



**A Jungle of Shadows:  
Interpenetrations of the Anagogical and the Grotesque  
in the Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor**

**by CATHERINE JANET SARAH IRVING**

**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH**

**at the**

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

**April 1999**

**Supervisor: ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LESLEY MARX**

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## Abstract

Flannery O'Connor (1925-64) has become established in critical thought both as a "Christian" writer and a writer of the "grotesque". Indeed, to be true to the nature of her art, neither designation can be easily discarded. It is the premise of this study that O'Connor's mature, post-1952 work, specifically her collected short fiction, draws on the modes of the anagogical and the grotesque to represent a vision highly conscious of both ultimate reality and the deficiency of a sinful, evil-inflicted world. These modes can be envisaged as antitheses: the anagogical, in its traditional medieval sense, implies a positive means to God via the created, sacramental world; the grotesque, conventionally and pessimistically perceived, infers a negative impetus towards the chaotic or demonic.

In Chapter One, I investigate the conceptual parameters of the anagogical, beginning with a consideration of its medieval status as the hermeneutical level concerned with apocalyptic eventualities and disclosure of the divine presence. In my discussion of the anagogical operating through nature, art, individuals and everyday objects, I emphasise the Thomistic principle that the literal or material serves as a starting point for configuring anagogy. I argue that to address a modern audience unfamiliar with, or unsympathetic towards, traditional Christian imagery, O'Connor enlarged her view of the anagogical mode to incorporate elements of the grotesque.

In Chapter Two, I explore the bounds of what constitutes the grotesque, drawing attention to its double-faced nature, to its inextricable merging of terror and comedy. Highlighting O'Connor's reliance at various points on both emphases of the grotesque, I examine the contrasting theories of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. I discuss also the negative way of representation that the grotesque makes possible. The supposition of this strategy is that degradation or distortion of a phenomenon causes its meaningfulness to be communicated anew. It remains a point of debate as to whether desired interpretation can be achieved. O'Connor's mature work importantly conveys a paradoxical understanding of the grotesque as registering both depravity and renewal.

In Chapters Three and Four, I analyse the nature of interaction between the anagogical and grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's two short story collections. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) marks a distance from O'Connor's overwhelmingly grotesque novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), in that it incorporates affirming impulses of the anagogical. Yet, reliance on negative representation is still strong in her first collection, especially in the adult-protagonist stories where intrusive agents of the divine come to destroy. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) deepens the anagogical significance of grotesque incursions by pushing the concluding actions further than in earlier stories to suggest the eternal. As such, these later stories reflect the impetus towards integration identifiable in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). The characters of O'Connor's 1955 collection are frequently propelled to an Augustinian awareness of their grotesque depravity. In comparison, a number of protagonists in her 1965 volume are moved through sin and judgement towards anagogical awakening, evincing the optimistic vision of Teilhard de Chardin. Although some O'Connor stories convey intention and suggest redemption more convincingly than others, especially her later pieces, none escape some degree of equivocation. The stories of this Southern Catholic fall within a "jungle of shadows", in a zone interpenetrated by anagogical and grotesque.

# Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Organisational Note	iv
Abbreviations Used	v
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
A Zone of Interaction	1
A Critical Overview	2
Medieval Affinities	4
The Reasonable and Unreasonable	7
<i>Notes</i>	<i>10</i>
<b>1. The Charged Proportions of Anagogy</b>	<b>13</b>
The Highest Sense	13
Towards the End	18
Reading Creation	25
Art and Vision	30
A Region of the Spirit	36
Symbols and Beyond	41
Substance and Sacrament	44
Making Contact with Mystery	49
<i>Notes</i>	<i>52</i>
<b>2. The Fraught Configurations of Grottesquery</b>	<b>57</b>
Form and Faith	57
Conjunctions across Space and Time	59
Attitudes and Approaches	65
Trajectories of Art	69
Sacred and Profane Bodies	73
Exploiting Tragic and Comic	77
The Negative Way	85
Connecting Seen and Unseen	89
<i>Notes</i>	<i>92</i>

<b>3.</b>	<b><i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find: The Insistent Pursuit</i></b>	<b>97</b>
	A Hazardous Passage	97
	Shooting Every Minute of a Life: 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'	108
	Moving in, Moving on: 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own'	112
	Desecrating the Sacrifice: 'Good Country People'	116
	Assailing the Imbalance: 'The Displaced Person'	120
	Defying the Order: 'A Circle in the Fire'	125
	Not Disputing the Way It Is: 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost'	132
	Melding the Defeated: 'The Artificial Nigger'	136
	Carrying off the Adopted: 'The River'	142
	Hard Pressed	146
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>149</i>
<b>4.</b>	<b><i>Everything That Rises Must Converge: The Drive to Deliver</i></b>	<b>155</b>
	The Immense Sweep	155
	Thrusting into the Tide: 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'	167
	Pinioning in Ice: 'The Enduring Chill'	172
	Stabbing the Heart: 'Greenleaf'	176
	Shoving in the Dirt: 'A View of the Woods'	182
	Summoning to the Extremity: 'The Lame Shall Enter First'	186
	Bruising to Open: 'Revelation'	189
	Searing to Seal: 'Parker's Back'	194
	Dispatching with a Vengeance: 'Judgement Day'	198
	Driven Beyond	204
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>207</i>
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>215</b>
	Creation through Struggle	215
	Consciousness at Cost	217
	Progression via Penetration	218
	Art to Shock and Endure	221
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>225</i>
	<b>References</b>	<b>227</b>

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Out of great appreciation for their support, it is to my family that I dedicate this study.

## Organisational Note

The British variety of spelling will be utilised predominantly, but American forms will be retained where used in original sources.

To maintain consistency I have chosen to use the same forms as O'Connor for recurrent terms such as “medieval” and “Manichean”. Orthographic variations on these terms may, however, be used when citing other sources.

Flannery O'Connor's idiosyncratic spelling on occasion — whether purposeful or inadvertent — will be preserved in citations.

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

An Author-Date system of referencing will be employed with endnotes after each chapter. If a citation that I use is quoted in another critical work, this will be indicated using “in” to mean “cited in”. Full bibliographical details of works referred to in the body of the thesis, or in the notes, will be given at the end under *References*. Foot- or endnotes from other texts will be acknowledged and marked with an “n” followed by a number.

## Abbreviations used

Unless noted below, the full titles of volumes will be used. The date of first publication is given below; full bibliographical details are provided in the list at the end.

### O'Connor Fiction

<i>Wise</i>	<i>Wise Blood</i> [1952]
<i>Violent</i>	<i>The Violent Bear It Away</i> [1960]
<i>Stories</i>	<i>The Complete Stories</i> [1971]
<i>Three</i>	<i>Three by Flannery O'Connor</i> [1983]

### Collected O'Connor Non-Fiction

<i>Prose</i>	<i>Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose</i> [1969]
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor</i> [1979]
<i>Reviews</i>	<i>The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor</i> [1983]
<i>Library</i>	<i>Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being</i> [1985] (Arthur F. Kinney)
<i>Correspondence</i>	<i>The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys</i> [1986]
<i>Conversations</i>	<i>Conversations with Flannery O'Connor</i> [1987]
<i>Works</i>	<i>Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works</i> [1988]

I have a biography of St. John of the  
Cross and one of Rabelais. I read a little  
of one and then a little of the other;  
edifying contrast.

— *Letters of Flannery O'Connor:*  
*The Habit of Being*

# Introduction

## A Zone of Interaction

Signing off a letter to a fellow Catholic from the South, O'Connor once wrote: "Cheers and screams,/ Flannery".<sup>1</sup> Applied figuratively, her jocular signature captures two extremes of response that her fiction provokes — high praise or strong censure. The expression could also serve to highlight O'Connor's ambivalent response to a world characterised by both good and evil. For my immediate purposes, I use O'Connor's locution to introduce the literary/spiritual dynamic which informs and propels her mature fiction: the interplay between the anagogical and the grotesque modes, as I identify them in the first two chapters. The anagogical mode, in its traditional, sublime sense, can be said to *affirm* as it impels attention to the divine; hence the implied association with "cheers". The grotesque, conventionally understood, can be said to *disaffirm* as it detracts attention from the exalted and absolute; thus the inferred connection with "screams".

Owing to the richness of Flannery O'Connor's metaphors, I have chosen to employ another of her phrases — a "jungle of shadows" — to prefix the title of this dissertation. I shall primarily use this metaphor to allude to the overall effect of the relationship between the anagogical and grotesque in her short fiction. My understanding is that, while O'Connor does not negate the diametrical opposition between the two representative and interpretative modes, she nonetheless brings them into relation — into tangled interaction, as the term "jungle of shadows" intimates. The closing line of O'Connor's 1962 story 'The Lame Shall Enter First' provides the context of the cited phrase: "the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space" (*Stories*: 482).<sup>2</sup> The metaphor conveys the ambiguity surrounding ten-year-old Norton's hanging. A "jungle" environment supports life in profusion, yet is a territory of the dangerous unknown. "Shadows", by their very existence, imply the presence of light, yet are created by obstructions. The "jungle of shadows" that Norton inhabits can either be interpreted as essentially life-giving or death-

instilling, or, more accurately, as occupying that place in between assurance and negation. Norton's is a suicide with a difference, an end impelled by the boy's joyous belief that, high and buoyant and beyond death, he will embrace his deceased mother in heaven and, at the same time, escape his cold, earthly father. Is Norton cursed or blessed in believing? On discovering the lifeless boy, is Sheppard, his father, crushed by the horror or does he feel the weight of guilt that induces penitence?

The child literally hangs in a "jungle of shadows", that is, in a sphere of vigorous interplay between light and dark shapes, in a space where shifting, perplexing patterns mark his body. Flannery O'Connor's mature fiction, in particular her collected short stories — *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) — might analogously be conceived of as occupying a zone of interpenetration between light and dark, by inference, between sacredness and sacrilege. In the wildly dappled zone where the body hangs and where O'Connor's short fiction is metaphysically positioned, one might say that negatives accentuate positives and positives draw attention to negatives. In the first two chapters devoted to discussion of the anagogical and grotesque, I suggest that anagogy can principally be associated with illumination and grotesquery with the fragmentary obstruction of light in that it challenges meaning and allows for absence. One suspects that in Flannery O'Connor's fictional territory, there can be no ultimate separation into the realms of radiance or darkness.

## A Critical Overview

Few commentators and readers dispute that O'Connor's mature fiction encompasses both modal elements that are *grotesque* and those more obviously related to the Christian sacred — in essence, what might be called, the *anagogical* (the upward-leading mode), though they may not use these designations. Critics such as Kathleen Feeley (1982), John F. Desmond (1987), Jill P. Baumgaertner (1988) and Richard Giannone (1989) essentially hold that the grotesque becomes incorporated into O'Connor's orthodox schema and does not overshadow her Christian concern. Others, such as Martha Stephens (1973), Josephine Hendin (1976) and André Bleikasten (1978), contend that O'Connor's

preponderant use of the grotesque suggests a corrosive scepticism that serves to undercut her own otherwise stated Christian intentions. A third critical grouping, in which we might place scholars as varied as Frederick Asals (1982), Marshall Bruce Gentry (1986), Ralph C. Wood (1988) and Anthony Di Renzo (1993), recognise, in essence, that the relationship between the anagogical (or Christian sacred) and the grotesque in O'Connor's mature (post-1952) work is exactly complex. As the title of this study suggests, my position falls closest to the last-mentioned group. I endeavour to examine O'Connor's collected short stories in the light of discussion surrounding the disjunction, as well as the unexpected conjunction, between the anagogical and grotesque — an attempt, which as far as I am aware, has not been covered in these specific terms before. Brian Abel Ragen is one of the few who makes explicit reference to the interplay between these modes in O'Connor. He remarks perceptively that what distinguishes her work in modern American fiction is that she “consciously used the grotesque to write on... the anagogical level” (1989: 11).

A fair body of O'Connor criticism has steered away from focusing *directly* on theological matters and has concerned itself, for good reason, with wide-ranging issues such as feminism, psychoanalysis, socio-political justice and narratology.<sup>3</sup> Yet, because Flannery O'Connor's work makes religious concerns so explicit — at variance with emerging 'postmodern' writers of the 1960s<sup>4</sup> — it presents an almost unavoidable challenge to critics who wish to dodge spiritual questions. Yet, in that O'Connor's work portrays religion so bizarrely, it also affords a great challenge to critics interested in spiritual matters. Because her fiction is “off the main trade routes”, Joseph Zornado contends, it betrays “a terrifying, unruly domain” — “some critical missionaries attempt to civilize [it] with a more accessible kind of Christianity”, while “the greatest explorers consider the island either too wild, or already tamed” (1997: 32). Yet there are those post-structuralists, Zornado claims (32), who have ventured into O'Connor's territory and recognised, in Frederick Crews' words, that “though there is much disturbing and even ambiguous about O'Connor's world, critics who seek to justify her in post-modern terms would do well to cease evading her intellectual and emotional loyalty to a single value system” (1990: 51). In addressing O'Connor's “single value system”, it is not implied,

says Zornado, that heterogeneous critical approaches be discouraged, nor, in the first instance, that the bounds of her Catholic faith be exclusively attributed to the realm of 'knowing' (1997: 32). Flannery O'Connor herself implied that Catholicism paradoxically accommodates both certainty and mystery. While she asserted: "I believe what the Church teaches — that God has given us a reason to use and that it can lead toward a knowledge of him" (*Letters*: 479), she also pronounced: "A God you understood would be less than yourself... You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is a making it in darkness" (*Letters*: 354). Taking off from Zornado, it is my understanding that O'Connor's aesthetic territory enigmatically allows for notions of art as positive incarnation (indebted to the anagogical) as well as conceptions of art as ironic or negative channels by means of which mystery is conveyed (a concept rooted in the grotesque). It seems that in some stories she aims to document the divine while in others she hopes to preserve its mystery through negative representation.

## Medieval Affinities

Writing between 1946 and 1964, Flannery O'Connor, an unapologetic Catholic, addressed what might be called a post-Christian audience. Melvin J. Friedman has called her the "anti-Pynchon of post World-War II American fiction" because she rebuffed the terms of burgeoning postmodern colloquy and rejected the multiplicity of the new era (1966: 1).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, many commentators during and after O'Connor's lifetime regarded her personal outlook and the mood of her fiction as anachronistic — in fact, as 'medieval'.<sup>6</sup> Like Matthew Arnold who foresaw the future, O'Connor recognised the sea of Faith steadily retreating.<sup>7</sup> Unlike William Butler Yeats, she did not own a sense of "keen delight" at hearing the naked pebbles rattling, creating new songs in a modern age of uncertainty.<sup>8</sup> O'Connor's association with the 'medieval' era should not, however, be limited to the derogatory and perfunctory nature of the designation. It seems that the term can also be applied to her work justifiably. Among many predictable reviews of O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, one stood out as particularly insightful to her: a 1960 piece by P. Albert Duhamel, entitled 'Flannery O'Connor's Violent View of Reality'. It

would seem that Duhamel's interest in medievalism served to enlighten what she was attempting to represent. She wrote favourably to fellow Catholic writer, Cecil Dawkins, about the review by "the Medieval Studies man at Boston College" and reflected: "Perhaps I have created a medieval study" (*Letters*: 377). In the same letter, O'Connor referred to the films of Ingmar Bergman which had been recommended to her: "They too are apparently medieval" (377). The term 'medieval' can, of course, be used in multifarious ways, but here O'Connor presumably thinks of the stark, unsentimental quality of the action and the sacral preoccupation of the work.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic living in Georgia, in fact, cultivated a strong interest in the period and was particularly knowledgeable about medieval theology, philosophy, aesthetics and mystical writings as can be gathered from even from a cursory look at her lectures, letters and book reviews.<sup>10</sup>

If Flannery O'Connor revealed an affinity with the boldly delineated pre-Renaissance traditions of the Church, she shared its resistance to the humanist appeal, as well as to the compartmentalisation and gnosticising of spirituality. She reacted against the Enlightenment assumption, largely promulgated in America by the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists and entrenched by twentieth-century humanists of every variety, that individuals do not require salvation from original sin, but by right application of the mind, can achieve no end of feats. The human individual takes centre stage. As Alfons Auer puts it: "The modern man wrenches himself... away from the authority of God and enthrones himself as the autonomous master of his own life" (1968: 47). And, in J. Hillis Miller's words: "Man has killed God by separating his subjectivity from everything but itself" (1965: 3). In addition to opposing the notion of human perfectibility, O'Connor remained set against the modern state of mind that definitively separates spirit from matter. This state of mind has brought about the notion of "a chemically pure faith": a heterodox, if heretical, construct in medieval perception (Guardini 1961: 123). Indeed, throughout O'Connor's established writing career, she remained vocally opposed to any form of dualism, or what she termed 'Manicheism'.<sup>11</sup> As if through medieval eyes, O'Connor saw the human world not as "one-dimensional" but as an arena in which spirit and matter interact in mysterious ways (Ireland 1987: 188). Cesáreo Bandero emphasises in his discussion of the sacred and profane that the notion of 'sacred contamination' is a

mark of modern thought. He recalls Cervante's words in *Don Quijote* which express displeasure at "mixing the human and the divine": it is "a kind of motley in which no Christian understanding should be dressed". In Bandero's opinion, Cervantes is already a "modern man" (1994: 3). It is no surprise, then, that O'Connor praised Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the modern Jesuit-palaeontologist, who embraced both faith and science: "By virtue of the creation and still more of the Incarnation, nothing is profane here below on earth to him who knows how to see".<sup>12</sup> According to dualistic conception, infiltration across domains is taboo; it results in might be described as a "sacred allergy" (Bandero 1994: 17). Certainly this was an idea O'Connor sought to challenge in her fiction by drawing on both anagogical and grotesque modes. Just one of the many respectable characters in O'Connor who display symptoms of a "sacred allergy" is Mrs McIntyre in 'The Displaced Person'. She suffers embarrassment about "Christ in the conversation" as much as her mother did when discussing "sex" (*Stories*: 226). The example is not incidental; in modern society sex is far from the great obscenity. It seems that religion, instead, has become "the final taboo".<sup>13</sup>

The two opening chapters of this study explore two theoretical territories in which both the sacred and profane are implicated. Chapter One examines the anagogical mode, originally a topic of medieval theological concern which O'Connor readily embraced, extended and adapted in her pursuit of a fiction that suggests both "time and eternity" (*Prose*: 177). In this chapter, I inquire into and attempt to elucidate theoretical proportions of the mode, medieval and modern, as they pertain to O'Connor. Beginning with a consideration of anagogy as traditionally the highest level of meaning in Scripture, I discuss the anagogical mode as suggesting the sublime, as strongly incorporating the apocalyptic, as encompassing the sacramental. I further examine the mode as readily finding expression in the 'medieval' South, as being constituted from the symbolic, as accessing the numinous and the realm of divine mystery. Chapter Two shifts focus to investigate the grotesque mode, an area of aesthetic and theological quandary in the medieval period, as well as in the modern. I argue that O'Connor grappled with this mode to create a fiction that might represent Christian truth in indirect, outrageous, even negative, ways, aiming always to avoid pitfalls of piety and predictability. In the context

of examining the theoretical positions of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, I hope to draw attention to the complexity of the grotesque, its emphasis on the body, its potential sacramental and apocalyptic status, its negative way of representing goodness and Divinity, and the capacity of its images to connect seen and unseen.

