huck Finn is safely returned to Missouri; a building falls on Buster Keaton, but he's not dead. O'Connor is clearly not concerned with this kind of second chance--but the revelation, the most vital part of a comic ending, is almost always visible.

From "A Circle in the Fire:"

The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old. . . . She stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few high wild shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them. (250-1)

"The Displaced Person":

She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away. . . . she came down with a nervous affliction and had to go to the hospital. . . . Her eyesight grew worse and she lost her voice altogether. Not many people remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. . . . he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church. (326-7)

"Good Country People":

"Give me my leg!" she screeched. . . "And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga," he said, using the name as if he didn't think much of it, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!". . . and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.
(283)

"Everything That Rises Must Converge":

He was looking into a face he had never seen before. . . . [His mother's eye] raked his face again, found nothing and closed. . . . 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.
(500)

"The Enduring Chill":

Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror.
(572)

"Greenleaf":

. . . the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. . . . she had the look of a person whose sight has been restored but who finds the light unbearable. . . . the huge body, as it sank, pulled her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear.
(523-4)

The particular pattern of resolution in "Greenleaf" will be discussed in the next section, dealing with violence.

Finally, "The Lame Shall Enter First":

His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. . . A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of salvation; all light. He groaned with joy.
(632)

In this last example. Sheppard realizes his mistake, his selfishness, moments before discovering that his son has indeed been transformed: "the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space" (632).

The theme is certainly consistent: a startling disruption of familiar forms of revelation and resolution. O'Connor is an unforgiving creator; she never grants her characters the second chance the genre demands. Her concern is with a second chance of another kind: the reevaluation of the preceding comic resolution that her disruptive punctuation forces.

I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil.

I have also found. . . an audience which puts little stock in either grace or the devil--it is an added blow. (Mystery, 118)

O'Connor chose to make that "action of grace"--the grandmother's human gesture, Sheppard's overwhelming realization of love--an undeniability by throwing it into as stark a contrast as possible. Her audience, as she saw it, was the unbelieving, territory held by the devil, so she incorporated that territory into her work. An action of grace, against such a dark setting, becomes an Action of Grace.

The violation of grace in the stories listed above precedes, causes, coincides with, or, most often, immediately follows the "right gesture," but in almost every case, the image we are left with as the story ends is some incarnation of "the world of guilt and sorrow." The devil seems to win almost every time--but:

In my stories a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective. . . this is another mystery. (Mystery, 117)

O'Connor is, in the final analysis, a comic writer: for her, the moment of grace outshines the disruption that consistently snuffs it.

There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, or a moment where it is offered, and is usually rejected. Like when the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It's the moment of grace for her anyway--a silly old woman--but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy. (1121)

A possibly apocryphal story has it that O'Connor was once asked if she was on the side of the devil, to which she replied, of course--because she was. She was on the side of the devil and God and salvation and damnation; she was against "an audience which puts little stock in either grace or the devil." Her humor, in every twisted incarnation, all of her stock characters, the outdated, mannered ladies, the overeducated, misguided humanists, the bovine and the batty, the innocent and the violent, the quick and the lame, forever meeting but never communicating, all represent a brazen willingness to rip the familiar fabric of the comic genre in order to shake up a lazy audience and make her reader "see what I have to show, even if my means of making him see have to be extreme" (Feeley, 45).

THE BAD

" . . . it is always assumed that violence is a bad thing. . . . Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven."

-- O'Connor
(Mystery, 113)

Whether or not Flannery O'Connor saw violence as a bad thing, she must have seen it for something; as one critic noted,

Of the nineteen stories. . . , nine end in the violent deaths of one or more persons. Three others end in, or present near the end, physical assaults that result in bodily injury. Of the remaining seven, one ends in arson, another in the theft of a wooden leg, another in car theft and wife abandonment. The other four leave their characters considerably shaken. . . . all this, performed by characters who are neither bright nor beautiful, is the stuff of O'Connor's comic view. (Sullivan, 33-34)

People often wrote O'Connor to complain that her work was too violent, to which she responded:

With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially. . . . the man in the violent situation reveals those quantities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him. (Mystery, 114)

Though the idea may seem irrecoverably gauche today, Flannery O'Connor desperately believed that "what we are essentially" meant something--that human beings have an essence, a soul. Another spurious anecdote about O'Connor has a dense interviewer

asking her if Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Wise Blood, is supposed to represent an existential hero, to which she replies, "No, he's just a moron" (Shloss). O'Connor has no existential heroes, though she supplies plenty of existentialists, in order to dis- and re-orient them.