## The Reasonable and Unreasonable

“Much of my fiction takes its character”, O’Connor proposed in a 1963 address, “from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be apparent” (*Prose*: 109). In the same talk, she made it explicit that the “assumptions” which undergird her use of “the unreasonable” are “those of the central Christian mysteries” (109). She inferred that theology provided implicit support for her manipulation of “the unreasonable”, a designation that might be considered allusive of, or synonymous with, the grotesque. She nevertheless remained very aware that adverse interpretations of her work were inevitable as its theological import would not necessarily be recognised. Two broad audiences “haunted” her imagination: readers who were avowedly Christian, in particular Catholic, and those who were consciously ‘secular’.<sup>14</sup> It can be gathered from her essays and correspondence that she was particularly aware of writing for the latter — a readership for whom “God is dead” (*Letters*: 92).<sup>15</sup> O’Connor often drew attention to the immense difficulty in bridging the hermeneutical gap between herself and her readers. An early critic, Robert Drake, articulates the issue that was apparently always on her mind. “How far”, he asked, “can [unbelieving readers] enter into both the substance and shadow of her work?” (1966: 43).

One could say that O’Connor’s audience played a role in artistic creation by virtue of their insistent presence in her consciousness. Taking into account her secular readers’ awareness of the visible world, O’Connor used the concrete as a vehicle to suggest the spiritual (use of the anagogical). Yet, at the same, she incorporated distortion and hyperbole (use of the grotesque) as a central rhetorical tool to reorient her readers’ perception, to “burn” their eyes “clean”, in the words of the old prophet, Tarwater (*Violent*: 147). O’Connor faced a tall order: to be true to both realistic description and grotesque contortion. She no doubt understood that disturbance would be at the centre of

her creation, that struggle would mark her efforts to create a fiction of reality — in its present and eternal dimensions. She ambitiously chose to write about “the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times”, the subject of “gravest concern” to her and, no doubt, the source of some humour (*Letters*: 349). In her fictional rendering of this conflict, she did not believe in conveying her loyalties in a way that could be easily dissected. As she reflected in an interview, “you don’t say [when writing a story], ‘This is going to be positive, and this is going to be negative’” (*Conversations*: 26). Yet, she was always conscious of how much easier it is to magnify the ‘absence’ of God in the world, than His presence. It is less difficult “to come out with something that is negative because it is nearer fallen nature”, she suggested, “than it is to suggest “the other” (26). For the positive “you have to strain yourself strenuously” (26). She evidently struggled, throughout her career, to negotiate the pull she felt towards the grotesque: the mode which, Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues, is “more comfortable in hell than in heaven” (1982: 8).

However antithetical the anagogical and grotesque are in impetus and focus, O’Connor at times spoke of these modes in terms that are strangely similar. The way she described an anagogical image — as “suggesting both the world and eternity” (*Prose*: 111) — approximates what she said of a grotesque image — as “embody[ing] two points; one... a point in the concrete, and the other a point not visible to the naked eye” (*Prose*: 42). To O’Connor, both anagogical and grotesque images connect the seen and unseen, matter and spirit, present and future. According to this understanding, the modes might be viewed as complementary media of representation. If grotesquery more obviously displays spiritual fallenness, anagogy more readily shows possibilities of redemption. Each mode essentially accents a dimension of the truth. In writing fiction, O’Connor’s quest was never to transcend the human situation, to divorce frailty from faith, corruption from spirituality. In her most striking stories — ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ being one — the anagogical and grotesque merge in the same image or action.

The short stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) form the focus of my analysis in the third and fourth chapters respectively. It is my contention that the collected short stories exemplify the most

intricate, intense and complex interaction between the grotesque and anagogical in O'Connor. One feasible reason for this heightened degree of modal interaction pertains to the time period in which they were written. Following *Wise Blood* (1952), O'Connor evidently shifted her modal emphasis from being predominantly grotesque to incorporate the anagogical to a significant degree. Another plausible reason for the heightened modal interaction is that the short story form lends itself to intensity of expression, in O'Connor's words, it requires "more drastic procedures" to convey meaning and mystery than the extended novel form (*Prose*: 70). Henry James, whose eye for "structure" O'Connor admired, argued that the aesthetic paradox at the heart of short story writing is "to do the complicated thing with a strong brevity and lucidity".<sup>16</sup> The short story form necessitates that her acclaimed subject of fiction, the process of 'conversion' — "a character's changing" (*Letters*: 184) — be short-circuited or fore-shortened in the face of imminent climax, the result of which could conceivably be violence or grotesque action.

It is conceivable that the stories, published in two collections almost a decade apart, reflect aspects of O'Connor's vision as it changed over time. Read in relation to each other, and then judged as a whole, the stories would seem to offer an expansive, complicated picture of a writer's intentional and technical undertaking.<sup>17</sup> In the course of my discussion, I shall also briefly refer to O'Connor's two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), as these works would seem to influence modal attributes of the two collections significantly. Distinctions and developments in the relationship between the anagogical and grotesque across O'Connor's two collected volumes will become apparent in my analyses, as will some differentiation between her handling of adult- and child-protagonist stories in each volume. Chapter Three takes its theme from what I perceive to be the prevailing impetus of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: God's relentless pursuit to capture those He wishes to visit with grace. St. Augustine evinces this understanding as none of O'Connor's characters consciously do: "You are ever close upon the heels of those who flee from You, for You are at once a God of Vengeance and Fount of Mercy".<sup>18</sup> Chapter Four gains its thematic focus from the primary divine incentive in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*: God's drive to lower the proud and stubborn before raising them to experience salvation and integration into a mystical body.

Again, a once-resistant convert recognises this necessity, as O'Connor's characters do not. John Donne addresses the "three-personed God": "That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend/ Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new".<sup>19</sup>

O'Connor's collected short fiction pulls in diverse directions: at once towards affirmation and the divine *and* away from all that indicates the sacred as we conventionally know it. Inevitable variation in mode occurs from story to story, the result being that the central actions of individual fictions fall somewhere in the corridor between extremes. Attempting an overview of the trends in O'Connor's two collections, my conclusion suggests a development of O'Connor's vision and handling of mode over time. I will ponder whether Flannery O'Connor, in rearranging an "essential vision" into sometimes "dirty" patterns (*Prose*: 163), was duly able to show her characters being changed or to shock her readers into submission.

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## ***Introduction Notes***

<sup>1</sup> A 1960 letter to William Sessions cited in Friedman & Lawson (1966: 217).

<sup>2</sup> The dates that are, on occasion, attributed to individual stories refer to the date of first publication, not to their date of composition. It should be noted that all of O'Connor's stories published in her two collections, except the very last, 'Judgement Day', first appeared in literary magazines as stand-alone pieces. The appendix to *The Complete Stories* provides an account of these details. From O'Connor's correspondence, it becomes clear that it was always her intention to publish her stories in collected volume form.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Louise Westling (1988) writes on feminist issues in O'Connor; James M. Mellard (1985) approaches O'Connor from both a Freudian and Lacanian perspective; Thomas Hill Schaub (1991) and Jon Lance Bacon (1993) consider her critique of the Cold War and contemporary American culture; Ralph C. Wood (1993-4) investigates her ambiguous standpoint on race; Robert H. Brinkmeyer (1989) discusses Bakhtinian dialogism as it pertains to her work.

<sup>4</sup> The early sixties saw the emergence of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Ken Kesey, John Hawkes, Sylvia Plath and Thomas Pynchon, whose works, although notably distinct from one another, all register some sense of the individual's terrible and absurd plight in a world out of control and of the meaningless of attempting to impose order. The non-existence, irrelevance or impotence of the Christian God could be envisaged as a starting point for writers such as the above.

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<sup>5</sup> It is evident that O'Connor admired certain conservative scholars, such as Russell Kirk (1953; 1956) and Gustave Weigel (1963), who re-examined human truth in the light of Christian precepts.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Hilfer remarks that O'Connor's writing was "so traditional in its values, those of the twelfth century, as to be outré" (1992: 78). Martha Stephens castigates O'Connor's imagination as "medieval", that is, "bleak", austere", "rigid", issuing an "injunction to renunciation of the world" (1973: 4). Dorothy Walters, who also finds O'Connor's spiritual vision troubling, writes: "The ethos of her vision is medieval rather than modern" (1973: 153). Others have attributed to O'Connor labels such as "literary witch" (Meaders 1962) and "evil-hunter" (Bleikasten 1978) which coarsely allude to her medieval affinity.

<sup>7</sup> The fourth stanza of Arnold's 'Dover Beach' records a lament that universal certitude, once existing in the Middle Ages, is waning:

The sea of faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright gurdle furl'd,  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating to the breath  
Of night-wind down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world. (in *The Penguin Book of English Verse*: 344-5)

<sup>8</sup> In 'The Nineteenth Century and After', Yeats parodies Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

Though the great song return no more  
There's keen delight in what we have:  
The rattle of pebbles on the shore  
Under the receding wave. (in Weatherby 1975: 5)

<sup>9</sup> These are, in fact, concerns to which Ingmar Bergman draws attention in a discussion on film-making: "To me, religious questions are continuously alive. I never cease to concern myself with them; it goes on every hour of every day". Yet, he maintains: "Religious emotion, religious sentimentality, is something I got rid of long ago — I hope" (in Bergman 1970: 12).

<sup>10</sup> Lorine Getz (1980), Kathleen Feeley (1982) and James Andreas (1989) take pains to elaborate on the focused nature of O'Connor's reading and reviewing interests. Her collected reviews and an analysis of her personal book collection are published respectively in *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews* (1983) and *Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being* (1985). It is notable that O'Connor read the theological works of St. Aquinas, St. Augustine and Origen; the poetry of Chaucer and Dante; the mystical writings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, to mention a few. She also gained a 'second-hand' knowledge of medieval theology and aesthetics by reading Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Henri De Lubac, Martin D'Arcy and other scholars of the mid twentieth century. It is significant to note that there was a renewed interest in medieval ethical theories and their aesthetic application during O'Connor's time of greatest literary activity in the 1950s and early 60s (Andreas 1989: 23, 38 n.6).

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<sup>11</sup> William Lynch explains that the “habits of perception which instinctively *dissociate*” can be considered ‘Manichean’ (*Library*: 180). Historically, Manicheism, deriving its name from its founder, Mani, was an influential religious movement of the third century, originating in Mesopotamia from where it spread east- and westwards. The movement became remarkably well-known in Europe until its decline in the West in the sixth century, though it re-emerged in sectarian form in medieval times. Its radically dualistic nature, sharing affinities with Gnosticizing trends in Christianity, emphasised the cosmic struggle between good and evil, light and dark, and advocated stringent abstinence from meat, sex, violence and hard labour. Darkness, depth, the earth, the body and all dense matter were associated with evil. At the opposite extreme, light, height, air, spirit, revelation, the redeemed human soul, were identified with a heavenly origin. The Manichean objective was to liberate light particles trapped in the dark matter of the present world. (*The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967), vol. 9. and *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*)

<sup>12</sup> From Pierre Leroy’s essay in the Harper edition of *The Divine Milieu* (1965: 15), cited in Wood (1988: 94).

<sup>13</sup> Hans Küng in his Yale Lectures on *Freud and the Problem of God* (in Kehl 1995: 274).

<sup>14</sup> Carol Shloss points out that O’Connor was “haunted” by her readers in contrast to William Faulkner, for example, who considered them of no account and Virginia Woolf who regarded them as an annoying reality (1980: 22). O’Connor was evidently very aware of those she called her “monstrous readers”, those who wanted to have a say in how she wrote (in Feeley 1982: 45). Brian Ragen also discusses O’Connor’s awareness of the interpretative gap between herself and her unbelieving audience and claims that it was a “terrible burden” and “haunted” her throughout her career (1989: 168).

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Gordon commented in an interview with O’Connor that the Hegelian concept of the death of God had “cast its shadow” on the Western world (*Conversations*: 72). Jue-Nam Han elaborates, in an article on O’Connor’s Thomism, that counter-cultural theologians of the 1950s and 60s, American and Protestant, “advocated an atheistic Christianity by adopting the God-is-Dead motive” they found in the ideas of Blake, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example (1997: 115-6). Theologians like Paul van Buren and Harvey Cox commonly argued that God is irretrievably lost in the modern world; they humanised Jesus in their search for a Christless Christianity. It is not difficult to read Hazel Motes as a high priest of this theology (117).

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Shaw (1983: 11) refers to James’ preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’ in *The Art of the Novel*.

<sup>17</sup> The conception of grouping stories originates with the medieval practice of collecting exempla into a single cohesive group and is still evident in the larger unity within which many contemporary writers present individual stories. (Shaw 1983: 16).

<sup>18</sup> From *The Confessions* (1943: 65), referred to by Asals (1982: 223).

<sup>19</sup> From Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIV in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 24).

## Chapter One

# The Charged Proportions of Anagogy

A dimension taken away is one thing, a dimension added is another... the reality of the added dimension will be judged in a work of fiction by the truthfulness and wholeness of the natural events presented.

— Flannery O'Connor, *The Church and the Fiction Writer*

### The Highest Sense

Through informal, intent reading of medieval theology and aesthetics, Flannery O'Connor came to discover the quartet of multiple meanings in Scripture and to explore the applicability of multi-dimensionality to art. She developed the habit of referring to “three kinds of meaning” to be found “in the literal level of the sacred text: the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical” (*Reviews*: 94). These terms are, in fact, borrowed directly from hermeneutical theory of the Middle Ages which specified literal meaning as the first level. Gregory the Great (Pope from 590–604) drew on the systematic approach to interpretation formulated by Origen (185?-254?) and presented to the medieval world the four-tiered hierarchy of meanings in Scripture. In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) outlined that the ‘ordinary’ (literal) meaning of Scripture provided the basis for the ‘spiritual’ (that is, the moral, allegorical and anagogical) meanings of the Text, of which the anagogical was the highest possibility.<sup>1</sup> The following mnemonic became popular in the medieval era, arguably first used by Augustine of Dacia, ca. 1260:

*Littera gesta docet, Quid credas allegoria,  
Moralis quid agas, Quo tendas anagogia.* (in Robertson 1963: 293)

An English version by Nicholas of Lyre reads:

The literal teaches you history, Your belief is allegory;  
Moral is what you do, Where you go is anagogy. (in Grimes 1982: 15)

It becomes clear from reading O'Connor's essays, reviews and letters that she considered the concept of multivalency applicable to all of life, including the creation of her fiction. The medieval quartet of meanings provided her with a theological basis for interpreting and representing truth at multiple levels. O'Connor importantly and ambitiously judged the literal and anagogical levels to be more germane to the writing of modern-day fiction than the allegorical and the moral (or tropological). She argues in 'Novelist and Believer' that "you can't have effective allegory in times when people are swept this way and that by momentary convictions, because everyone will read it differently". Furthermore, "[you] can't indicate moral values when morality changes with what is being done, because there is no accepted basis of judgement" (*Prose*: 166). Because a pervasive belief system is no longer in place and a set of ethical absolutes no longer upheld in the modern West, the modes of allegory and morality are less able to convey meaning than in medieval times; the gap between vehicle and tenor is too wide. O'Connor's sense of dislocation from an interpretative community was not, of course, new, although deeply felt. Her observation recalls the perceived authorial solitude of Henry James some decades earlier and, even, Herman Melville in the nineteenth century, but, in her case, the disjunction would plausibly have been more acute.<sup>2</sup>

In Flannery O'Connor's view, the relationship between the literal and anagogical — reflective of the relationship between "nature" and "grace" — is central to effective and Scripturally underpinned fiction writing. Representation of reality according to a biblical worldview necessitates including both tangible existence and intangible verity. As O'Connor argued: "you can't show the operation of grace when grace is cut off from nature or when the very possibility of grace is denied, because no one will have the least idea of what you're on about" (*Prose*: 166). Neither the concrete nor the spiritual is enough on its own. Anagogy, transcending allegorical parallelism and tropological didacticism, apprehends the mystery of the spiritual world through the concrete detail of the literal. To most moderns *anagogy* is not

a familiar classification, but to O'Connor this mode exemplified the supreme level of access to truth. "St Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do" (*Prose*: 184). Rather formidably, Flannery O'Connor compared her aim as author to that of Scripture.

By implicating the anagogical level in the world of the story, O'Connor attempted to present a realm of reality normally imperceptible to the eye. The anagogical could be conceptualised as an "added dimension" which accesses the *divine* mystery (*Prose*: 150). Her vision might be compared to that of fellow Catholic, Walker Percy, who argues for the existence of the "Delta" dimension of meaning in a world that might be called "Flatland" (1975: 155).<sup>3</sup> As the impetus of anagogy is Godward, its contra-impetus — the *diabolical* — also comes into focus. For the purposes of this study, one can argue that the heavenly momentum of the anagogical sense distinguishes itself from the evidently hellward impetus of the grotesque mode. The anagogical and the grotesque can thus be viewed as occupying opposing symbolical extremes: the exalted and vulgar. I will further discuss in this chapter and the next that the spiritual and aesthetic categories of high and low are not entirely separable from those of metaphysical and geophysical space. My investigation of the expansive proportions and sometimes complex implications of anagogy in relation to O'Connor will begin by first considering the mode as high and heavenly.

St. Thomas Aquinas held that anagogy relates the *historia* or *litera* of scriptural texts to "eternal glory", thus indicating the mode's principal association with the divine realm.<sup>4</sup> In the light of this understanding, an early conception of the sublime is a useful introduction to anagogy. The first-century Longinian treatise, *Peri Hypsous*, presents the sublime as an aesthetic and critical term which conveys the sense of an "echo of greatness of spirit" — a spark that leaps from the soul of the artist to that of the audience. 'Sublime' literally means '(on) high, lofty, elevated' and, as an aesthetic category, stresses the ultimate, ideal and transcendent. The Longinian sublime emphasises the spiritual quality of the category, the *elevation* of thoughts and aspirations, the "spark" issuing through the writer's soul.<sup>5</sup> The

sublime “spark”, in O’Connor’s Catholic worldview, can convincingly be equated with the God-given creative impetus. To her, the writer is a “maker” (*Prose*: 82) indwelt by God’s gift of creativity who, if attentive to the *littera* of reality and demands of the craft, might cause her art to resound with anagogical dimensions.

O’Connor was devoted to the action of making — she espoused the Thomistic understanding of art (via Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism*) as the *creative activity* of nature always in the interest of the good of the thing made. She understood that Secondary Creation rises from the Primary (J. R. R. Tolkien),<sup>6</sup> or in other words, that “there is aesthetic creation because there is *creation*”, to quote George Steiner.

There is formal construction because we have been made form... The core of our human identity is nothing more or less than the fitful apprehension of the radically inexplicable presence, facticity and perceptible substantiality of the created. It is; we are. This is the rudimentary grammar of the unfathomable. (Steiner 1989: 201)<sup>7</sup>

The “perceptible substantiality of the created” is O’Connor’s bedrock in originating her own creation. Deferring to Aquinas and assuming her own fallenness, she confidently asserted that “art does not require rectitude of the appetite” (*Prose*: 171). She understood that because talent is bestowed, deficient and even dissolute artists could be used for high purposes. For good reason, O’Connor noted this passage in Carl Jung’s *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*: “Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him” (1957: 169). The question of O’Connor’s gender did not apparently pose a dilemma because she did not conceive artistic gifting to be self-generated, but given by the highest of masculine authorities — God Himself. Katherine Hemple Prown argues convincingly that Catholicism offered O’Connor “a means of justifying her desire to write, allowing her to conceive of her work not as a frivolous and misguided usurpation of male privilege, but as a responsibility to which she must faithfully submit” (1995: 66-7). In 1956, O’Connor wrote to a valued nine-year-long correspondent who wished only to be

known as 'A':<sup>8</sup> art is "a good deal more than a masculine drive — it is, in part, the accurate naming of the things of God" (*Letters*: 126). In O'Connor's conception, "accurate naming" is closely connected to "seeing straight" (*Letters*: 131). Both practices require a vision of penetration and a respect for fidelity to reality. In Walker Percy's understanding, which O'Connor conceivably would have endorsed, the act of naming enables one to enter the higher unseen dimension of reality and to account for the self as one who "stands apart from the universe and affirms some other being to be what it is" (1975: 155).

The literal meaning of 'anagogy' is strikingly analogous to that of 'sublime'. 'Anagogy' originates from the Greek word-stems meaning 'up' and 'lead' (to elevate), and 'sublime' from a Latin-derived word signifying 'on high'. The directional momentum of both modes is *up*; the intentional impulse is to *highly elevate*. An anagogical signal or impetus guides the eye to the visible heavens: the perceptible atmospheric expanse. The impetus also manoeuvres the inner eye mystically to the unseen heavenlies: a realm of divine habitation and glory in mytho-theological conception. As Mircea Eliade explains in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

What is 'above', the 'high' continues to reveal the transcendent in every religious complex... in religious life the sky remains ever present by virtue of its symbolism. (1959: 128)

One could say that Boethius' instruction — "Look to the highest heights of heaven" — is an exhortation to pursue the Christian sublime to its anagogical end.<sup>9</sup>

Considerable attention is given to the sky in O'Connor's fiction, as even the most desultory reader will notice. The short stories, in particular, abound in descriptions of cloud shapes, sun blazes, lunar profiles, celestial expanses and, notably, horizons: margins of encounter between the atmospheric and terrestrial. As more searching readers will realise, these atmospheric phenomena in O'Connor's fictional universe are associated with possibilities of revelation and visitation, also of portent. After all, it is from the heavens that the Son of Man will come at the end of human time. This is the advent which Rufus Jones has called "the fierce comfort of an apocalyptic relief expedition of the sky" (1938: 5). The curiosities above,

the skies, moons and suns, are almost always loci of spiritual activity. Asked by students about the presence of the sun in her work, O'Connor answered: "It's there; it's so obvious. And from time immemorial it's been a god" (*Conversations*: 59).

Throughout the ages of Judaeo-Christian thought, the sky and its spheres have predominantly been associated with divine presence and benevolent theophany. Yet, it seems important to note that the heavens could at times also be identified with inexplicable, even malevolent, influences. The sky in O'Connor's fiction is arguably somewhat like a medieval atmosphere: an open domain of presence that at times pictures conflict between forces of light and darkness. "There dwell in the air many kinds of creatures which shall remain there till doomsday comes. Some of them are good and some do evil", reads part of the twelfth-century poem, the *Brut* (in Lewis 1968: 46). Eliade notes that throughout history disasters proceeding from the sky have caused people return to the supreme being again and entreat him (1959: 126). The heavens in O'Connor's stories are presumably charged with good, but at times seem enchanted or assailed by evil. The onlookers, her characters, do not always seem to discern the source of power, yet often recognise it as a threat to their self-defined lives. One might say, then, that anagogy initially leads the eye upward to increase awareness of the numinous, before suggesting the divine. Strangely enough, O'Connor at times intends God's power or grace to look like its opposite, as will be further discussed in relation to the grotesque. In the end, anyone, whether character or reader, who heeds the advice of Hazel Motes, the Church Without Christ preacher — "[you] needn't to look at the sky because it's not going to open up and show no place behind it" (*Wise*: 165) — will neglect a crucial vehicle of anagogy in O'Connor's fiction.

## **Towards the End**

As I have thus far discussed, anagogy is principally associated with sublimity and eternal glory. But in the context of its popular medieval designation, it should also be considered in relation

to spiritual judgement and eternal darkness. The medieval adage which outlines the quartet of hermeneutical levels does not, after all, specify the fourth level of meaning as revealing heaven. “*Where you go is anagogy*”, it reads. Another rendering of the original Latin phrase runs: “Anagogy shows us where we end our life” (in Grant 1963: 85). Medieval dictionaries of biblical interpretation, known as *distinctios*, attempted to codify the multivalent possibilities of many Scriptural verses. For example, an entry for ‘bed’ in a twelfth-century *distinctio* illustrates the word’s oppositional anagogical senses. “My children are with me in bed” (Luke 11: 7) indicates eternal blessedness, whereas “I have made my bed in darkness” (Job 17: 13) points to eternal punishment (Smalley 1952: 247). For the medieval, images both of dread and promise characterised the meditation on death and the after-life. It was not unusual in this period, O’Connor remarked, that attention should be devoted to “questions more curious than decisive” concerning the world to come (*Reviews*: 75). Imaginably for the modern individual of a religious persuasion, a similar tension between hope and fear is felt. Either eternal bliss or everlasting perdition awaits, or perhaps a purgatorial state in between. O’Connor argued that “Catholic literature will [only] be positive in the sense that we hold this freedom [of accepting Christ] to exist, but the Church has never encouraged us to believe that hell is not a going concern” (*Prose*: 182).

Jesuit scholar, William Lynch, infers that anagogy as a hermeneutical mode strains or moves *towards* the end *through* that which is created:

[The anagogical sense] is not a jump to a Manichaeian moment, conqueror of time. It is the end, the last moment of time, an end effected by time itself, both natural and supernatural, and it produces the anagoge in its moment of final exhaustion. (*Christ and Apollo*, 1960: 194)

The anagogical sense encompasses the end in a way that is both “natural and supernatural”: it incorporates historical time (*chronos*) as it is propelled by divine time (*kairos*) towards the eschatological denouement. One might say that anagogy approaches, enfolds and discloses the end on both a personal and universal plane — it is apocalyptic. Marjorie Reeves elucidates in *Apocalyptic Spirituality* that “belief in the soul’s immortality is intimately linked with the

place of the human personality in an ongoing historical process which has two terminals — one in death and a universal one in the end of the world” (in McGinn 1979: xiii).

The term ‘apocalypse’, derived from the Greek *apokalupto*, ‘to uncover’, is significantly associated with revelation — as it pertains to the individual and to the whole order of being. ‘Uncovering’ or unveiling is potentially disruptive, as the etymology could suggest; a hidden truth could be exposed, for example, like the forceful stripping of a clothed body. Not insignificantly, the prototype of Christian apocalyptic, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, is replete with visions of violence and destruction. Yet, it is also punctuated with intimations of hope and redemption. Ultimately this prophetic Book could be said to confound attempts at irrefutable interpretation and to leave questions resounding in the mind of the average reader: “Who are the ‘sheep’ and who are the ‘goats’? When will the end come and who will be spared?”. A comparable sense of unease frequently affects O’Connor’s reader, as he or she faces climactic or cataclysmic closure of story after story. For example, does Tanner’s “Judgement Day” execution — “his head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister” (*Stories*: 549) — signal his redemption or damnation?

As I have discussed, the anagogical sense apprehends the highest level of mystery and the unknown of the future. But, it also importantly addresses the present. Patrick O’Donnell speaks of anagogy as a “vision of means and ends” (1986: 95). Both the ‘journey’ and ‘destination’ can thus be read in an anagogical light. Indeed, O’Connor asserted that being conscious of the end affects life in the present: “The creative action of the Christian’s life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which the world’s goods are utilized to the fullest” (*Prose*: 223). The artist can therefore interpret and represent human life on the earth as a phase of the End and of the Future. As Jesuit Martin C. D’Arcy writes in *The Meaning and Matter of History*:

All life is an expectancy, the tense awaiting for the knock on the door and the sounds of a voice saying: ‘It is I’; and because this Coming is decisive and felt to be final, it is described by apocalyptic writers in terms of judgement, sudden call, catastrophic change, ultimate separation or union, and it is localized in the

coming of faith and grace, the Church, death, the passing of a generation and the last assize. (1959: 196; *Library*: 138).

All of life, in O'Connor's Catholic view, is geared towards the final moments of death, and on a larger scale, towards the Parousia, Judgement, the New Heavens and New Earth. Indeed in Catholic thought, it is only in death that an individual's life is "weighed in the balances" and spiritual "destiny eternally fixed". This outlook differs from the Calvinistic conviction that, once saving grace has been received, one's outcome is sure (Wood 1984: 17). It is no wonder that O'Connor noted D'Arcy's reflection on Judgement Day and, in her fiction, pictured divine visitation as bewildering and powerful: "Thou hast 'thy dark descending and most art merciful then'" (*Library*: 138).

From all accounts, Flannery O'Connor possessed a heightened awareness of physical and spiritual extremes — pain, isolation, death, spiritual fundamentalism. While she chose in everyday life to articulate this awareness with humour and bathos, in her fiction she conveyed, more viscerally, it would seem, her reaction to matters of life, death and faith. Death was, of course, a large and looming consideration for her personally, besides being a central dwelling point of her Catholic faith. From the age of twenty-five for a period of fourteen years O'Connor felt the effects of disseminated lupus erythematosus and its treatments: fatigue, aching joints, debilitating infections, and enervating cortisone dosages.<sup>10</sup> She lived with a near constant awareness that the "dread disease" which took her father's life at forty-four could at any time seize hers (*Letters*: 255). It is hard to imagine that her prolonged period of incurable illness did not bear upon her imagination and inflame stories fixated with last things.<sup>11</sup> One might even say that her fiction conveys a 'medieval' type preoccupation with death.

The medieval period has, of course, been associated with the *memento mori* more than any other epoch (Huizinga 1927: 124). In Michel Foucault's words: "the theme death reign[ed]" (Foucault 1965: 15). François Villon, the medieval French poet, with whose work O'Connor was familiar, captures some of the flagrant motifs of inevitable but hideous death, as it was often portrayed in the twelfth century:

Death makes him to shudder and turn pale,  
The nose to curve, the veins to swell,  
The neck to inflate, the flesh to soften,  
Joints and tendons to grow and swell.

.....

Do these evils await you?

Yes, or you must go to heaven quite alive. (trans. Huizinga 1927: 133)

O'Connor's work incorporates the graphic physical processes and spiritual implications of death, but also frequently offers a comical, if ironic, handling of the death's anagogical possibilities. Death is so serious it has to be treated with some lightness. "[It] is well to realize", O'Connor wrote in 'The Novelist and Believer', "that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy" (*Prose*: 167). It is no contradiction for her to say of Bernard Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*: "Really spiritual and very funny" (*Letters*: 288). Marion Montgomery (1987: 234) and James Andreas (1989: 23) attest that she is humorously "Chaucerean" in her acceptance of human fallenness, the inevitability of death and ultimate reality. O'Connor inferred that in the security of her Christian beliefs, she could see "the comical side of the universe" — the outrageous grace of God operating in the lives of disinterested personae. "[W]hat is more comic and terrible", she reflected, "than the angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth?" (*Letters*: 105-6). She alludes here to Simone Weil, whom she greatly admired, but whose existential, and ultimately self-destructive, plight to reach God, she considered tragic. That O'Connor could consider Weil's life "comic", as well as "terrible", suggests that she adopted a divine perspective on the situation, as did writers and dramatists of medieval times. "The tragedy of the world is the comedy of God", comments medievalist Morton Bloomfield, "We are both I's and he's, tragic from our own perspective and comic to others" (1972: 389).<sup>12</sup> Or, in other words: "Comedy is life in long shot and tragedy is life in close up".<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, to call Weil's struggle "comic" is, to our minds, macabre and even callous — we cannot easily identify with an otherworldly perspective. O'Connor plays with notions of comedy and

tragedy from a theocentric point of view throughout her two collections, which allows her to incorporate both the anagogical and grotesque.

In Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the characters' revelatory encounters and insights often work towards conversion if not actually effecting it. The traditionally chartered process from sin to salvation — recognition, confession, repentance, and absolution — is typically short-circuited in O'Connor's short stories, significant aspects of the process being accentuated, while the “complete journey-as-process pattern” is used in the novels (Randles 1988: 239). Though the author acknowledges an “initial conversion”, she does not necessarily “think of conversion as being once and for all”. But that “once the process has begun and continues” an individual is “continually turning in toward God and away from [one's] egocentricity” (*Letters*: 430). According to this understanding, it can be argued that in particular stories where the characters remain alive, the process of conversion continues beyond the parameters of the text, beyond the realm to which the reader has access. In certain cases, it may seem obvious where a character is headed eternally, but the possibility nevertheless exists within the parameters of Catholic doctrine that a conversion may be lost or gained over time. In stories where characters meet their end in simultaneous *death* and *revelation*, salvation is possible despite the nature of their previous years. Conveying this notion is the child in ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’ who suspects that she “could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick” (*Stories*: 243).

The revelations which characters experience might be otherwise be termed epiphanies. As Carol Shloss is careful to point out, epiphany in O'Connor's fiction hearkens back to the ancient conception of disclosure effected by an external force. It remains distinct, Shloss says, from the Joycean concept which emphasises the role of the sensitive perceiver in gaining a sudden moment of ‘spiritual’ insight in the human commonplace (1980: 105). In James Joyce's schema, the artist, the perceptive interpreter, is a priest who “converts the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life” (*Portrait*: 221). Flannery O'Connor's outlook could not be more divergent. In her view, the revelation issues from the three-

personed God and is in no way self-created (such would amount to a heretical effort at transubstantiation). It appears that to a somewhat bewildering degree, O'Connor requires passivity, not highly conscious, self-seeking activity as a prerequisite to experiencing epiphany. All the incentive comes from God, as I discuss in some detail in Chapters Three and Four.

The revelatory and transforming moments in O'Connor's stories are usually so intense and revolutionary that they do not easily fit conventionally understood conversion — as delineated from both Catholic and Protestant doctrinal standpoints. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* stresses that conversion is “always founded on personal conviction of truth”: a state of reasoning mind, which seems conspicuously absent in O'Connor's stories. According to the Catholic view, the reality of conversion cannot be made to depend on the “supernatural character” of the experience. The general Protestant position, on the contrary, is that conversion entails a “personal, subjective” knowledge of change.<sup>14</sup> Frederick Asals (1982: 231) proposes that the experiences of conversion in O'Connor resemble more the awakening of the mystic which, following Evelyn Underhill's explication, he understands to involve an “unselfing” in which “the transcendental consciousness” breaks in on the individual (1955: 176-7). The sense that a character's civilised self is disrupted through the incursion of a higher consciousness, suggests that the experience is largely mystical. Indeed, the etymological roots of the word ‘revelation’ (Latin: *re* or back, *velum* or veil) imply a second chance at vision, an awakening to what one knew was there but did not see (Sessions 1997: 192). The anagogical encounters of O'Connor's stories thus seem designed to reach the unconscious or sub-conscious spiritual centre of the human personality.

Flannery O'Connor, aged thirty-nine, worked on her last story (included in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*) only a few weeks before slipping into a coma in August 1964. Her letters do not articulate her experience of dying, but few of her stories fail to generate an awareness of death. In general, her work prior to the mid-fifties — *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* — moves repeatedly towards death, but seldom beyond it. However, her fiction of the early sixties — *The Violent Bear It Away* and *Everything That Rises Must*

*Converge* — reveals a greater awareness of eternal possibilities and eschatological dimensions of the universe. One could say that her protagonists are thrust toward an apocalyptic extreme throughout her mature work, but that the limits of that extreme horizon shift as the author herself approached death.

The graphic truths of Flannery O'Connor's Catholic faith rooted in medieval theology certainly fuelled an apocalyptic sensibility, as she acknowledged in an interview with C. Ross Mullins (1963):

I'm a born Catholic and death has always been brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its foreshadowings.  
(*Conversations*: 107)

Death signals the inevitable terminus of a human life and pictures, on a macrocosmic scale, universal judgement and the possibilities of a resurrected existence. Though not in an erudite sense, it seems that O'Connor strove to illustrate Dr Zhivago's perspective: "All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John" (in *Letters*: 305).

## Reading Creation

Anagogy points to the End, as dramatised in the Apocalypse, yet it hearkens also to the Beginning, as depicted in Genesis. Indeed, Christ, the source and goal of anagogy, reveals Himself to be the "Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last" (Revelation 22: 13). An understanding of the expanse of history from a Christian perspective is crucial to the artist who aims to demonstrate the anagogical dimension of truth extending forward and back in time, as well as to portray the present, living reality of creation. History, in this understanding, is both linear and circular. It is a progression toward the end and, indeed, toward the hope of renewal which a number of Church Fathers perceived as a recapturing and reinstating of universal edenic origins (Abrams 1984: 346).

As I have discussed, the primary source and stimulus of anagogical consciousness in medieval times was the acclaimed *Logos*, the Word of God literalised as the Bible. The

natural universe was, however, also read as a terrain into which God had inscribed meaning. Following Romans 1:20 (“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made”), a number of medieval theologians believed that the anagogical level could be attained by encountering nature as Truth. Twelfth-century Hugh of St. Victor, for example — known to his contemporaries as “the new Augustine” — taught that spiritual types could be discovered *per creaturam*, in creatures, as well as *per doctrinam*, in doctrine (De Lubac 1964: 172). Despite the “Book of Nature” being damaged as a consequence of the Fall, it could still reveal God to readers who sought spiritual truth through the creation (Bump 1982: 71). Landscape and atmospheric features, as well as living and non-living things of every description, could be interpreted as meaningful.

Flannery O’Connor’s emphasis on the natural environment, and the material world in general, suggests her indebtedness to Thomistic thought. She highlighted a number of passages in her copy of Anton C. Pegis’ *The Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas* which focus on the nature of human acquisition of knowledge, more specifically, on the recognition of the supernatural in the natural.

Man as a knower must be partly material in order to be adequately a knower... [He] needs a body; for through the senses of his body he can give sensible existence in the order of knowing to that which is sensible in the order of being. (1948: xxiv, xxvi, *Library*: 71-2)

Instead of regarding the natural world as adversarial to the supernatural, St. Thomas considered one the starting point for the other. Apprehending the physical world via the five senses initiates the process of knowing. In Thomistic understanding, Sura P. Rath clarifies, “God is present in His immensity, as cause, before He is present by grace as a redeemer” (1990: 3).

Of the three ways to know God, according to St. Thomas (or three “wisdoms” in Jacques Maritain’s terms), the first is metaphysical: the effect of *reason*, drawn from human

sense impressions of the external, physical creation. The second way is theological and the third mystical: both the effects of *faith* which metaphysical wisdom, in the first instance, makes possible. In O'Connor's understanding, *reason* (which entertains the mind) initiates *faith* (which entertains the imagination). Apprehending God metaphysically precedes knowing Him theologically or mystically. This Thomistic notion supports the understanding that anagogy is accessible only through the literal and concrete. Also important is St. Thomas' understanding that faith, though an inferior type of knowledge, overrides reason in that it implies assent of the intellect to that which the intellect does not consider to be true (Rath 1990: 2). Echoing the Scholastic, O'Connor affirmed: "I find it reasonable to believe, even though these beliefs are beyond reason" (in Montgomery 1990: 228). In the end, she inferred the mutual accommodation of reason and imagination in the Catholic sensibility by deferring, for example, to St. Thomas' view that art is "reason in making" (*Prose*: 82).