The violence O'Connor does to her characters is a direct reflection of the violence she does to the familiar world in general. Getting at "what we are essentially" is not a simple task: O'Connor's usual technique is to make sure her reader is comfortable in the concrete and to save her ammunition for one great volley at the end. The startling violence that, more than any other facet of her work, comprises O'Connor's thumbprint, her signature in blood, is not evenly dispersed throughout each story. Often, latent violence in the text forms a sort of drum roll for the eventual violent cymbal crash, as in "Greenleaf": "Birds were screaming everywhere, the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even piercing blue" (520) sets us up for Mrs. May's violent death a few pages ahead. Though we can sense something coming, we are rarely given a hint of the nature of the explosion to come before it is upon us. Of course, the reader who is familiar with O'Connor comes to expect the unexpected; O'Connor herself confessed that, at least in some cases, the violent twist at the end was the original creative seed for the story:

I am very happy right now writing a story ["Greenleaf"] in which I plan for the heroine, aged 63, to be gored by a bull. I am not convinced yet that this is purgation or whether I identify myself with her or the bull. In any case, it is going to take some doing to do it and it may be the risk that is making me happy. (Habit, 129)

My preoccupations are technical. My preoccupation right now is how I am going to get this bulls horns into this womans ribs. Of course why his horns belong in her ribs is something much more fundamental but I can't say I give it much thought. Perhaps you ["A.", her longtime correspondent] are able to see things in these stories that I can't see because if I did see I would be too frightened to write them. I have always insisted that there is a fine grain of stupidity required in the fiction writer. (990)

Violence, for O'Connor, is an amplifying force. The human gestures, the moments of grace discussed in the previous section, are rendered with extreme clarity due to contrast; a diamond in the rough, in O'Connor's stories, shines twice as brightly. We never discover exactly what constitutes Mrs. May's moment of grace in "Greenleaf," the story O'Connor mentions above; all O'Connor tells us is that "she seemed. . . to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (524). The question of what exactly that last discovery is--or even of whether Mrs. May actually discovers something or just seems to discover something--is unanswerable, probably even by O'Connor. We can make an educated guess, however, mainly because the bull that Mrs. May sets out to kill has been loaded with various importances:

The sun, moving over the black and white grazing cows, was just a little brighter than the rest of the sky. Looking down, she saw a darker shape that might have been its shadow cast at an angle, moving among them. (512)

She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, secure in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property. . . Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with. . . the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull munching under her window. (519)

In the same letter to "A." quoted earlier, O'Connor mentioned that she thought "Mrs. Greenleaf was a sympathetic character. She and the sun and the bull were connected and sympathetic" (989). The bull belongs to the Greenleafs. Mrs. Greenleaf is, in Mrs. May's opinion, a religious nut. In O'Connor's opinion, Mrs. Greenleaf is a nut, yes, but she is also right.

[Mrs. Greenleaf] swayed back and forth on her hands and knees and groaned. "Jesus, Jesus."

Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. (506)

O'Connor believed that the word Jesus and everything it philosophically implies cannot be kept inside the church building; the power of God is an undeniable force. Mrs. May tries to deny it, but the truth, identified with the Greenleaf bull and the sun, chases her down. This happens first in her dream, as the sun/Truth/fireball shoots past its normal boundaries into her "property" and then metamorphoses into the bull, and again in the final two paragraphs as the bull, a "violent black streak," unavoidably rooted in the very real, traps her at last:

One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed--the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky--and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable. (523)

The imagery is impossible to ignore, especially in light of Mrs. Greenleaf's earlier rantings: "Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (506). Note that the sky conquers the trees: the Truth finally corners Mrs. May and pierces her heart in the spiritual sense as well as the concrete sense. The abstract in capital letters, the

Truth of God and Redemption and What-Have-You, connects with--in fact, punctures--the lowercase real: the sun, the bull, Mrs. May. This connection, forced against the resistance of Mrs. May's entire belief system, manifests itself in the physical world of the story as a sudden, shocking violent act. Mrs. May's probable revelation, her split-second of grace, is amplified by this heightened atmosphere of unexpected violence into an epiphany, and the point of the story--"why his horns belong her ribs"--is encapsulated in this final act, in the final two paragraphs, without throwing the story off balance.