O'Connor recognised various implications of a Thomistic perspective for literary aesthetics. She held that "[the] writer whose point of view is Catholic in the widest sense of the term reads nature in the same way the medieval commentators read Scripture" (*Letters*: 468), but insisted that spiritual interpretation should not be severed from what is immediate to the senses, let alone from what is aesthetically effective:

Part of the complexity of the problem for the Catholic fiction writer...[is] the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what is. (*Prose*: 147)

The problem entails the dramatic (re)presentation of grace — God's unmerited favour and redeeming power — in the natural world, and in the world of the story. A departure point for the Catholic artist of this persuasion would be to focus on ways in which reason and faith, not contradicting each other, are manifested in natural phenomena and in human contexts:

The artist uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees. For him to be reasonable, is to find, in the object, in the situation, in the sequence, the spirit which makes it itself. This is not an easy or simple thing to do. It is to intrude upon the timeless, and that is only done by the violence of a single-minded respect for the truth. (*Prose*: 82-3)

O'Connor asserted that recognising an echo of intelligence or being ("an answering reason") in the natural world is where the artist begins. As Étienne Gilson explains: "The sense-objects which form the point of departure of all our knowledge have retained some traces of the divine nature which has created them, since the effect always bears resemblance to its cause" (1924: 26). The distinctiveness of the object perceived conveys to the 'knower' the presence of the Creator. In aiming to depict the analogical level in fiction, O'Connor believed she needed to start "where human knowledge begins — with the senses", and to work "through the limitations of matter". Only if she were writing "fantasy", would she have cause to move beyond "the concrete possibilities" of her culture and environment (*Prose*: 155). As Brian Abel Ragen (1989: 1) observes, Flannery O'Connor's insistence that ideas should take on form was a central tenet of New Critical thinking to which she had been exposed during her study in Iowa, yet she necessarily sought theological justification.

It can hardly be coincidental that O'Connor devotes a noticeable amount of narrative space, especially in her two collections of short stories and second novel, to describing landscapes, natural forms and creatures. She believed, in the words of Mircea Eliade, that "the existence of the world itself 'means' something, 'wants to say' something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque" (1960). What is particularly striking about the natural features of O'Connor's fictional world, on the whole, is that they are not *typically* picturesque or attractive. The skylines, water surfaces, forested expanses and clearings are not usually *beautiful* in the Burkean sense; they do <sup>not</sup> generally display "clean and fair" colours in their "milder shades" nor evoke a sensuous enjoyment of life (Burke 1958: 220). Neither are her landscapes normally reminiscent of the more idyllic Romantic descriptions of nature. In her fictional universe, cliffs do not "connect/ with the quiet of the sky", as in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. Though O'Connor viewed nature as imbued with vitality and mystery, she did not consider this sense of presence to emanate from a ubiquitous, unnamed Spirit of

Oneness. To her, the natural world echoes and celebrates the supreme mind and fearsomeness of the Creator-Christ who at any stage might become manifest.

O'Connor's frequent decision to create "trees with a sawtooth edge" (*Stories*: 321), "a ragged wall of cloud" (194), "a black violent streak [of a bull]" (333), and scores of other peculiar images, was motivated by her belief in the metaphysical significance of nature. She presented images and scenes — at times relying on the distorting lens of the grotesque — that would capture the attention of her characters and readers. She constructed a world in which nature became heightened and dramatised in order to initiate the processes of the anagogical. Many of the natural phenomena in her world are reminiscent of those identified with the Burkean *sublime* — searing sunsets, black dense forests, rugged mountain faces. The immediate affective reaction to such scenes is terror, and then, astonishment. Suggesting an essentially Thomistic understanding, Edmund Burke advanced that from "the contemplation of a sublime landscape, one is led to a sensible impression of the Deity by whose power such magnificent scenes are created" (Meller 1993: 86). As in the Burkean or terrifying sublime, the junctures between sky and ground, heaven and earth are seldom smoothly drawn in O'Connor's fiction. These frontiers are characteristically charged with mysterious energy. The extraordinary skylines of many of her stories — the dark rows of sky-piercing trees silhouetting a sunset — often unnerve the beholder, propelling him or her to a new awareness of the numinous.<sup>15</sup> Having stressed O'Connor's tendency to render her descriptions of nature peculiar and sometimes terrifying, I should note that instances of beauty and lyricism are not altogether absent in her stories. One thinks, for example, of the trees that "sparkle" and the clinkers that "glitter" (*Stories*: 119, 269). These instances are infrequent and understated, yet they suggest the profound reality — the eternal glory — which informs her greater anagogical vision (Martin 1987: 149).

The anagogical level of meaning was, in O'Connor's understanding more than "a method applied to biblical exegesis", but "also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities" (*Prose*: 72-3). In her view, the perceptual

margins of anagogy incorporate an expansive, integrated awareness of life that opposes the modern 'Manichean' impetus separating reason from imagination, nature from grace, and judgement from vision. The anagogical mode allows for interaction, even integration, between what is immediate to the human senses and what is not. To O'Connor, anagogy importantly extends the effect and intensifies the stature of the stories she and others might write:

[It] is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. It seems to be a paradox that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction.  
(*Prose*: 73)

The all-encompassing nature of the anagogical sense draws in all facets of life as it elevates the sensibility to apprehend what is normally imperceptible. As William Lynch has said, this sense opens "a world of complete insight" (1960: 194). An anagogical approach to fiction writing enables the writer to include spheres of reality that confront both eternity and the tangible, personal present.

## Art and Vision

Considered as an "attitude toward all of creation" (*Prose*: 72-3), anagogy offers immense potential to the artist seeking to show the divine. Not only was the anagogical mode relevant to the sculptor, designer or author of an integrated medieval world, but Flannery O'Connor judged it pertinent to the artist of a modern disjointed existence. She suggested that to "increase the meaning" of his or her work, the contemporary artist should develop "anagogical vision" (72). This is "the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation" (72): a sensibility capable of making connections between the unexpected and incongruous. Crucial to the artist and indeed to the believer is the ability to see — immediately with the physical eyes, penetratingly with those of the spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Like Abbot Suger in the twelfth century and Dante in the fourteenth century, O'Connor articulated a theory of anagogical vision and applied it to a domain of creative

enterprise. The perspectives of the two renowned medievals on their particular projects offer useful insights into how anagogy can shape the creative perceptions and techniques of the Christian artist. However, as one might suspect of the twentieth-century author, O'Connor went beyond medieval conceptions of the mode. She considered, for instance, that objects need not be splendid or extraordinary in order to invite or initiate anagogical vision. She explored too the idea of blindness as a phase in anagogical awakening; she deepened her understanding of anagogical vision as prophetic.

Abbot Suger (1081-1151), renovator of the Abbey of St.-Denis, was one of the first to draw from dialogues at the time surrounding vision, anagogy and *aevum*,<sup>17</sup> and to accord heavenly significance to a structure built with human strength. He intended the Abbey to be an inspired model of celestial order and wholeness “with power to lift observers into heavenly realms” (Nolan 1977: 40). Suger envisaged that this ‘model’ could openly imitate divine reason — even participate in it — and by the qualities and minutiae of its construction, lead the intellect (and then imagination) to appreciate the spiritual work of the “divine artificer” (40).

The towering Gothic cathedrals of the later Middle Ages in Europe certainly demonstrated the innovative influence of Suger. These ‘houses of God’ were structurally designed to set in motion an anagogical impetus of bewildering strength and momentum: the eye was propelled upwards to the point of the steeple and beyond (if viewed from outside), or to the intricate ribbing of the extraordinarily high vaults and to the expansive stained-glass panels of radiance (if viewed from the inside).<sup>18</sup> A sense of being earthbound was meant to dissipate in the dappled light and soaring shadows. This visual/visionary propulsion towards the heavens was known as ‘anagogical movement’ (Shaver-Crandell 1982: 35).

When the choir of St.-Denis had been completed, Suger wrote in *De Administratione* of his reaction:

Whence, when the many-coloured beauty of the gems had called me from external cares out of delight in the comeliness of God’s house, and serious meditation had induced me to concentrate on transferring the variety of holy

virtues from the material to the immaterial; then I seem to see myself as if dwelling on some foreign shore of the earth neither wholly in the slime of the earth nor wholly in the purity of heaven. By God's grace I seem to be able to be transported from this inferior world to that superior one in an anagogical manner. (trans. Panofsky 1946: 62-4)

This description of an anagogical experience effected through art suggests that time and eternity could fuse in vision, and that an individual life on earth could be infused with divine meaning. Suger experiences what appears to be "a quasi-temporal state of cognitive suspension between earth and heaven" (Nolan 1977: 41). His visionary episode propels him *towards* heaven, but without removing him completely from the sight of earth.

An inscription on the doors of St.-Denis expresses<sup>65</sup> Suger's cherished ideal for the worshipper or beholder:

The dull mind rises to truth  
through that which is material  
And in seeing this light,  
is resurrected from its former submersion<sup>19</sup>

Anagogical movement traces the ascension of the human mind towards "truth", as well as its resurrection in the act of apocalyptic "seeing". Anagogical motion necessarily occurs "through the material" and revelatory transformation takes place when the imperceptive or "dull" mind encounters the spiritual "light". Anagogy as a visionary mode is dependent on both the material (art, nature) and the spiritual (vision, divine truth). Suger displays an appreciation of the sensible loveliness apparent around him ("the many-coloured beauty of the gems", "the comeliness of God's house"). Yet, the material things are beautiful primarily because they reflect a higher resplendence. Suger is careful to qualify his appreciation of the literal by appealing strongly to the spiritual. O'Connor, however, was more at ease valuing things at the immediate level before seeing "through" them. The abbot tells us that the "many-coloured beauty of the gems" summoned him, then that "serious meditation" (a volitional act) translated him to an altered state. Suger's "transport[ation]" towards a "superior world" is evidently a conscious and partly self-exerted adventure. In contrast, the anagogical

experiences of O'Connor's characters are typically uninitiated — in 'The Artificial Nigger', for instance, Nelson and Mr Head become strangely enthralled by the sudden sighting of the tacky, incongruously placed plaster statue: "They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery" (*Stories*: 269).

The terms Suger uses to describe earth and heaven are indicative of a Neo-Platonic conception of the universe; O'Connor would be quick to sum up the attitude as "Manichean". The earth-reproaching phrases — "slime of the earth" and "inferior world" — contrast strongly with the lofty references to "the purity of heaven" and "superior [world]". Suger's reflection on his St.-Denis design is, to some degree, reminiscent of a Plotinian understanding of art:

[T]he beauty of a man-made object... is an imitation of Beauty and ultimately of the Good. And below the beauty of the created are the incomplete beauties of natural things which the arts are able to perfect. Hence works of art stand midway between the somewhat obscured beauties of nature, which they ennoble and bring to fulfilment, and Beauty itself, which the mind can know through its ascent beyond the beautiful object. Art is a symbol in a double sense: of that lower reality which it perfects and that ultimate reality which it mirrors. (in Hofstadter & Kuhns 1976: 140-1)

Suger sees art in anagogical action as capable of lifting the sluggish mind out of "submersion", whereas Plotinus regards art as capable of raising imperfect, earthly reality to a level of completion aspiring to the eternal. Evidence of dualistic thinking is apparent in both instances, though both accounts allow for a place *in between*. Suger speaks of anagogical movement taking him to "some foreign shore of the earth" which is "neither wholly in the slime of the earth nor wholly in the purity of heaven" and Plotinus of art as a "midway" locus.

Like Plotinus, O'Connor saw art as echoing "ultimate reality" (for her, the divine realm), yet, unlike the philosopher, she did not scorn "lower reality". Like Suger, she considered anagogy to lift the human personality to a place where both earth and heaven are in focus, but she did not share the abbot's articulated disdain of the present world (nor his *abstraction* of the one to come). The modern Catholic inferred the presence of a 'zone' in which material objects and ordinary experiences might be seen anew in the light of the

eschaton: “a crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet” (*Prose*: 59).

Finding that “location” becomes the problem of the fiction writer (59).

Moving from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, and from architecture to the poetry of vision, we find Dante insisting on symbolic form in art as a means to spiritual encounter. Barbara Nolan explains that Dante had “absorbed the new affective mystical theology” and could employ the term *anagogy* “both in its older traditional sense [of exegetical analysis] and in the experiential senses developed by his immediate predecessors” (1977: 41). In both Dante’s *Convivio* and in his famous letter to Can Grand, anagogy is the “suprasensible explication of the letter”.<sup>20</sup> But in the *Commedia*, he bids his readers to apprehend the light of contemplation through his verbal form. Through apprehension of his art, Dante, like Suger, wished his audience to be powerfully dislocated from a realm of sinful bondage and projected into a higher sphere. The narrator of the *Commedia* himself seems to experience the affective state of anagogical vision effecting this projection:

Thus living light engulfed me  
and left me so wrapt in the veil  
of its brilliance that I could see nothing. (*Paradiso XXX*, 49-51)

Here Dante refers to a state of (temporary) blindness resulting from anagogical encounter, suggestive of Saul’s Damascus road conversion. The possibility of blindness — of *not* seeing — as a phase in, or facet of, apocalyptic awakening is encompassed by O’Connor’s fiction. Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* only appears to start seeing and accepting truth about himself and Christ once blinded by lime. Asbury Fox in ‘The Enduring Chill’ begins to confront reality as the setting sun momentarily blinds him. An inability to see seems to bring the self to an awareness of his or her own inner darkness. Influenced by Augustine (taking his lead from the Scriptures and Plato), O’Connor believed that self-knowledge is crucial to the discovery of ultimate truth (Andreas 1989: 25). Necessary to self-knowledge, furthermore, is humility, she said, remembering St. Catherine of Siena (*Letters*: 125). Blindness presumably reinforces the desire for light and revelation; it is the root of the artist’s understanding of anagogy.

To O'Connor, the impairment of sight, the potential for human creativity and the possibilities of anagogical vision are mysteriously and inextricably linked. Possibly thinking of Homer, the singer of *Beowulf*, and John Milton, O'Connor commented in her talk 'Catholic Novelists and Their Readers':

The poet is traditionally a blind man, but the Christian poet, and storyteller as well, is like the blind man whom Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to learn to accept if we want to realise a truly Christian literature. (*Prose*: 184-5)

In O'Connor's understanding, the Christian storyteller potentially perceives reality beyond the limits of normal vision — at least, dimly or rudimentarily. The writer's gaze extends beyond the surface to the "realm which is the concern of poets and prophets" (*Prose*: 45). Anagogical vision can thus be conceived of as being prophetic: "not a matter of seeing clearly, but of seeing what is distant, hidden" (*Letters*: 365). O'Connor claimed that this blurred ability to see is the beginning of "deeper" and "stranger" visions. She thus implied that more obscure and perplexing visions are possible (perhaps grotesque in nature) and that they need to be apprehended to develop a more integrated understanding of the world.

In Thomistic thought, as O'Connor liked to point out, prophetic vision is a quality of the imagination, not of the moral life of the seer (*Prose*: 179). This conception opened up the way for this Catholic author to use young degenerates like Johnson and hardened criminals like the Misfit to convey the deeper truths of reality. According to St. Thomas, the prophetic gift could "be found indifferently in good men and evil men" (Aquinas 1952-4: 129). It seems, furthermore, that as O'Connor moved into the later period of her work (1954 onwards), she experimented more with using the visionary mode to precipitate anagogical encounters. In addition to using prophetic figures like Mary Pitts Fortune and Mary Grace to challenge hubris, she allowed characters such as Mrs Turpin and Mr Fortune to become recipients of visions magnifying their eternal destiny. The nature of their visions could either be purgative like the revelation of chastened Ruby Turpin ("a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward

heaven” [508]) or punitive like the hallucination of defiant Mark Fortune (“hellish red trunks rose up in a black wood” [*Stories*: 348]). Essential to attaining anagogy in Flannery O’Connor’s world is a willingness to see beyond the sharp outlines of the immediate to a more mysterious existence. In the first place, however, one needs to respect the surface things before the deeper visions come — unless they arrive with a fury that ushers in judgement.

## A Region of the Spirit

The writer from Georgia perceived within her own region a function of (in)sight analogous to medieval awareness: apprehension of phenomena and actions “under the aspect of eternity” (*Prose*: 203). To O’Connor, the largely agrarian American South represented a region where “the writer whose themes are religious” could “find a response in the life of the people” (*Prose*: 200). Not unlike those who lived in medieval times, the general populace of the South was spiritually aware, if not superstitious. O’Connor wrote in 1960:

[In] the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological... while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner who isn’t convinced of it is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. (*Prose*: 44-5)

As a writer concerned with the mysteries of faith, O’Connor considered that, in the South, she had “the greatest possible advantage”, because there “belief can still be made believable, even if for the modern mind, it can’t be made admirable” (*Prose*: 203). Setting stories in Southern space enabled the writer, in O’Connor’s view, to demonstrate the dimensions of anagogical vision more convincingly than if located in any other American region (*Prose*: 202).

Characteristics of a medieval attitude towards life serve to illumine aspects of Southern thinking. For example, what Carroll Erickson observes about the Middle Ages can be considered relevant to this modern spiritually conscious region: “Extraordinary appearances — unusual natural configurations, visual portents, dream messages from the dead, divine and infernal warnings, intellectual illuminations, visions of the future — everywhere complemented ordinary sight” (1970: 30). People studied details of bizarre phenomena — whether seen with

the natural or visionary eye — for fear or hope that meaning could be discerned. To the meaning-seeking medieval or Southern mind, facets of nature were seen to be vehicles for supernatural messages. Not coincidentally, in an early O'Connor story, the Southern boy, Ruller, treats his discovery of a dead turkey as a divine sign: "Maybe that's why [it] was there... to keep [me] from going bad" (*Stories*: 49).

The ability to see beyond the physical into the spiritual realm was revered and feared by the common people in the Middle Ages, as it indeed is in regions like the religiously charged American South. Nietzsche's castigating criticism of a medieval attitude to visionaries could well be applied to Southern Pentecostalism: "the actual and decisive sign of the highest humanity was that one was capable of visions — that is to say, of a profound mental disturbance!" (in Jay 1993: 40). The Baltimore secularist, Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956), was notoriously outspoken about the fervent fixation of Southern seers and worshipping followers. In no uncertain terms, he berated the population's crude mysticism and "barbaric grotesquerie" of revivalist meetings.<sup>21</sup> Mencken pejoratively named this region, where religion shaped cultural expression and existence, the Bible Belt. O'Connor dryly acknowledged that American liberals generally viewed the region's "religious enthusiasm" as "one of the South's more grotesque features" (*Prose*: 204). However, in her view, an extreme expression of faith and a visionary orientation were of advantage to the worshipper and writer — these qualities incurred anagogical possibilities. O'Connor actually felt a "kinship" with this fiery type of Christianity (*Prose*: 207). The Catholic novelist in the South, she motioned, will find herself closer in spirit to "backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists" than to "those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development" (207). She agreed with Gustave Weigel's judgement that Southern fundamentalists are doctrinally closer to the feared Church of Rome than the liberally enlightened (*Reviews*: 76-7).<sup>22</sup> O'Connor gained sufficient insight into vernacular Southern religion via tenant farmers and townsfolk, newspaper articles and general observation, to recognise both its affinity with her own beliefs

and its “grimly comic” fanaticism (*Letters*: 350). She criticised the Protestant “do-it-yourself” emphasis and the dearth of sacraments, but recognised that the Southerners’ means of grace is their “wise blood” (350).

The Bible was known (if incompletely and indiscriminately) to the majority of Southerners: a fact which fuelled O’Connor’s incentive to incorporate into her fiction strong biblical allusion, displays of the supernatural intruding into the natural, and, not contradictorily, an emphasis on the ordinary and concrete. “The Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete”, she argued, “[has] conditioned the Southerner’s way of looking at things” and has provided a foundation for the region’s “storytelling” tradition (*Prose*: 202). She stressed that the “*mythos*” of the common people was of special value to her as a fiction writer. “When the poor hold sacred history in common”, she wrote, “they have ties to the universal and the holy which allows the meaning of every action to be heightened” (*Prose*: 203). The connections which anagogy effects — between matter and spirit, nature and grace, time and eternity — could arguably be made more credible in the poor ‘medieval’ milieu of the South than in a stable, more secularised environment. ‘Southernness’, not insignificantly, has been described as “a state of soul that exists free from the disjunctions that rend the modern mind, particularly the tensions between thought and feeling” (Brinkmeyer 1988: 237).

Flannery O’Connor did not consider it a coincidence that so much “good [writing]” had come out of the Southern states. Alluding to Walker Percy’s famous statement on receiving the 1962 National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*, she attributed the literary merit to the “Fall” which the region experienced. (She was, of course, only thinking here of a white community of Southern literature.) O’Connor deliberately framed the Tragedy of the South in religious terms (*Prose*: 59). To her mind, the punishing defeat of the Civil War and presumably the shameful heritage of slavery and violence, brought the South

into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in [the] first state of innocence. (*Prose*: 59)

As a result of the Great Defeat, an essential understanding of the taintedness of humanity and a fearful regard of the spiritual — the divine and demonic — was deeply instilled in the Southerner. O'Connor deemed that the inhabitants of the Northern states, influenced by New England Unitarianism, had not in the same way been confronted with a sense of complicity in original sin.

O'Connor did not share her region's nostalgia of a glorious past (the "first state of innocence"); in fact, she almost mercilessly satirises characters like General Sash in 'A Late Encounter with the Enemy' who idealise the former days. Neither did O'Connor show an affinity for what has been called an "aesthetic of memory": a mode adopted by many Southern writers of her era intent on recapturing history as they knew it.<sup>23</sup> O'Connor was primarily interested in the historical because she saw it as reverberating with the eternal. According to Lewis P. Simpson, she, in effect, refocused the "southern fictional imperative" by rejecting the "mode of remembering" and by embracing the "mode of revelation" (1980: 246). One could say that O'Connor drew on the Augustinian principle of "metaphysical memory", the roots of which reach ultimately into the transcendent, that is, into a residual, often unconscious, knowledge of immutable Truth.<sup>24</sup> She recognised that, in spite of the obscuring effects of the Fall, the divine imprint exists in every human being: the inbuilt register of having being created in God's image. Her outlook is reminiscent of the ancient theology of *exitus et reditus* which teaches that humanity is ultimately inclined back to God. Ralph Wood explains this theology as "the inexorable procession of all things from God, and their equally ineluctable return to him" (1988: 91). If a shape were to represent this conception phenomenologically, it would be the circle: a symbol of what we have emerged from, what we will return to, and yet what we fail to achieve in the present.<sup>25</sup> It was O'Connor's understanding that divine intervention is necessary to wrench her Southern characters out of their 'metaphysical forgetfulness' to see anagogically and to face the Call.

To the fiction writer with spiritual preoccupations, the South apparently afforded many advantages. The region provided a wellspring of myth, history and spirituality from which the

anagogical dimensions of the stories could rise — the “sense of mystery” needed in fiction. The region also offered environmental particularity, cultural distinctiveness, and richness of idiom, requisite to the felt credibility of the stories — the “sense of manners” (*Prose*: 103). But O’Connor acknowledged that the South also presented great challenges to the writer, not least to one who was “alien” on the face of it, a minority in religious faith. As she discussed in her Georgetown lecture, ‘A Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South’ (1963):

The larger social context is simply left out of much current fiction, but it cannot be left out by the Southern writer. The image of the South, in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged. The writer must wrestle with it, like Jacob with the angel, until he has extracted a blessing. The writing of any novel worth the effort is a kind of personal encounter, an encounter with the circumstances of the particular writer’s imagination, with circumstances which are brought to order only in the actual writing. (*Prose*: 198)

O’Connor believed that the “larger social context” of the South could not be easily overlooked by the writer, so complex and vivid was its matrix. Indeed, she considered good and evil to be “joined together at the spine” of her region (*Prose*: 200). Realities such as the South’s shadow traditions of slavery and violation, its rigid racial and class structures, its ambiguous response to industrial and liberal reform, its sub-culture of primitive Protestantism, its growing urbanisation, needed to be grappled with and in some way incorporated into the texture of the fiction. A failure to reflect the “rich and contradictory” (*Prose*: 103) nature of the social context would no doubt make the “added dimension” of her fiction less believable.

The fiction itself demanded that the writer encounter the “circumstances of [her own] imagination”, not least the uneasy aspects of her relationship to the South. O’Connor realised that a writer’s country is both *without* and *within* the individual (*Prose*: 34). Not choice, but a diagnosis of lupus made shortly after the publication of *Wise Blood* (1952), brought O’Connor back to Milledgeville, Middle Georgia, after a five-year study and writing sojourn in the North. She was at first appalled by the prospect of leaving behind a stimulating literary environment for a return to the small town South: “I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK”, she confessed (*Letters*: 224). But with five years’ hindsight

she was able to say: “it was only the beginning” (224). It is difficult to read O’Connor’s story ‘The Enduring Chill’ (1958) without reflecting wryly on her history. Like Asbury Fox she had to return home ill to live with a widowed, farm-managing mother not given to literary interests.<sup>26</sup> She again had to face the social and familial pressures of her hometown.<sup>27</sup> She again had to confront her ambivalence towards racial integration in the region.<sup>28</sup> A poem of another once self-exiled Southerner intimates the difficulty, indeed the uncanny experience, of return to the South: “I came home to Georgia, my foreign birthplace,/ home to the strange red earth, the tall, unbranching pines.”<sup>29</sup> Flannery O’Connor was to discover that in the semi-rural South, a region of the spirit as well as earthy reality, the environment of her inner world was to intensify. In the South, the impetus of the anagogical in her work was only to gather momentum and to expand the Christic significance of her thereunto predominantly grotesque work.

## Symbols and Beyond

A central concern of O’Connor’s mature post-1952 fiction, written in the American South, was to demonstrate riveting anagogical operations, as well as the “lines of motion” (*Prose*: 113) which propelled the action towards these revelatory occurrences and climaxes. The technical challenge of constructing these anagogical operations was not straightforward, but it involved use of the symbolic mode. O’Connor perceived that symbols are themselves a means to anagogy, but that the anagogical assumes proportions beyond the symbolic and, of course, beyond the literal.

The twelfth-century theologian, Richard of St. Victor, advanced useful insight into the relation between the anagogical and the symbolic. His understanding illumines O’Connor’s sometimes cautious approach to the symbolic, yet her confidence in the sacramentality of the anagogical. Citing from sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* which enjoyed extraordinary popularity in the twelfth-century, Richard maintained that an anagogical impulse

does not merely *indicate* the existence of God, it *entails* “the pure and naked seeing of divine reality”. A symbol, for Richard, is a “gathering [*collectio*] of visible forms for the demonstration of the invisible”, whereas anagogy is “the ascent or elevation of the mind for supernatural contemplation”.<sup>30</sup> He wished to differentiate the objects formed for spiritual edification (symbols) from the experience of the edified spirit. O’Connor too insisted that the anagogical does not merely point towards God, but reveals Him.

To centre discussion on anagogy, however, is not to dispel the symbolic from consideration. Indeed, symbols are constitutive to the anagogical mode and would seem to embody the invisible by effecting the “ascent or elevation of the mind” (Richard of St Victor’s terms). Or as Coleridge advanced, symbols would appear to transport “the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal”.<sup>31</sup> In ‘The Nature and Aim of Fiction’, O’Connor herself directed attention to the rich suggestiveness of reference which symbols make possible:

In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself, and when this happens, they become symbolic in their action... these are details that, while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction.  
(*Prose*: 70-1)

As in Flaubert’s work, tangible objects may or may not acquire significance in O’Connor. She did not wish to impute symbolic significance to everything. When cross-questioned about the role of the Misfit’s hat, for example, O’Connor rebutted: “it was to cover his head” (*Letters*: 334). She emphasised that objects should be taken literally before being read multivalently. Before a wooden leg may be a symbol, O’Connor pointed out, it must first be a wooden leg: “it operates in depth as well as on the surface” (*Prose*: 99). In accepting and observing the corporeality of the wooden leg, the writer then looks beyond the obvious, allowing the object to accumulate symbolical significance. As the object — or scene — becomes symbolically charged, it begins to operate anagogically, ultimately “increas[ing] the story in every direction” and keeping the story from “being short” (*Prose*: 99-100). If objects grow in importance, becoming symbols, they work like an “the engine in a story”, she claimed.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the

automobile in 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', becomes a symbol of 're-incarnation' which informs the central concern of the story: Mr Shiftlet resurrects the old jalopy as a vehicle of the spirit to aid his escape from the material responsibilities of life, not least of all from the retarded, divinely favoured Lucynell. O'Connor saw the necessity of using innovative, often outrageous, symbols to effect her intentions. She sympathised with Raymond Hostie's opinion that the "dogmatic symbol protects a person from a direct experience with God".<sup>33</sup>

In her lecture 'Writing Short Stories', O'Connor further explained that symbols are not created by a "mechanical piling-up of detail", but by a crescendo-ing of elements. "Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose, and every detail has to be put to work for you" (*Prose*: 93). She pointed out that art is "selective"; what is carefully included in the story becomes "essential" and "creates movement" (93).<sup>34</sup> The narrative progressions in her stories cannot therefore be described as "syllogistic", but rather as "qualitative" (to use Kenneth Burke's terms). Though not being able to calculate what is to come, we may well "recognize its rightness after the event". By means of qualitative progression, "[we] are put into a state of mind which another state of mind can appropriately follow" (Burke 1953: 124-5).<sup>35</sup> According to this schema, the mind becomes transported from the realm of logic to one where anagogical apprehension would seem to become possible. One can then begin to make connections between the seen and unseen. Arguably thinking of the anagogical heightening of her stories, O'Connor simply but astutely states: "In fiction two and two is always more than four" (*Prose*: 102). Flannery O'Connor's belief that 'mystery' is at the centre of a story in essence reflects the New Critical position, exemplified by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, that the literary work "embodies a rendered experience that offers a unique form of knowledge from which a complete statement of meaning cannot be abstracted" (Fodor 1997: 218).<sup>36</sup> Yet, it seems that O'Connor's desire to convey spiritual meaning to her audience with less equivocation than New Criticism generally allowed, created a tension within to go beyond the inference of the rendered text.

Northrop Frye, who reintroduced the concept of anagogy into modern literary criticism in the 1950s, suggested that symbols in their anagogical phase are “apocalyptic” — they reach their imaginative limits. The symbol at an anagogical level is not just a recurrent symbol (which might be termed archetypal), but it is one which “contains” and “encompasses” other symbols (Grimes 1989: 14). If we follow Frye’s reformulation in *Anatomy of Criticism*, an anagogical action operates like a “monad, all symbols being united in a single infinite and eternal verbal symbol” (1971: 121). The entirety of things becomes condensed into a single action. The world no longer contains an action; rather, a gesture or a form contains the world.

The anagogic[al] view of criticism thus leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing a life and reality in a system of verbal relationships. From this point of view the critic can no longer think of literature as a tiny palace of art looking out upon an inconceivably gigantic ‘life’. ‘Life’ for him has become the seed-plot of literature, a vast mass of potential literary forms, only a few of which grow up into a greater world of the literary universe. Similar universes exist for all the arts. (Frye 1971: 122)

Like Northrop Frye, Flannery O’Connor saw a literary form as being irreducible, as upholding a world of its own. “A story that is any good can’t be reduced”, she stated, “it can only be expanded... when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you” (*Prose*: 102). On an anagogical level, the story itself sustains its own universe. As O’Connor wrote to Shirley Abbot: “every story is a unique statement — experience is the better word — and no abstract meaning can be drained off from it (*Letters*: 147). Yet, while she upheld a high regard for the autonomous world of the story, she also recognised her own aspiration to communicate specific meaning. She thus aimed to create fiction “apparently without comment” (*Prose*: 34).

## **Substance and Sacrament**

Flannery O’Connor was clear about her aim as a fiction writer — to write about human encounters with the unlimited yet personal God (*Prose*: 161). Yet her literary challenge was

to make the experiences, which occur both on a “natural and supernatural” level, understandable and credible to a largely unbelieving readership (161). She appreciated that the technical demands of her art required use of the literal and symbolic, but she aspired to create the anagogical. Her ambitious aim was that her characters should experience anagogical vision: “the pure and naked seeing of divine reality” as Richard of St. Victor expressed it (in Nolan 1977: 37). “I am only really interested in a fiction of miracles”, she affirmed elsewhere (*Letters*: 413-4). Her aim seemed “well-nigh insurmountable” because the modern age had to a large extent lost an understanding of the visible realm being influenced by the invisible (161). As a sacramental believer and writer, O’Connor *countered* the modern ‘Manichean’ impetus which dislocates spirit from substance.

O’Connor claimed that her audience consisted mostly of those whose “religious feeling” had become “vaporous” (*Prose*: 161). What she thought the writer needed to emphasise, the modern readership appeared to dispel: the *substantiality* of faith. To O’Connor, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1832 resolution was an important marker in the “vaporization” of religion in America — “he could no longer celebrate the Lord’s supper unless the bread and wine were removed” (161). Erich Heller articulates the disturbing implications of this move to separate spirit from substance: “not only the sacraments but the holiness of all that is holy will cease to be literally true” (1957: 266). To the Catholic believer, the elimination of matter is unacceptable. Both the elements in their material form and their special divine infusion are essential to true Communion. Like the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), O’Connor accorded immense significance to the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharist — in her words: “Christ is really, truly and substantially present under the forms of bread and wine” (*Letters*: 364). Hopkins and O’Connor were both influenced by Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* which prized the presence of matter in spiritual revelation: “The Catholic doctrine [of transubstantiation] leaves phenomena alone. It does not say that the phenomena go; on the contrary, it says that they remain” (in McNees 1989: 89).

At a dinner party with Robert Lowell early in her writing career, O'Connor reacted strongly to a suggestion that the Host was a "symbol" and a "pretty good one". "Well, if it's a symbol, the hell with it", was her pithy, provocative response (*Letters*: 125). In 1955, some years after the incident, she related soberly to her friend 'A':

That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable. (*Letters*: 125)

To O'Connor, Christ is made manifest in the Host, not merely symbolised or suggested. The Eucharist is not merely a reverent ritual, but a real encounter with the divine, she insisted. Her strong rebuttal at the dinner party conveyed her regard for the Real Presence in the Communion — and by anagogical extension, in Scripture, in nature, in works of art and even in human vessels. The truth of the sacrament formed the "center of existence" for her as a worshipper and writer. Importantly, she felt that she could best convey her commitment to the sacrament within the realms of a story.

Considering O'Connor's emphasis on the *experience* of anagogy (rather than mental assent to truth), one might consider anagogical vision as a type of Communion. The act of beholding the divine *in* and yet *through* a physical entity can be likened to partaking of the Eucharistic elements. Both are intimate, potentially transforming encounters. Interestingly, in Catholic tradition, the presentation of the Host to the congregation, the *elevatio*, involves lifting up the Body of Christ for all to see (Robertson 1962: 175). The eye is directed heavenward by the elevating action as well as towards the sacrament itself where the Presence presides. The words pronounced at consecration, according to Romano Guardini, can even be compared with those "which once brought the universe into existence": such is their creative and transfiguring power (in *Reviews*: 28). In every Eucharist there occurs the mysterious *conversio* known as transubstantiation whereby bread is changed into Flesh, wine into Blood by a charge of divine energy at the invocation of the consecrating words.<sup>37</sup> The transubstantiation entails a "recharging" of the elements: the opposite effect to entropy.<sup>38</sup> In physically receiving the elements and desiring to appreciate the Eucharist's full meaning, the

earnest communicant anagogically receives new life of the spirit, new energy to unite in mystical community and potentially new revelation.

The natural world to O'Connor is also sacramentally imbued with Christ — with His incarnational presence, His salvific power, and the mystery of His apocalyptic return. As Frederick Asals clarifies:

The sacrament is... not only the sign pointing to the mystery, it contains and bestows the mystery itself; and this view extends beyond the specific liturgical act, it implies a world pregnant with spiritual presence. (1982: 72)

In Catholic thought, as I have discussed, nature witnesses to its divine source. It bears the imprint of the Creator and is suffused with incarnational presence. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”, Hopkins proclaims, “It will flame out like shining from shook foil.”<sup>39</sup> In celebration, the sacramentalist poet Richard Wilbur writes: “the universe is full of glorious energy,/ the energy tends to take pattern and shape”.<sup>40</sup> In bold and all-embracing terms, William Lynch declares: “Christ is water, gold, butter, food, a harp, light, medicine, oil, bread, arrow, salt, turtle, risen sun, way, and many things besides” (1960: 188). In O'Connor's understanding, furthermore, the universe of a story is potentially also charged with the presence and revelation of Christ. She held that if storytellers are going to write “fiction of any depth”, they must have a vision that the “Catholic sacramental view of life sustains and supports at every turn” (*Prose*: 152). Her most important concern was to show “ultimate mystery” as “embodied in the concrete world of sense experience” (*Prose*: 125).

O'Connor's attempt in her fiction to attain anagogy sacramentally — through traditionally employed ‘vehicles’ such as nature and art — would seem to reflect the impetus of *post*-Vatican II theology which Karl Rahner epitomised: “God in his free grace, from the very beginning and always and everywhere, has communicated himself to his creation as its innermost energy and works in the world from the inside out”.<sup>41</sup> However, it was vital to O'Connor that other means of reaching the anagogical level in her fictional universe be included. Were God's grace only to work in her fiction “from the inside out”, she feared that it might be sentimentalised or overlooked. More personal, radical and disruptive means of

revealing the divine — through prophetic human vessels and exaggerated actions, for example — would seem to suggest the *pre*-Vatican II position emphasising that Truth comes from “above”.<sup>41</sup> According to this more contentious standpoint, God was seen to impose his grace on the world. O’Connor’s use of unorthodox instruments and means of grace cuts across the expectations of her audience, presenting the spiritual through the material in new, unsettling and apocalyptic ways.

In O’Connor’s fictional world, particular characters and objects are at times powerfully impregnated with spiritual presence. She dramatises encounters with marked out individuals; these encounters often have an anagogical impact because the individuals sacramentally embody Christ’s presence. St. Francis of Assisi might be considered an example of one who affected others in this extraordinary way. According to Barbara Nolan, he offers the clearest example of a saint “whose life was represented as a symbolic form leading to visions ‘in an anagogical manner’”. Both St. Francis’ rule and the *Actus* suggest the “concrete historical means whereby an ordinary life may become a manifestation of divine presence”. Francis was the *povorello*, the “little poor man of God”, whose physical form was seen to be “a symbol of God’s particular goodness, and in his reception of the stigmata, his body was transformed into a living figure of Christ”.<sup>42</sup> Divine energy was seen to transform the man’s body into the suffering Body of Christ. St. Francis would at once be afflicted and re-energised to literally, yet mystically, (re)embody the divine. Those who encountered him would be meeting Christ in the *povorello*.