I believe there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them, and when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror. (942)

The right horror is, of course, holy: the Mrs. Greenleafs of the world are closer to the Truth than the Mrs. Mays. In order to communicate that Truth, to identify a point that lies in the plane of abstracts and ideas to an audience that lives entirely in the real, concrete plane, O'Connor had to communicate the violent collision of the two worlds. To connect a point in one plane with a point in another requires that at least one plane is ruptured; like the sun, burning over its normal limits into Mrs. May's dream, the idea has to burn its way into the real. The effect on the familiar world of this intrusion, of this rupturing, is a consistently violent one: the Misfit murders the family; Bevel/Harry drowns; the three boys burn Mrs. Cope's land; the Bible salesman steals Joy/Hulga's wooden leg; the tractor crushes Mr. Guizac; Julian's mother has a stroke; Mr. Fortune

kills his granddaughter and himself; Asbury lives as a terrified invalid; Norton hangs himself; Thomas shoots his mother. Mrs. Turpin, Parker, Mr. Head and Nelson, kindred anomalies in this catalogue, survive their respective revelations, but are spiritually shaken to their bones. O'Connor punctuates every story with some sort of disruptive violent outburst, and the resulting punctuation mark is an exclamation point. As one critic has written: "In all of O'Connor's work, the moderate center will not hold" (Asals, 115). She veers wildly from the everyday to the entirely unexpected, trying to make us see both images at once. Accepting two diametric opposites is what O'Connor would call accepting a mystery:

The fiction writer presents mystery through manners,
grace through nature, but when he finishes there
always has to be left over that sense of mystery
which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.
(Mystery, 153)

This passage echoes Joseph Conrad's famous manifesto in the preface to Nigger of the "Narcissus"; O'Connor's "sense of mystery" is what Conrad calls "that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask." Mystery is found, among other places, according to O'Connor, in the space occupied by both opposites: if she can make us see the familiar and the unfamiliar at once, she can communicate that mystery.

THE UGLY

"This is all very depressing. The general reader is going to think that violation [Tarwater's, in The Violent Bear It Away] is a piece of arbitrary grotesquery. I was once mentioned in an article as belonging to the 'School of the Gratuitous Grotesque.'"

-- O'Connor
(Works, 1119)

O'Connor was annoyed by labels in general, and was regularly confronted with this particular one. Often, she was flippant, with a singular gift for quotable one-liners:

Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

(Mystery, 40)

Despite this offhandedness, O'Connor clearly recognized the central part the grotesque played in her fiction, and was tenacious in defending its place there.

Defining the grotesque is more difficult than defining comedy or violence; recognizing it, however, is just as intuitive. The grotesque character is distorted in some way, recognizable as a human being but with some essential fibers warped. Sometimes, these characters are physically deformed, but this deformity is usually reflective of the more frequent

distortion in some theological, emotional, or intellectual capacity. Joy/Hulga, the one-legged atheist Ph.D. in "Good Country People," "believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg" (Mystery, 99). Even without O'Connor to spell it out for us, we can recognize grotesques in almost all of her stories. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," the search is particularly easy.

The Misfit, from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," has become a standard example of a Southern grotesque. From the first paragraph, he is referred to as a ruthless killer and maimer. When we meet him, he is not at all the vicious animal we might expect; he is, instead, "an older man than the other two. His hair was beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look" (146). He seems to be a peaceable middle-aged gentleman--except for the fact that O'Connor couldn't resist putting a black hat on his head and a gun in his hand. He is polite, at first, but eventually murders the entire family. The Misfit fits unnaturally into the Grandmother's decaying world of manners and equally unnaturally into the excited, homicidal world of his trigger-happy henchmen.