The infusing of matter by spirit is no accident in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction. Typically, though, her ‘sacraments’ are anything but sanctified, her ‘saints’ anything but attractive or worthy. In her stories, Christ does *not* appear “Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his”, as Hopkins celebrated.<sup>43</sup> The living embodiments of Christic presence are as outrageous or profane as an hermaphrodite or a scrub bull. The inanimate objects or forms which acquire anagogical significance are as peculiar or mundane as a chipped plaster statue or a bird-shaped water stain. As will be discussed in the chapter to follow, O’Connor is

curiously, if problematically, indebted to the grotesque in her fictional representations of sacrament and her fictional representatives of Christ. She, no doubt, would have favoured Richard Wilbur's reflection: "What holy things were ever frightened off/ By a fly's buzz, or itches, or a cough?".<sup>44</sup> In whatever form O'Connor envisaged sacramental energy manifesting, it was vital to her as a believer and author. It is no wonder she marked this proclamation of Claude Leatham's in *Rosmini*: "we should meditate in our house like taut bows, like wine in a bottle, like force under pressure, so that in due time we may expand and burst forth (*Library*: 67).

## Making Contact with Mystery

A late commentary of O'Connor's, entitled by the editors, 'On Her Own Work', discusses the distinctive importance, indeed the centrality, of anagogy in delineating the core, scope and potency of a story. A significant anagogical operation would seem to magnetise and encompass all other aspects of the story; in Northrop Frye's understanding, to uphold the world of the fiction.

I often ask myself what makes a good story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the stories lie. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both *totally right* and *totally unexpected*; it would have to be one that was both *in character* and *beyond character*; it would have to suggest both the *world* and *eternity*. The action or gesture I am talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or by pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery. (*Prose*: 111, emphasis mine)

The anagogical action/gesture is determined by O'Connor as transcending various distinctions or transgressing various bounds. It connects the visible and the invisible realms, resonating between the "world" and "eternity", between "human participation" and the "Divine life". In that the anagogical gesture or action connects the future and the divine with the human

present, it is wonderfully or fearfully apocalyptic. By “somehow mak[ing] contact with mystery”, the anagogical action unites the known and the unknown, thereby effecting potential revelation and transformation for the human ‘communicant’. O’Connor suggests that in ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’, the grandmother’s gesture — touching the Misfit’s shoulder for an ecstatic and terrible moment — is one such action (*Prose*: 112).

O’Connor chooses, or is only able, to describe an anagogical gesture as featuring contrary aspects, two faces. The gesture, thus delineated, seems nothing short of contradictory: “totally right” and “totally unexpected”, “in character” and “beyond character”. It surpasses the hermeneutical proportions of the allegorical or moral; it gives way to the enigmatic realm of paradox. O’Connor’s grasp of anagogy suggests a more complex understanding of the mode than we might first have expected. Furthermore, in that the anagogical obfuscates conceptual and categorical margins, eludes explicit definition, and connects the seen and unseen, it unexpectedly intersects with the mode of the grotesque at various points. The grotesque, of course, is a domain ostensibly dissimilar to anagogy — in origin, association and expression, as will be discussed in the second chapter.

Flannery O’Connor certainly ascribed considerable significance to the enlightening and apocalyptic proportions of the anagogical mode. However, to the darker potentialities of grotesquery she too imputed revelatory capacity and transformative power. As if suspecting that anagogy, in its traditionally conceptualised medieval scope, might not effectively render truth to a modern desacralised world, O’Connor embraced an “enlarged view” of the mode. The expansive, seemingly all-embracing proportions of anagogy, in her view, allowed for an infusion or intrusion of the grotesque. In order to represent and convey the central anagogical gesture(s) or action(s) of a fiction in an effectual way she considered it necessary to “bend the whole [story] — its language, its structure, its action”.<sup>45</sup> Baptism provides an example of an anagogical gesture which O’Connor strongly distorted in an attempt to convey its full-blown, apocalyptic significance to a contemporary readership who typically only recognised it as “a meaningless rite” (*Prose*: 162). In two cases, baptismal sprinkling or immersion is warped to

drowning. By contorting the central action, she does not primarily appeal to the reader's conscious, reasoning mind, but tries to "make the reader feel, in his bones, if nowhere else, that something is going on... that counts" (162). (At the same time, she knew that this "added dimension" would be judged in relation to how truthfully the natural events building up to the anagogical climax had been presented.) In distorting and exaggerating a central gesture, she incorporated the causes and effects of evil, not seemingly troubled about a possible corrupting effect. "In my stories", she said unashamedly, "a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (*Prose*: 117). To her, anagogical operations were both fitting and shocking — "totally right and totally unexpected".

O'Connor drew on the conception of anagogy as the highest, most powerful level of perception at which God can be encountered, yet she frequently incorporated elements of the grotesque, of the comic *and* terrible, in her construction of anagogical images and operations. Her stories lacked the ingredients of goodness and reassurance, as conventionally understood. "The reader has the mistaken notion", she said, "that a concern with grace is a concern with exalted human behavior, that it is a pretentious concern... Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence" (*Prose*: 204). In the light of this assertion, one could suggest that O'Connor employed the anagogical to strain towards and access the *presence* of grace at various points in the fiction, whereas she implicated the grotesque to demonstrate the *absence* of grace in situations, ironically to lead to a mystical awareness of God.

If we allow O'Connor's practice to qualify and inform medieval and modern perspectives on the mode, we can say that, for her, anagogy reveals mystery by connecting and merging apparent contraries. (As will be seen, the grotesque conjoins opposites, but conspicuously flaunts their incompatibility to produce its effects.) As O'Connor would have it, anagogy does not simply elevate; that is, neatly propel the earthbound to a transcendent position above. It does not merely move the metaphysical focus to a higher plane, thereby

disconnecting from what is concrete and lowly. Anagogy embraces what is present in reality, however rough or incomplete, to lead to revelation of a more extreme, numinous dimension of reality. Disclosing God, who sustains the whole cosmos of the natural world and of the fiction, is the ultimate aim of anagogy.

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## Chapter One Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the following volumes for historical and contextual information on medieval hermeneutics: Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1952); William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo* (1960); *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (1990).

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to twentieth-century writers, James considered Hawthorne to have the benefits of community (Shloss 1980: 22). However, Herman Melville, even in 1832, expressed an awareness of the breakdown in commonly-held assumptions: "Say what poets will, Nature is not so much our own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reaches his own peculiar mind and mood" (in Shloss 1980: 31).

<sup>3</sup> See Archer (1987: 99).

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (1948: 18).

<sup>5</sup> See *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* on the sublime (1974: 819).

<sup>6</sup> See Montgomery (1990: 33).

<sup>7</sup> Wood (1992: 105) refers to George Steiner's *Real Presences*.

<sup>8</sup> After 'A' took her life at Christmas 1998, aged seventy-six, her identity as Betty Hester was disclosed. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 28 March 1999, carries a feature on Hester's extraordinary solitary life and her dedicated epistolary relationships with Flannery O'Connor and Iris Murdoch. She worked as a clerk by day, but devoted the rest of her hours to writing and to serious study of literature and philosophy. As a result of O'Connor's influence, Hester became a Catholic in 1956, but later renounced her faith in 1961. The feature article indicates that William Sessions is currently working on a study of Hester's many unpublished philosophical essays and fiction pieces.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Stallybrass & White (1986: 3).

<sup>10</sup> The disease sets in when the body produces antibodies that attack its own connective tissues. The term 'lupus', derived from the Latin word for 'wolf', alludes to the butterfly-shaped rash that often develops over the nose of a lupus sufferer, giving the face a 'wolf-like' appearance. Progressive physical degeneration characterises the disease (Walters 1973: 155 n.2).

<sup>11</sup> See the following articles for further discussion of O'Connor's degenerative illness as it has been thought to bear upon her fiction: Sturma (1987), Spaltro (1991), Walker (1996-7).

<sup>12</sup> Martha Stephens (1973) and Anthony Di Renzo (1993) highlight the pertinence of Bloomfield's argument.

<sup>13</sup> Bloomfield quotes Charlie Chaplin (1972: 389).

<sup>14</sup> From the entry on 'conversion' in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967 ch.4: 287).

<sup>15</sup> See Linehan (1985) on anagogical realism in O'Connor.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Ephesians 1: 18. St. Paul prays "that the eyes of [one's] understanding may be enlightened".

<sup>17</sup> The place of understanding analogous to the angels and heavenly saints. In the final canto of the *Commedia*, the pilgrim is, at last, in unison with God's will, turning in that wheel which moves the sun and other stars: he has in essence reached the state of *aevum*. (Russell 1984: 217-9).

<sup>18</sup> For Suger, stained glass had three important properties: it was a bearer of holy images, an intrinsically rich material resembling precious stones, and a mystery, because it glowed without fire (Grodecki 1953).

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Shaver-Crandell (1982: 35)

<sup>20</sup> Epistole XIII, 20-22 in M. Barbi *et al* (Eds.), *Le Opere di Dante* (2nd ed.), 1960. All references to Dante will be from this edition; the translation is by Barbara Nolan.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Wood (1991: 13).

<sup>22</sup> O'Connor's review of Louis Bouyer's *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (1956) notes commonalities between Catholic and Protestant faith (*Reviews*: 35). See also her mention of conceived discrepancies (*Reviews*: 135-6).

<sup>23</sup> In *The Brazen Face of History*, Lewis P. Simpson argues that writers such as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty, like many of their contemporaries in England and Europe, came to look upon remembering as “an art of the psychic — the spiritual — survival”. The ‘aesthetic of memory’ came into being as a conscious literary mode when the “culture of kinship and custom, of tradition and myth, began to give way altogether to the culture of rationality... In this situation, memory became, not a spiritual heritage, but a life’s work” (1980: 241). One of Welty’s narrators says revealingly that memory lives “in the patterns restored by dreams” (in Conn 1989: 492).

<sup>24</sup> See Desmond (1987: 87). Étienne Gilson re-presented Augustine’s principle in *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (1936).

<sup>25</sup> Gaston Bachelard cited in Harpham (1982: 8).

<sup>26</sup> Flannery O’Connor’s relationship to her mother was, at best, committed, co-operative and humour-sharing; at worst, strained, intense and stifling. O’Connor’s letters refer again and again, in comic tones, to “Regina” and her farm related ‘crises’, but an undercurrent of uneasiness often pervades these references. The uneasiness is not always contained:

The other day she asked me why I didn’t try to write something that people like instead of the kind of thing I do write. Do you think, she said, that you are really using the talent God gave you when you don’t write something that a lot, a LOT, of people like? This always leaves me shaking and speechless, raises my blood pressure 140 degrees, etc. All I can ever say is, if you have to ask, you’ll never know. (*Letters*: 326)

Regina O’Connor was an irritant to her daughter, but her insurmountability and pragmatic devotion to the farm provided O’Connor with the security she needed to write. Regina also unwittingly provided many of the anecdotes and curiosities that Flannery incorporated into her stories, for example, “the artificial nigger” (Nichols 1987: 25-6). Despite dissociating from her mother intellectually, aesthetically, and politically, O’Connor conveys, through miming Regina in her letters, more of a complicity in her prejudices than she cared to realise. A shared impatience with black farmhands and white tenant farmers seems likely.

<sup>27</sup> It is clear that from the many allusions to Milledgeville social events that O’Connor did not feel comfortable in the company of the socially elite and conventionally wise. She liked to say, for instance, that her function at her mother’s tea parties was to cover the stain on the sofa (in Wood 1988: 85). She did not aspire to Southern ladyhood, nor aimed to keep the myth alive in her fiction. What Alice Walker appreciated most about O’Connor’s work was that when she set to writing about Southern white women “not a whiff of magnolia hovered in the air” (1975: 76). O’Connor rebuffed the idea that a woman of her background should, according to convention, be more properly concerned with social activities than intellectual pursuits. Katherine Hemple Prown argues that to survive as a professional writer, O’Connor realised she would have to adopt an ‘unladylike’, if not altogether ‘masculine’, demeanour in her professional life as well as her fiction (1995: 60). However, to survive in her everyday life she

usually maintained a veneer of conformity (Whitt 1986: 42-3). See also Westling's useful article on O'Connor's revelations to her friend 'A' (1986).

<sup>28</sup> O'Connor remained relatively quiet about the race issue. While she evidently agreed that integration should happen, she held that it should take place slowly and without the intervention of politicians and activists (*Letters*: 253, 404). Ralph Wood suggests that O'Connor did not, from the start, lean towards defensive cultural conservatism, but that she probably started her writing career as a liberal who came across too many glib, hypocritical proponents of anti-racism during her time in the North (1993-4: 98). It is disturbing, however, to realise that she at times seemed to align herself with the status quo (masculinist) opinion, rather than conceiving a position of her own (Prown 1995: 60). To readers of the 1990s, it is embarrassing to read of O'Connor's refusal to entertain James Baldwin in 1959 in Milledgeville. "I observe the traditions of the society I feed on — it's only fair", she explains to a friend (*Letters*: 329). Her assertion at a deeper level alludes to the power of her familial and social circumstance — perhaps the ultimate indictment is against the society she felt compelled to placate in order to remain 'fed'. Despite O'Connor's disconcerting refusal to outrightly gainsay common Southern attitudes, she nevertheless allowed a good number of her black characters, especially in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, to assert themselves in ways that overturn entrenched norms. Though O'Connor did not take her stand in public, she conveyed, in some of her stories, a more sympathetic, and even radical, vision of changing race relations. For thought-provoking discussion on race in O'Connor see Shackelford (1989), Gordon (1992), Johnson (1992), Yaeger (1993) and Wood (1993-4).

<sup>29</sup> From 'Homecoming' by Tracy Mishkin in Georgia College and State University's poetry magazine, *The Peacock's Feet* (1995). The magazine was named in honour of Flannery O'Connor who attended the College, then only for women, in 1942-45, and who for a time acted as editor of the College's newspaper, *The Corinthian*.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Nolan (1977: 37).

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Abrams (1971: 196).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Friedman & Lawson (1966: 259).

<sup>33</sup> O'Connor drew an arrow next to this point in her copy of Hostie's *Religion and the Psychology of Jung* (1957: 136). See *Library*: 27.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor's belief in "selection" as the means by which an author "makes his statements" was the customary advice of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, and her regard for the element of "drama" echoes Henry James' injunction (Schaub 1991: 118).

<sup>35</sup> See Ming (1988) for a discussion of Burke's theoretical paradigm.

<sup>36</sup> See *Understanding Poetry* (1945), possibly used as a text when attended the University of Iowa.

<sup>37</sup> See Berkouwer's chapter on 'Symbol or Reality?' (1969: 202-18).

<sup>38</sup> See McNees (1989 n.16).

<sup>39</sup> From 'God's Grandeur' in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Selection* (1986: 128).

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Stitt (1985: 14).

<sup>41</sup> From Karl Rahner & Karl-Heinz Weger (1981: 79), cited in Wood (1988: 92).

<sup>42</sup> See Nolan (1977: 35 n.2).

<sup>43</sup> From 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Selection* (1986: 129).

<sup>44</sup> From 'A Plain Song for *Comadre*' in Stitt (1985).

<sup>45</sup> So as not to imply a strict use of the term "novel" (found in the original text), I have replaced it with the more general designation "story". In O'Connor's talk 'The Nature and Aim of Fiction' she chooses to call "any length of fiction a story, whether it be a novel or a shorter piece" (*Prose*: 66). A "more massive energy" is required to write a novel, she says, but the short story is more demanding and agonising. "But no matter what fictional form you are using, you are writing a story" (*Prose*: 77).

## Chapter Two

# The Fraught Configurations of Grotesquery

[The] audience is going to ask [the writer of grotesque fiction] – or more often tell him – why he has chosen to bring such maimed souls alive.

— Flannery O'Connor, *'The Grotesque in Southern Fiction'*

### Form and Faith

The relationship between grotesquery and Christian belief in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor is one that invites interrogation. She propagated a bold, life-long profession of faith, but she also sustained deployment of the grotesque as a representative mode. As a way of entering into investigation of this relationship, I will first consider the controversial place of the grotesque in the medieval period, the Age of Faith in the Western world. Discussion about the Middle Ages in relation to O'Connor does not seem incongruous given her intellectual and religious interest in the period and considering the designations critics have already attributed to her particular treatment of the grotesque: “medieval”, “gothic”, “Catholic”, as well as, “wild”, “demonic”, “comic”, “charismatic”.<sup>1</sup>

‘Grotesque’ was not a classification known in the medieval world, but manifold varieties of the mode nevertheless manifested themselves in the arts, culture and religion of the West. Like the grotesqueries of ancient history, medieval forms were created *avant la lettre*. Remarkable configurations, such as gaping-mouthed gargoyles and carvings of hybridised beasts adorned many ecclesiastical buildings. Pictorial grotesques were riotously incorporated into holy manuscripts. Bizarre creatures and eccentric landscapes characterised many paintings, notably those of Hieronymous Bosch. Humorously despicable Devils, Vices and

Death-figures populated medieval plays, tales and sermon *exempla*. In works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, few characters escaped depiction as hilarious figures of *discordia*. In Dante's *Paradiso*, the redeemed souls singing "Hosanna!" did not refrain from scatology.<sup>2</sup> Probably the most outrageous iconographical figure was that of St. Wilgefortis, the bearded and crucified woman: patron of the deformed.<sup>3</sup> In the medieval era, grotesquery was customary in creative exhibitions of diverse kinds: in artistic genres, in common speech, as well as in cultural expressions of ritual and festivity. It was by no means, however, an unreservedly or unanimously sanctioned mode of representation, as will be discussed. Significantly, the grotesque still presents itself several centuries later as fervid cause for debate.

In Flannery O'Connor's first published essay 'A Fiction Writer and His Country' (1957), appearing in Granville Hick's *Living Novel*, she conveyed an aesthetic interest in the grotesque and drew attention to her faith:

The problem [for the modern writer] may well become one of finding something that is *not* grotesque and of deciding what standards we would use in looking. (*Prose*: 33)

I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that. (*Prose*: 32)

As expressed here, her confessed Christian vision is intensely personal, while at the same time appealing to ecumenism. How do these bold affirmations — of divine redemption, of the community of humanity, of a fundamental Christian outlook on her part — appertain to the negations and abjections apparently implicit in grotesquery as a representative mode?

The challenge of this question leads me to consider how Christianity throughout the ages has responded to both ideals and deficiencies. We know that centuries before Christ the Psalmist sung: "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139: 14). More than a millennium after Christ, medieval lyricists celebrated the variety within creation: "I thanked be the God of hevене/And every brid [bird]with selcouth [strange, wonderful]

name” [*sic*].<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, Cecil Frances Alexander, a composer of hymns, acclaimed:

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.

Throughout the ages of Judaeo-Christian faith, the sound human body in addition to all the finely crafted aspects of nature, have been unambiguously attributed to God. Certainly, it has been theologically and conventionally reiterated that everything flawless and attractive is divinely created; and pertaining to artistry, divinely inspired. But what of the residue, the remainder of comically deformed things? What of the excess, the profusion of perturbingly eerie things? ‘Grotesque’ is the term often imputed to such elements and entities. In a conceptual sense, ‘grotesque’ becomes the *de facto* category of “non-things”: those objects not settling into the “discriminatory grid” of (adult) reasoning or morality (Harpham 1982: 4). Another critic proffers that the grotesque is “a concept without a static form; one that seems to be able to occupy a multiplicity of categories or none at all, falling somewhere in the cracks between the conscious and the unconscious, the knowable and the unknown” (Uruburu 1983: 29). To the modern rationalist, argues Bernard McElroy, grotesque entities are “by nature something exceptional... set apart, aberrant” (1986: 6). They may offend yet alarmingly fascinate, disgust yet appallingly amuse. But what is to be made of their origin and their influence, specifically within the bounds of an acknowledged Christian gnosis and within the framework of a Catholic literature? Is it possible in faith or theory that shapes of the grotesque in O’Connor should converge with patterns of orthodoxy?

## Conjunctions across Space and Time

In Flannery O’Connor’s 1960 lecture on the grotesque and Southern fiction, she bantered: “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” (*Prose*: 40). O’Connor

was amusedly aware of the shifting, relative and often idiosyncratic interpretations of the term 'grotesque'. In spite of the stated focus of her 1960 lecture, the writer said comparatively little about the literary mode closest to her in geographical context, the so-called 'Southern grotesque'. Related to, or in some minds synonymous with the former, is the 'Southern Gothic School' with which O'Connor did not wish to be directly associated (plausibly due to weak, predictable critical assessments of this tradition). Paul Wayne Nisly remarks that as early as 1958, a critic described O'Connor as a "Georgian by birth and the latest important addition to the school of Southern Gothic writers, well known for their calamitous stories of decadence and abnormality, and their preoccupation with the grotesque and bizarre" (1974: 3). The tone was clearly less than laudatory and the cataloguing tendency strong. It is to summations like this that O'Connor invariably reacted. In her essay 'The Fiction Writer and His Country' (1957), she remarked:

No one has ever made plain just what the Southern school is or which writers belong to it... often the term conjures up an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of a preoccupation with unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell. (*Prose*: 28)

She did not wish to be considered simplistically within the bounds of what had been accomplished before in Southern fiction. Such an approach might well render her work an "unhappy" attempt. Furthermore, she did not wish to be identified with grotesque horror or grotesque caricature — largely for their own sake. Though not repudiating 'Southern gothic' works, she did not encourage comparison with her own. Probably linking the designation 'gothic', rightly or wrongly, to a fictional arena of spectacle and decadence, she indicated to John Hawkes, "The word *gothic* means nothing to me. I always use the word grotesque" (*Letters*: 501).

Though O'Connor once said that her reading of *The Humerous Short Stories of Edgar Allen Poe* first inspired her to think of a writing career (*Conversations*: 94 — presumably she recognised in them the possibilities of contorted comedy form), she did not specifically attribute to Poe an indebtedness of influence. After all, Poe's aesthetics are concerned with

suspending consciousness of the external world. In general, she appeared to dodge association with well-known writers from the South: Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, for example (*Conversations*: 7, 34, 70). When questioned about ‘Southern writers’ other than herself, she would characteristically respond with a brusque statement like: “Just different people writing” (*Conversations*: 35). If she could be associated with anyone or any group at all, it might be with the Fugitives and Agrarians.<sup>5</sup> She had, after all, studied at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop under Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle and Robert Penn Warren, and in her writing career regularly sought the advice of Caroline Gordon schooled in New Criticism. O’Connor avoided strong association with established figures, but she also evaded connections with folksy “regional writers” who, in her view, were as prolific as the streams in Georgia (*Conversations*: 111). “Some may blame preoccupation with the grotesque”, O’Connor laughingly or scathingly remarked, “on the fact that here we have a Southern writer and that this is just the type of imagination that Southern life fosters” (*Prose*: 32). To her mind, grotesquery and ‘Southernness’ should not be elementarily linked. Three decades after O’Connor, Patrick J. Ireland suggested that the long-standing, heightened correlation between the mode and the region might in fact be weakening.<sup>6</sup>

Though O’Connor did not, at any stage, deny the storytelling heritage of the South, she wanted to “shift critical discussion away from any narrow Southern ethos”, Steven Weisenburger argues, “toward a style of representations which specifically derives — and [she] knew it — from early Christianity” (1983: 76). In a similar vein, James Andreas, acknowledging O’Connor’s confidence in centuries-old truths and practices, maintains that her “sense of the gothic” and “grotesque humour” were derived primarily from “medieval theological and aesthetic sources” (1989: 23).<sup>7</sup> It is significant to note that the only American artist, with whom she suggested a “kinship”, was Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Letters*: 457). He too upheld a ‘medieval’ sense of humanity’s immense power to sin, while his work epitomised, for O’Connor, the “dark and divisive romance-novel” able to keep for fiction “some of its freedom from social determinisms, and to steer it in the direction of poetry” (*Prose*: 45-6).<sup>8</sup>

She intimated at one point that the confluence of Hawthorne's genre, the South's "comic-grotesque" tradition and "lessons... from the naturalists" had a poignant, preserving effect on the region's literary art (*Prose*: 45-6).

O'Connor did not refer directly to expressions of grotesquery in the Middle Ages, but conceivably had some awareness of this medieval mode owing to her extensive and focused reading in the period. She alluded to the startling, larger-than-life, if not necessarily grotesque, figures that the artists of the period presented. A child in medieval times "formed his images of the Lord", she claimed, "from... the stern and majestic Pantocrator, not from a smiling Jesus with a bleeding heart" (*Reviews*: 100). In congruence with her preference for sharply drawn figures, O'Connor would, no doubt, have agreed that a "Picasso mother and child" is much less "secular" than a picture of Jesus looking like "a tubercular, fair-haired, blue-eyed goy" (L'Engle 1980: 28). Images of Satan in the medieval era were similarly formed from hideous and funny depictions of a repulsive devil and his lurid habitation (Russell 1984). For example, Raoul de Houdenc's thirteenth-century *Songe d'Enfer* conveys a notion of hell in a way that no fact, statement or doctrine could — by foregrounding grotesquery in a literal story. The song sets the scene of a banquet in hell, hosted by an infernal lord:

The narrator, sitting on two heretics, sees elegant courses being carried in... plenty of murderous robbers...each one all red with the blood of murdered merchants... old fat whores who cause the banqueteers to lick their fingers with delight (the whores smelled and [the guests] liked the odour). (in Nolan 1977: 152)

To O'Connor, as to the medieval, Satan was appallingly real: "My Devil has a name, a history and a definite plan. His name is Lucifer, he's a fallen angel, his sin is pride, and his aim is the destruction of the Divine plan" (*Letters*: 456). O'Connor believed that intellectual and aesthetic *abstraction* of diabolical wickedness — and of divine supremacy — was as rare in the medieval age as it is common in modern times.<sup>9</sup>

O'Connor's justification in deploying the grotesque conceivably stemmed from an affinity with notable theologians, such as St. Augustine who affirmed the nature of existence, the good and deficient, and St. Thomas who held that the world of senses is not opposed to

the spiritual world.<sup>10</sup> Christian forebears, such as Chaucer, Boccaccio, Jean de Meun, Langland and Dante, who to varying degrees incorporated earthy expression and crude subject matter into their work, arguably provided some incentive for O'Connor's encompassing of the grotesque. It was ludicrous to her that Chaucer could be labelled "pagan" and the medieval church "polytheistic" (*Letters*: 41). And for Dante she had nothing but the highest regard (*Letters*: 116). The Scriptures themselves, of extreme importance to O'Connor, do not exclude repugnant or disturbing details.<sup>11</sup> "Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ", noted Chaucer in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, both the New and Old Testaments incorporate humorous, startling or enigmatic descriptions. In O'Connor's copy of the *Douay Bible*, she marked the following prophetic depiction of Babylon, a city grotesquely inhabited:<sup>12</sup>

Wild beasts will make their lairs in it. Its houses will be tenanted by serpents; ostriches will nest there, and satyrs dance; the owls will hoot to one another in its palaces, birds of ill omen in its temples of delight. (Isaias 13: 21-2)

Intensifying a sense of grotesque mystery, the translator's note aptly reads: "The creatures here cannot be certainly identified."

Like the Old Testament prophets, the world-affirming thinkers and writers of the medieval age, Flannery O'Connor wrote as reality appeared to her. She did not present an ameliorated picture of her vision to suit the tastes of a sanitised, modern audience. As such, she included in some measure aversions, vulgarities and grotesqueries in contexts that would probably cause offence. Like Chaucer's host, she would speak "rudeliche and large" (l.734),<sup>13</sup> constrained to "record the truth *verbatim* as well as see it 'faithfully'" (Andreas 1989: 26). "[P]erhaps purely in an academic way", she remarked, "the term, 'Christian realism', has become necessary for me" (*Letters*: 92).<sup>14</sup> As she said in her 1957 essay: "writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (*Prose*: 32). She wrote shortly after *Wise Blood* was published that "a feeling for the vulgar is my natural talent and [I] don't need any particular encouragement" (*Letters*: 49). To address atrocities and absurdities is expected of

the modern Christian, but to magnify horrific and ridiculous realities in one's imaginative and fictional world, perhaps at the expense of ideals, is another matter. Can O'Connor's inclusion of grotesquery be convincingly justified by an implied affinity with medieval Christian perception? Or do the lowness and darkness of the grotesque ultimately obscure the high concerns of a Catholic novelist?

That O'Connor was more knowledgeable about medieval thought and practice than the average citizen (or Catholic) does not imply that her understanding was comprehensive or without bias. Her most direct approach to medieval studies was through scholarly and literary channels, predominantly religious in nature: either original works in translation or studies authored by Catholic men of letters. At times O'Connor seemed to idealise the medieval Age of Faith (ironically so, for one strongly opposed to any form of sentimentality), yet she did not retreat from the present, nor advocate ignoring modern problems of belief. "I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure", she asserted in 1955 (*Letters*: 90). But in the same letter to 'A', she insisted that "to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level" is a "necessary burden for the conscious Catholic" (90). A "Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness" is how she described herself to her newly acquired correspondent (90).

For Flannery O'Connor, spiritual reality could not be conveyed compellingly in art without an understanding of the audience's condition (in which she too was implicated). Because her highest level of interpreting reality was *anagogical*, enabling "an enlarged view of the human scene" (*Prose*: 73), her outlook did not preclude a heightened awareness of modern cynicism and despair. O'Connor's "modern consciousness", though burdensome to her, stood "in resistance to simple adoration, thereby challenging, provoking and deepening belief" (Brinkmeyer 1995: 73). A modern consciousness, underpinned by rationalist Enlightenment thought and embittered by twentieth-century horrors was to O'Connor's mind fraught with discordance. Jung described it as "unhistorical, solitary, and guilty" (*Letters*: 90). O'Connor found herself in a world that believed "God is Dead" or, as T. R. Spivey suggests, in a world

experiencing “an eclipse of God”.<sup>15</sup> In 1958, William Van O’Connor observed that the grotesque was readily adopted by modern writers seeking to express a vision of fractured reality; it served as “a response to modernity comparable to the central terms of postwar criticism”. “It is not fortuitous”, he claimed, “that the terms *irony, paradox, ambiguity, synthesis, tension*, and so many others are the staple terms of modern criticism”.<sup>16</sup> One could argue that O’Connor’s use of the grotesque reflected post-War literary preoccupation and experimentation, but also shared affinities with medieval practice. If modern grotesquery largely conveys the fraught condition of a technocratic, morally uncertain world, then medieval-style grotesquery might be said to capture alarming truths about eternity, as well as, frightening earthly reality.

## Attitudes and Approaches

In order to approach O’Connor’s handling of the grotesque with informed — and contrasting — perspectives in mind, it is useful to examine existing theory on the mode. Over the past three centuries, studies on the grotesque as an aesthetic category have given rise to differing, often antithetical, opinions as to its essence and effects. Of course, long before the term ‘grotesque’ was coined, its presence provoked discordant responses, some of which are well documented. Vitruvius in *De Architectura* (ca. 27 BC), for instance, referred disparagingly to the intricate designs of interwoven vegetal, animal and human parts in Nero’s Golden Palace. He castigated the “monstrous” and “bastard” forms which did not “[reproduce] clear images of the familiar world”.<sup>17</sup> Horace in *Ars Poetica* (ca. 68-65 BC), had a few decades earlier commented on the strange hybridised forms of the same frescoes, wondering whether one could “refrain from laughing” if offered “a private view”.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Vitruvius saw only the hideous, Horace recognised the peculiar and laughable.

A millennium and a half later, in about 1480, the same unusual designs again became the focus of attention during excavations of Nero’s Golden Palace. They were termed ‘*grottesco*’ (‘grotesque’ in English by the seventeenth century) from the Italian *grotte*

meaning 'caves', or by extension, 'excavations' (Thomson 1972: 13). The Golden Palace frescoes represented one of the most significant and controversial retrievals of Roman culture in the Italian Renaissance. Lively dispute arose over whether the first-named grotesqueries were primarily decorative or sacrilegious. The dispute remains intriguingly unsettled today.

The Victorian John Ruskin, who commented on the Golden Palace designs, was one of the earlier critics to claim that

the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful... (*The Stones of Venice*, 1851-53)

Echoing this insight that the grotesque is essentially "double-faced", Sylvie Debevec Henning recalls the contrary yet complementary Greek masks of weeping Tragedy, *Jean qui pleure*, and smiling Comedy, *Jean qui rit* (1981: 119). The "mixed effect" of the grotesque is important in at least two ways:

the instability of the effect separates the grotesque from the comic (which is only occasionally disturbing) or the macabre (which is rarely humorous), and marks it as essentially transitional, transformative. (Gentry 1986: 10)

In that the grotesque is generically ambivalent (transitional) and hermeneutically unsettled (transformative), it is reminiscent of the anagogical mode which "transcend[s] any neat allegory that might have been intended or by pat moral categories a reader could make" (*Prose*: 111).

The metaphor of the 'double face' is a useful one not only for capturing the integrally ambivalent nature of the grotesque, but also for describing opposing critical attitudes towards the mode. While the major theorists on the grotesque have recognised its inherent ambiguity, they are often uncomfortable with it, observes Kelly Anspaugh, and strive to eliminate the perplexing, uneasy mixture of dark and light, 'tragedy' and 'comedy' (1995: 130). Attempting to eradicate this mixture inevitably means accentuating one aspect of the grotesque and distancing (or 'de-facing') the other. In the end, it is well to remember Philip Thomson's observation that the grotesque ultimately presents "the unresolved clash of opposites" (1972: 27). Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, probably the most influential modern theorists of

the grotesque, indicate this tendency to accent one countenance of the grotesque. They present diametrically opposed views which can, arguably, be applied irrespective of period or cultural context. It should be noted, however, that Kayser's study focuses on Romantic and modern arts, while Bakhtin's concerns medieval and Renaissance forms.<sup>19</sup> Their antithetical emphases are significant in this study in that they illumine two broad approaches to O'Connor's grotesque and suggest the nature of the differing operations with which she experimented in configuring her grotesquery.

In *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1963), Wolfgang Kayser insists that horror, antipathy and fear ultimately prevail over any light-hearted features of the mode. Where the artistic creation does succeed in effecting "a secret liberation" from fear, only "a faint smile seems to pass rapidly across the scene or picture" (1963: 188). The grotesque can be epitomised, according to Kayser's conclusions, as "the estranged world" (185), "a play with the absurd" (187), and "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188). Freud's notion of the 'uncanny' — "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar"<sup>20</sup> — certainly reflects on Kayser's conception of the mode as peculiarly disturbing. The grotesque is a curious threat, a strange and absurd tragedy with which to contend. *Jean qui pleure* is the face which Kayser's perspective on grotesquery magnifies.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1968), Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that the festive, renewing effects of the grotesque override any bitter or terrifying aspects of the mode. In Bakhtin's understanding, gaiety and revitalisation result from overturning high seriousness and from undoing fixed norms. The grotesque laughingly degrades the ideal and abstract to a material level, producing a "regenerating ambivalence" (1968: 21). From the material level, symbolic of both the grave and womb, spiritual and physical rebirth emerges — that is, a new way of seeing and a new expression of universal wholeness. The grotesque is an ironic celebration, a bizarre comedy to be played out jubilantly to its reformative conclusions. Bakhtin's view enlarges the face of *Jean qui rit*.

Significantly, both the theories of Kayser and of Bakhtin have been advanced by a range of O'Connor critics as crucial to an understanding of her grotesque.<sup>21</sup> Although most of the major studies appear to read O'Connor's deployment of the mode as either predominantly fearful *or* humorous, this dissertation recognises that her grotesque encompasses an intricate interplay between the two motivations at different levels and to achieve different purposes. The way in which O'Connor exploits the tragic and comic impetuses of the grotesque differs from novel to novel, and from story to story. Geoffrey Harpham rightly observes that Flannery O'Connor's "fictional practices achieve considerable complexity" and emphasises that her "fictions are distinguished by the amount of interpretive energy they require" (1982: 187). O'Connor, herself, was careful not to define too absolutely the operations of her literary art. Indeed, she seemed to exult in the paradoxical and contradictory, often delivering riddling aphorisms, typical of the Desert Fathers, as 'explanations' for her aesthetic intentions:

In my own experience, everything funny I have written is more terrible than funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny.  
(*Letters*: 105)

It is significant that O'Connor, in acclaiming the novelist Simone Weil, used the very terms by which she constituted her own work: "The life of this remarkable woman still intrigues me while much of what she writes is, naturally, ridiculous to me. Her life is almost a perfect blending of the Comic and Terrible, which two things may be opposite sides of the same coin" (*Letters*: 105). Writing again on the same subject, O'Connor remarked to 'A': "Possibly I have a higher opinion of the comic and terrible than you do" (*Letters*: 106). Throughout O'Connor's life, the vigorous interaction of opposites captured her attention aesthetically and theologically. But does a Catholic worldview easily accommodate a complex interplay between the notions of "comic" and "terrible"? To O'Connor, seeing anagogically somehow allows "most possibilities" (*Prose*: 73).

## Trajectories of Art

Probably the most famous medieval account of a reaction to grotesquery is that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), second founder of the austere Cistercian order and most admired of twelfth-century theologians. He interpreted the ornate designs in the monastery he was visiting as alarmingly ambivalent, as grotesque. Indeed, one can say that grotesquery is in the eye of the beholder as much as it is in the mind of the creator. In other words, the grotesque is constructed by the reader/critic, as well as configured by the author/artist. Important in evaluating critical responses to the mode in general, and to O'Connor's treatment in particular, is an understanding of the grotesque as a mode of interpretation, as well as representation. When approaching a work, according to Wolfgang Iser, "one must take into account not only the actual text [or work of art] but also... the actions involved in responding to that text [or work]" (1974: 274). In the light of this point, I will consider the challenge involved in interpreting the grotesque, as illustrated by St. Bernard reacting to the Cluniac sculptures.