"I'm sorry I don't have a shirt on before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly.
(148)

"No pleasure but meanness," he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.
(152)

Though she often contended that "the way to read a book is to see what happens" (Mystery, 72), and that "you cannot read a story for what you get out of a letter" (Habit), she was adamant

that "in the greatest depths of vision, moral judgement will be implicit" (Mystery, 30); that is, her fiction operates on (among, of course, other levels) an elevated level of concepts and judgement. Her storytelling is exactly that--the telling of a good story, not the dry recording of "a sketch with an essay woven through it, or an essay with a sketch woven through it, or an editorial with a character in it, or a case history with a moral, or some other mongrel thing" (Mystery, 66), but there always exists above (or, she might argue, below) that real story a blurrier level of intent. Though it can assume other facets, that intent is typically anagogical: exposing the madness of a character confronted by but unable to accept the truth of Jesus, Redemption and God, a character who is in the hand of God but desperately trying to crawl through His fingers. Occasionally, unable to restrain herself, she explained her deeper meanings in terms unequivocal enough for the densest reader, as when a schoolteacher wrote asking her if "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was interpretable as Bailey's daydream:

The story is a duel of sorts between the Grandmother and her superficial beliefs and the Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action which set the world off balance for him. . . . My tone is not meant to be obnoxious. I am in a state of shock. (Habit, 437)

She was always quick to qualify such a force-fed interpretation: "There are perhaps other ways than my own in which this story could be read, but none other by which it could have been written" (Mystery, 109). O'Connor recognized, as we must, that her interpretation of her own work was no more than an expert opinion, not by necessity any more valid than any other.

That qualification made, the deeper world of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" can at least be sketched out. The Grandmother, the first character we meet, is one of O'Connor's regulars, a mannered old lady, content in her belief in Jesus and salvation through prayer. She has the "right" principles, but is fatally shallow and untried in her application of them--until she is brought to the revelation described in the earlier section about comedy. "'Pray, pray,' the grandmother began, 'pray, pray . . .'," and continues to parrot this meaningless spiritual instruction to the Misfit until her enlightenment/death (149). The Misfit, infinitely more inclined to consider and understand than the grandmother, is confronted by the same theological truths but is deeply offended by them. He has twisted away from these truths; he is a grotesque.

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." (152)

These two characters meet against a backdrop of violence and comedy that amplifies their gestures, as discussed earlier; the grandmother eventually has her consciousness raised moments before having it permanently erased, not coincidentally.

O'Connor believed that the fiction writer's noblest hurdle was bringing together this abstract plot of meanings and the real plot of actions--finding a way, as William Carlos Williams put it, to "reconcile the people and the stones." "Fiction is about

everything human," wrote O'Connor, "and we are made of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It isn't a grand enough job for you" (Mystery, 68). At face value, O'Connor's fiction conveys a gritty reality, but within her stories, there are, of course, Williams's "stones," basic, elemental ideas to be transmitted by all means necessary.

The Misfit is a medium, a conduit between the dusty world of human motion and a still dirtier one, a world of ideas and images. To draw a line from the solid, comfortable plane of her intransigent reader "who sits down beside me and continually mutters, 'I don't get it, I don't see it, I don't want it'" (Feeley, 45) to the wholly mysterious and created world of her vision and judgement, O'Connor needed such an intermediary.

I think the writer of grotesque fiction does [things] in the way that takes the least [doing], because in his work distances are so great. He's looking for an image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees. (Mystery, 42)

Such an image is by necessity boldly drawn:

. . . you have to make your vision apparent by shock --to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (Mystery, 34)

The Misfit is an early example; he is large and startling in his actions and in the discrepancy between his manners and his behavior. Rufus Johnson, a much later grotesque, reflects O'Connor's growing tendency to (it sounds absurd) stop being so indirect. Johnson is deformed in almost every possible way: he has an enormous club foot of which he is proud. He is brilliant,

which he denies, but malicious and destructive--of which, again, he is proud. He believes that he is damned. More important than this alone is his belief that damnation is meaningful--that is, that salvation is possible, Redemption occurs and God exists. Though the story is seen through his eyes and he is a strong presence, Sheppard is more of a plot device. He is an overeducated humanist, one of O'Connor's regulars, and O'Connor herself recognized that as such he was flatly drawn.

The story doesn't work because I don't know, don't sympathize, don't like Mr. Sheppard in the way that I know and like most of my other characters. This is a story, not a statement. . . . If Sheppard represents anything here, it is, as he realizes at the end of the story, the empty man who fills up his emptiness with good works. I just don't know such a man, don't have any felt-knowledge of him. I don't want to go on to higher mathematics [this protesting a suggestion that Sheppard represents Freud], but to people I do know. (Habit, 491)

Sheppard and his son Norton, the equally standard impressionable youngster, exist as foils for Johnson. The trio are close copies of Rayber, Bishop, and Tarwater, from The Violent Bear It Away, and echo dozens of O'Connor's other characters throughout her work. The central image of "The Lame Shall Enter First" is Johnson, as the representative of Christ and of the devil, "baptizing" the wide-eyed Norton, and Sheppard, the hardened intellectual, giving love to Johnson-as-devil more freely than to his own son, and realizing his mistake only after the damage is irrevocable. This subtext--super-text, perhaps--relies entirely on Johnson's essential twistedness: on his representing the world of Belief by representing its darkest side.

The grotesque in O'Connor's fiction is given the same

peculiarly effective trait that Tarwater finds so infuriating in the idiot boy Bishop in The Violent Bear It Away: they stare back, unashamed. They often live just over the fence dividing the dusty from the holy, in either direction--Joy/Hulga and Mrs. Turpin firm in their (supposedly) wrong beliefs, the Misfit and Rufus Johnson closer to the Truth--but always lack something, not enough to make them unrecognizable as human, but enough so that the reader recognizes them as somehow wrong. The unsettling effect of the grotesques' refusal to be categorizable as human or inhuman is compounded by the fact that they are willing to offer themselves as whole people. The Misfit stifles the grandmother's prattle by staring back at her: "he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare" (149); Rufus Johnson uses his stare to vex Sheppard and control Norton: "'I eat out of garbage cans,' the boy said slowly with a beady stare, 'because I like to eat out of garbage cans. See?'" (603). These two demand to be taken as complete humans, but do not quite fit the definition. The easy way out, to dismiss them as unrecognizable, unbelievable, is not an option: they glare at the audience and insist upon being dealt with.

The Misfit and Rufus Johnson are like the holy ghost. They are like imaginary numbers. O'Connor said that "The writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live" (Mystery, 27); she made her grotesques live in a more transcendental and believable way than any other characters. To assume that a grotesque is an icon because he (she) is used in the fashion described above, as a medium, a mechanism to connect

points in the real with points in the imagined, is to commit an unforgivable inversion. Sheppard, O'Connor understood, did not really live, because she couldn't recognize him. O'Connor recognized the grandmother, recognized her every day. The grandmother is a representative character, standing for Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. McIntyre, Julian's mother, Mrs. May, Asbury's mother, Thomas's mother, and all of the small-minded but well-mannered faded women of the South; as such, she is flatly drawn, comic, as discussed above, but almost a caricature. O'Connor understood Sheppard and the grandmother; if some of her players must be labeled as plot devices, label these two and their comrades. They are the icons, the foils. They exist for the characters O'Connor could bring to luminous life every time: the ones she couldn't understand.

We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery. Saint Gregory wrote that every time a sacred text reveals a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on a lesser level, hopes to do.

(Mystery, 184)

Like the holy ghost, like fiction itself, the grotesques embody a specific mystery. Like the imaginary numbers, understanding their mystery is in no way prerequisite to using them to achieve specific goals, to connect points. The separation between the points, between the dusty, real plane and the abstract, imagined plane, is great; an expanse of fabric lies between them. To bring her points together, O'Connor had to tear that fabric, to rupture the plane itself.

It's not necessary to point out that the look of this [grotesque] fiction is going to be wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine. (Mystery, 42)

Once she had sufficiently shaken up the order of the universe so that it offered little resistance, she fused those "discrepancies" and introduced the people to the stones. Even readers, such as myself, who disagree with her theology and her message, are startled at and impressed by her boldness in grasping the world like a snow-filled paperweight and shaking it furiously.

"It requires considerable courage at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller."

-- O'Connor
(Mystery, 35)

EPILOGUE

Hawthorne knew his own problems and perhaps anticipated ours when he said he did not write novels, he wrote romances. Today many readers and critics have set up the novel for a kind of orthodoxy. They demand a realism of fact which may, in the end, limit rather than broaden the novel's scope. (Mystery, 38-39)

On one level, realism was O'Connor's ultimate concern. Her aim, as quoted earlier, was to present "mystery through manners," in the same way that Conrad's aim was "to make you see. That--and no more, and it is everything." If the manners are unrecognizable to the reading audience, then the mystery stalls in the driveway; that is, if we don't believe what happens in the story--if we don't recognize it as familiar to life--then we have no basis for believing the ideas behind the story. According to O'Connor, realism is the lowest common denominator of fiction, the first step on the staircase; without it, nothing else happens. If the "writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by revealing truthfully what he sees from where he is" (Mystery, 150).

The "orthodoxy" that O'Connor is protesting against in the above passage is the demand that fiction be realistic through-and-through. O'Connor claimed that without the mystery, the manners are worthless, or at least uninteresting; the "added dimension" of abstracts and ideas is the mark of worthwhile fiction (Mystery, 150). That added dimension is by definition not realistic; it is an idea, a point in the imaginary plane.

Hawthorne recognized this distinction between different

levels of realism, and O'Connor identified herself with him for this reason. In an obviously limited view, the history of American fiction from Hawthorne to O'Connor can be seen as the story of a line of authors running from the realists. American writers have invented or appropriated a number of tools, from the Gothic to the grotesque, to help clarify the difference between real-realism and imaginary-realism. We can recognize O'Connor's place in the context of American fiction by placing her at the end of this line; two of her immediate predecessors are William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson.

The first chapter of Anderson's chef d'oeuvre, Winesburg, Ohio, is relevantly named "The Book of the Grotesque." In that chapter, a character called "the old writer" gives his personal definition of the grotesque:

It was the truths that made the people grotesques.
. . . the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

Like O'Connor, Anderson distorted his characters to make a point --his was "not the kind of distortion that destroys" but "the kind that reveals" (Mystery, 162); however, his definition can in no way be applied to O'Connor's grotesques. O'Connor's characters become grotesque not because they embrace a truth but because they live in the spaces between the truths, and cannot adhere to any of them. They are familiar with many truths, and accept none.

Faulkner's work bears a much closer thematic resemblance to O'Connor's fiction. Faulkner and O'Connor use radically different means to create and distort reality, but many of the ripples

created are common to both; like O'Connor, Faulkner uses humor and violence to focus and amplify his distortions and pull the imaginary closer to the real.

Obviously, analyzing the aims of all of American fiction is far beyond the scope of this epilogue. No author creates in a vacuum, however, and the connections between O'Connor's work and its context can at least be suggested.

When we talk about the writer's country we are liable to forget that no matter what that particular country is, it is inside as well as outside him. . . . To know oneself is to know one's region.

(Mystery, 34-35)

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John Schwartz * English Honors * Reading List

Flannery O'Connor:

A Good Man Is Hard to Find and
Everything That Rises Must Converge.

The stories in these two collections can be found in many other places. O'Connor's Complete Stories and Collected Works both contain all of them.

Specific stories:

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The River," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Artificial Nigger," "A Circle in the Fire," "Good Country People," "The Displaced Person," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Greenleaf," "A View of Woods," "The Enduring Chill," "The Comforts of Home," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Revelation," "Parker's Back," "Judgment Day."

--- SECONDARY WORKS ---

William Faulkner:

"Barn Burning," "Shingles for the Lord," "Wash," "Beyond."
All four stories are in Faulkner's Collected Stories, among other places.

Sherwood Anderson:

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