Like Vitruvius of the ancient world, St. Bernard was outraged by the fanciful arrangements he regarded. Like Horace he was somewhat intrigued by the mixed configurations he beheld. Given below is Anthony Di Renzo's vivid translation of Bernard's resounding words from his *Apologia* directed against Cluniac monastic art (1993: 1):

What are these ridiculous monstrosities doing in the very cloisters where the monks do their reading, these strange things hideously beautiful and beautifully hideous? What is the meaning of these filthy monkeys; these fierce lions and fearful centaurs; these ugly mutants, spotted tigers, fighting soldiers, and horn-blowing hunters? One sees a head with many bodies and a body with many heads. Here is a beast with a snake for a tail and a fish with the face of a cow. There is a creature which is half-horse and half-goat, and another which is half-goat and half-horse! There is such an amazing variety of shapes all around that one could easily prefer to take one's reading from the walls than from a book.<sup>22</sup>

Bernard's was not a lone outcry, but due to his formidable reputation as Mellifluous Doctor, his is apparently the best known today.<sup>23</sup> A number of O'Connor critics sound curiously like Bernard, expressing righteous indignation or extreme puzzlement at the incorporation of

grotesquery in Christian creativity. Martha Stephens, probably the sternest of O'Connor critics, surmises from the author's use of the grotesque that for this Catholic "human life is a sordid, almost unrelievedly hideous affair" (1973: 10). Other critics, seemingly in tones more of bewilderment than censure, question the orthodoxy of grotesque inclusion in O'Connor's artistry. "Pre-Christian" is the term Irving Malin applies to O'Connor's grotesquery (1966: 108); "on the side of the devil" is the expression John Hawkes uses to demarcate her "creative perversity" (1962: 99). Claire Kahane (1974), André Bleikasten (1978), Carol Shloss (1980) and Mary Jane Schenk (1988) identify only profound ambiguities which undercut the author's own interpretations. The question that has concerned many critics is: Why did she bring her "maimed souls" alive?

Though Bernard's complaint reveals assumptions about Neo-Platonic mimetic and ordering principles, his disapproval is primarily rooted in religio-moral disgust at the invasion of consecrated space by bizarre, extrusive gargoyles. The designs display a striking departure from a stark Cistercian norm and exhibit a displeasing degradation of integral human, animal and plant forms. Hybrids and monsters — vulgar and otherworldly — encroach on hallowed edifices. To Émile Mâle (1910), commenting on Bernard's denunciation, these grotesques are the result of free-reigning imaginations very aware of the pagan past, not of minds in synchrony with established Christian iconography. The unicorn could symbolise Christ, the phoenix Resurrection, the basilisk Death, the dragon Satan — as depicted in many bestiaries (Farnham 1971: 3) — but the Cluniac grotesques, like the strange marginal drolleries of Gothic manuscripts, cannot easily be accommodated within such a symbolical schema.

Realising that "reading" the walls could not yield *recognised* symbolical (let alone, sublimely anagogical) meaning, Bernard acknowledges the wonderful danger of their influence — perhaps other unnamed modes of interpretation exist? The weird carvings within holy bounds, within the range of vision, could distract and defile minds set apart for holy contemplation. Perhaps more seriously, however, these carvings could present an enticing, illegitimate *jouissance*.<sup>24</sup> "There is such an amazing variety of shapes all around", admits Bernard, "that one could easily prefer to take one's reading from the walls than from a

book”.<sup>25</sup> The iconoclastically inclined contemplative is both enchanted and infuriated by the contorted, restless designs. In his understanding, the “hideously beautiful and beautifully hideous” formations discourage sustained aesthetic regard; at the same time, they attract considerable attention to their form: their de-formity. The result of this viewing process is that beholder’s focus is repelled, yet impelled back again — to re-view, inspect, stare. The sculptures’ violation of defined *aesthetic* and *theological* norms give rise to the secret of their “disturbing vitality”, suggests Di Renzo (1993: 2). In the process of being revisited visually, reflectively and critically, these objects of repulsion conceivably become objects of forbidden desire and unsought knowledge.

In considering the grotesque as a representational form, it could be judged that the horribly appealing formations before Bernard’s eyes do not easily project his gaze beyond their own strange surfaces and profiles. Indeed, it seems that, *unlike* the effect of Gothic cathedral architecture, the impetus of the grotesque designs in the monastery is not to project the eye *up* and *away* towards the heavens. Instead, the grotesque designs in the cloister enrapture the eye in a spirited, confused movement of depart-return — the forms demand attention and no easy escape from view. Although both the anagogical and grotesque have both been associated with the ‘Gothic’ period or ‘Gothic’ style of the medieval period, these two terms conjure up antipodal associations. Anagogy has been traditionally aligned with height, light, beauty and sanctity; the grotesque with baseness, darkness, ugliness and corruption. The grotesque is not conventionally thought to initiate elevation of sight and soul, or to induce holy vision.<sup>26</sup> If in any compelling direction at all, considering the complex effect of the grotesque on physical and spiritual vision, the mode has traditionally been understood to transport one’s spiritual attention *downward* to earthly or to abysmal things. More recently, since the widespread entrenchment of psychoanalytical thinking, the grotesque has been thought to move one’s searching gaze *inward* toward the repressed, instinctual self.

Revised thinking since the medieval period about the cosmogony of the world has complicated the idea that Hades is at the dark centre of the earth and Paradise beyond its

bounds. The medieval great chain-of-being reflected a Dionysiac understanding of a hierarchical universe: the highest position was occupied by the purest of forms (God in heaven), the lowest place by the most corrupt (Satan in hell), and on an incremental scale in between, all manner of animate and inanimate things. Dante alludes to this metaphysical order in the *Commedia* (here glossed by Jeffrey Burton Russell 1984: 217):

When we are... buoyed by the Holy Spirit within us, we rise naturally toward God, we spread out, widen our vision, open ourselves to light, truth and love... (*Paradiso* I. 135-38)

When we are... weighed down by sin and stupidity, and we sink downward and inward away from God, ever more narrowly confined and stuffy... (*Paradiso* I. 134)

The modern secular world no longer officially upholds this perceptual organisation of the universe, though it certainly endures in the consciousness of the West. The grotesque mode, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, inverts the cosmic order: the dark underworld, rather than the radiant heaven, becomes the relative centre (1968: 369). In François Rabelais' *Pantagruel* (1553), for example, one becomes aware of an inverted fictional cosmos. As the priestess of the Holy Bottle declares:

The phenomena you see in the sky, the wonders earth, sea, and river offer, are not to be compared to what is hidden in the womb of the earth. (*Pantagruel* Bk. 5, Ch. 48)

In the grotesque world, neither the sky nor the living earth yields the most important meaning or mystery. In Bakhtin's words: "the greatest treasures and most wonderful things, are not found on the highest or medium level, but in the "material bodily lower stratum" (1968: 369). The essential principle of grotesque realism, according to Bakhtin, is that of degradation: "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (1968: 19-20). In Geoffrey Harpham's words, the grotesque represents a "dynamic state of low-ascending and high-descending" (1982: 74). An emphasis on what is *under* the earth therefore means a de-emphasis of what is *above*; the lowest level becomes the metaphysical focus in place of the highest, most

traditionally revered level. By creating a hellward, or at best, an earthward frame of reference, the grotesque would appear to counter sublime anagogy which projects and sustains a heavenward perspective.

## Sacred and Profane Bodies

St. Bernard of Clairvaux's vociferous criticism of the grotesque configurations in the monastery was instigated to a strong degree by their overtly corporal, for the most part, *contortedly* corporal, constitution. He saw a vast array of "ugly mutants", "many bodies", "many heads", "beast[s]" and "creature[s]", and was both repulsed and fascinated by them.<sup>27</sup> For a contemplative monk like St. Bernard, as for a puritan reader, to expose oneself to grotesque artistic enterprise is expressly unfitting. In his *Apologia*, St. Bernard argues that those of a monastic calling should judge "all things corporally delightful to be as so much dung". In no uncertain terms, the monk equates corporal art forms with excretory waste. From St. Bernard's flesh-denouncing perspective, there is no justification for seeking "to excite devotion" by studying naturalistic bodily forms, let alone grotesque designs.<sup>28</sup> A rich *interior* experience is, after all, what he and other contemplatives strive after.

It is no coincidence that the primary form which implicates and configures the grotesque is the *body*: the animal, the hybrid, and above all, the human form. The grotesque does not lose touch with the essential concreteness of the inhabited world, although it does not feign to replicate it respectfully. Marshall Bruce Gentry explains that the grotesque on a basic level "describes images of degraded physicality with an effect both humorous and disturbing" (1986: 10). Mary Russo (1994: 8) elaborates that the "trope of the body" is crucial to the configuration of the grotesque, indeed to both its faces, to the disturbing and the humorous, and, by extension, to the theoretical categories of Kayser's uncanny and Bakhtin's festive grotesque. Flannery O'Connor evidently drew from both the tragic and comic conceptions of the grotesque body within the scope of her work to achieve various effects.

The Kayserian perspective on the grotesque is strongly related to *subjectivity*, Russo

says, to “the psychic register and to the bodily as a cultural projection of an inner state” (1994: 9). The body is seen as an isolated site of disturbance: troubled psychic energies manifest themselves in the physical (like disquieted spiritual powers in the natural world) and a strong sense of estrangement develops. By the end of ‘The Displaced Person’, Mrs McIntyre’s state perhaps best illustrates the Kayserian grotesque body in O’Connor. Mrs McIntyre’s once-compact form loses its cohesion and she becomes subject to psychic forces which leave her with a nervous jiggle, as well as almost blind and voiceless (*Stories*: 234). From a Kayserian perspective, furthermore, the distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape and the “suspension of the category of objects” instil a fear of life.<sup>29</sup> The enormous, disfigured Mr Paradise, who tries to save Harry/Bevel from drowning at the end of ‘The River,’ does not appear to the terrified boy as a man, but as “a giant pig bounding after him” (*Stories*: 174).

In contrast, the Bakhtinian view on the grotesque is concerned first and foremost with a *social body*. The material bodily element in grotesque realism “is presented not in a private egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal representing all the people” (Bakhtin 1968: 19). Mrs Greenleaf, the fanatical prayer healer of O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf’ comes to represent the body of the world’s oppressed and hurting. As she grovels on the ground in intercessory prayer, she unites with the substance of the earth and its features, she becomes one with <sup>the</sup> source of life and with the victims for whom she is pleading. The grotesque body, Bakhtin emphasises, is not distinct but blended with objects and features of all kinds (1968: 27). Besides depicting a few grotesque bodies in detail, she often describes characters, especially in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, as boasting vegetal and animal qualities: Bailey’s wife has a face as “broad and innocent as a cabbage”, Mrs Shiftlet’s smile appears like “a weary snake waking up by a fire”, a train conductor has the look of “an ancient bloated bulldog” (*Stories*: 117, 152, 253). In a prose piece, O’Connor actually makes reference to a ‘social’ body she considered immanently real, although not obvious to everyone. She refers to the “Communion of saints”, a universal corpus “entwining the living and the dead”, not made up of perfect individuals, but of those who are flawed. It is a Body created

upon “human imperfection”, created from “what we make of our grotesque state” (*Prose*: 228).

If the “grotesque body” is exuberantly or terrifyingly undone, depending on whether a Kayserian or Bakhtinian perspective is adopted, then the “classical body” is, in contrast, tightly shut up, homogenous, monumental, transcendent. Mary Russo emphasises that the images of the grotesque body are “precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics” (1994: 8). The grotesque body flaunts its protrusions and excrements; it can grow, change, seep, connect, reproduce. The classical body refrains from making contact with another; it stagnates, remains sedentary, hides its pains and seepages. According to one stream of medieval thought, the classical body attempted to represent a “disembodied spirituality” (Finke 1992: 88) — a ‘Manichean’ ideal St. Bernard seemingly upheld and one which Flannery O’Connor unequivocally renounced. Those who rise “to flow with the spirit, just go on flowing”, she reflected cynically (*Letters*: 386).

To Flannery O’Connor, the body was not a shameful assemblage, despite assumptions and accusations to the contrary. Martha Stephens, for one, speaks of “the loathing with which she apparently contemplated the human body” and of the “renunciation of the world” which her “dark”, “medieval” Christian view propounded (1973: 9, 4). O’Connor, in fact, understood the Catholic attitude towards the body — in temporal and eternal perspective — to be outrightly affirmative. To O’Connor, the human form was sacred: created by God and designed to be the habitation of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3: 16). Conceiving of Christianity as flesh-and-world-despising was, to her, nothing more than a caricature (*Reviews*: 87).

I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says will rise but the body, glorified. I have always thought that purity was the most mysterious of virtues, but it occurs to me that it would never have entered the human consciousness to conceive of purity if it were not to look forward to a resurrection of the body, which will be flesh and spirit united in peace, in the way they were in Christ. The resurrection of Christ seems the high point in the law of nature. (*Letters*: 100)

The basis for O’Connor’s affirmation of the body was the Incarnation: when God, “Pure

Spirit”, became flesh (*Letters*: 360). Christ’s Incarnation is, for her, both the “ultimate” and the “present” reality (*Letters*: 92). It marks the Saviour entering history and His presence becoming sacramentally manifest in the natural world and in the realm of the body. The Incarnation also points to another “law of the flesh”: the Resurrection (*Letters*: 100). Prefiguring the final rising of the believer, the Body of Christ, and potentially all people, Christ’s Resurrection has even been criticised as “an overestimation of the body” (*Library*: 79).

Flannery O’Connor’s regard for the body does not, of course, imply that she idealised or objectified it. Unlike the poet Richard Wilbur who often presented “the admirable grace or strength of body” as a symbol for “the inward motions of the mind or condition of the soul”,<sup>30</sup> O’Connor typically chose to portray the inverse. She did not present beautiful and sleek bodies, animal or human, in her fiction, but typically foregrounded what is grotesque — the malformed or unsightly, the domestic species which are invariably relegated to the back yard. A gaunt scrub bull, slit-eyed shoats and grunting pigs are the animals central to some of her stories. The human characters who are instruments of truth in her stories are seldom appealing. The hefty, acne-pitted college student of ‘Revelation’, the deliberately-named Mary Grace, is noticeably ugly *and* powerfully influential in bringing change to Mrs Turpin. “Because Flannery loves her” was Maryat Lee’s explanation for the unattractiveness of this character (*Letters*: 578).

For Flannery O’Connor, portraying the goodness of creation meant depicting its imperfect existence after the Fall. Her own diseased body was certain evidence of the pain and deficiency of a postlapsarian world. Yet, she valued the body, whether ugly or broken, as sacramental. Writing to her friend, Maryat Lee, in 1958, she acknowledged the weakness of her lupus-ridden frame and candidly attributed her relative longevity to the sacrificial death of many porcine bodies. From the hormones that the swine provided, specialised steroids could be produced to control to the ravages of lupus erythematosus.

I owe my existence and cheerful countenance to the pituitary glands of  
thousands of pigs butchered daily in Chicago Illinois at the Armour packing

plant. If pigs wore garments I wouldn't be worthy to kiss the hems of them.  
They have been supporting my presence in the world for the last seven years.  
(*Letters*: 266)

O'Connor unceremoniously used the language of sacrament to describe the sustenance that the slaughtered animals made possible. Her humorous, yet poignant, comment reveals something of her enormous respect for life in the body, for sacredness in the profane. O'Connor's commitment to the sacramental falls both within the grotesque and the anagogical. Both modes necessarily rely on the physical in order to embody and suggest meaning beyond.

## Exploiting Tragic and Comic

When Flannery O'Connor discussed the grotesque, she made little overt reference to theoretical examinations of the field. At the time she was writing, of course, most twentieth-century studies on the grotesque had not yet become available, let alone in English.<sup>31</sup> Though she did not set out to present a commentary on the mode, her opinions have nevertheless vitally contributed to the ongoing debate surrounding the grotesque. "[Perhaps] the most articulate of all recent artists who have spoken of the subject" is the hard-earned praise she receives from Geoffrey Harpham (1982: 185). The reflections of medieval thinkers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, the views of modern theorists of the grotesque, and O'Connor's own statements, serve to reveal an awareness of both faces of the grotesque in her work — of how she used the interplay between 'tragic' and 'comic', terrible and humorous, to convey both depravity and promise in her collected short stories.

The tragic or terrible grotesque is important to Flannery O'Connor's fictional enterprise in that it pictures a modern, fragmented experience of reality estranged from nature and fellow human beings, from sacramental energy and divine grace. Hazel Motes' world probably best exemplifies the grotesque wasteland of desacralised reality. Indeed, in *Wise Blood* and other stories of the early 1950s, grotesque characters, actions and environmental settings create a fearful milieu. According to Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque produces an

awareness of the “familiar” and “apparently harmonious” world being “alienated under the impact of abysmal forces” (1963: 37). The reader’s sense of security is undermined in that the recognisable is rendered strange. The writer of grotesque fiction, like the child artist, presents a picture that is starkly and nakedly realistic according to his or her penetrating perceptions.<sup>32</sup> The terrible grotesque thus portrays the depraved nature and transgressive norms of humankind — truths not readily received by a secular audience.

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience... [When] you have to assume that [your audience] does not [hold the same beliefs as you do], then 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. (*Prose*: 33-4)

O’Connor employed the grotesque mode as a contorting mirror to reveal a reality not always obvious to her audience’s eye. Extreme means seemed necessary to shock readers into recognition of the “distortions” they had been used to identifying as “natural”. Richard Giannone argues that the apocalyptic moments of O’Connor’s stories — in which the grotesque is usually foregrounded — are aimed at the readers as well the characters. It was O’Connor’s ambitious intention, he contends, that her readers, as well as her characters, experience first what he terms *catanyxis*, “a sudden shock that puts a new feeling into the soul”, and then *penthos*, “the tears that flow from inner shock” (1996: 334). A distortion of the parenting role is epitomised by Sheppard in ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’, for instance. Only when he sees his neglected son commit suicide is his guise as an altruistic welfare worker broken. O’Connor insists that what the Catholic writer “sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies... Is he, as Baron von Hügel, has said, supposed to tidy up reality?” (*Prose*: 177).

In Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, the dismal or sinister face of the grotesque exhibits, at least rudimentarily, the debilitating consequences of the Fall. She once referred to the grotesque as an “an accurate description of the human condition, even at its best”.<sup>33</sup>

O'Connor's grotesquery is thus universal in implication, but usually modern and American in censure. Indeed, O'Connor wondered if there was not "some ugly correlation" between America's so-called "unparalleled prosperity" and the "stridency of... demands for a literature that shows us the joys of life" (*Prose*: 30). In stark contrast to the proclaimed well-being of society, O'Connor's stories are all about those who are "poor", "afflicted in both mind and body", having "little — or at best a distorted — sense of spiritual purpose" (*Prose*: 32). The demeanour and actions of her characters "do not apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life" (32). Yet, O'Connor suggests that when the socially, physically, sexually or spiritually aberrant — "the freak" — "can be sensed as a figure for our *essential displacement* that he obtains some depth in literature" (*Prose*: 45, emphasis mine). She asserts in another essay that the freak is "usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his [imperfectability]" (*Prose*: 133). If at times O'Connor implies a disapproval of her grotesques, she wishes to draw attention to the distorting effects of their sin, of sin common to humankind. Where she quotes Wyndham Lewis — "If I write about a hill that is rotting, it is because I despise rot" (*Prose*: 31) — she anticipates the critical insinuation that she derived vicarious pleasure from the horror in her stories.<sup>34</sup>

I have suggested that, within a theological paradigm, the tragic grotesque can represent *fallenness*. However, according to a sociological framework, this pessimistic face of the grotesque can also delineate *abnormality*. Flannery O'Connor was strongly critical of sociological rationalism and did not hesitate to satirise its standpoints. In her fiction, she often highlights and inculcates the opinions of individuals, as well as the prevailing views of society, which delineate who and what is grotesque. To Rayber, the humanist teacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*, his old Uncle Tarwater is little more than a monster, a religious fanatic unfit for civilised society. The "standards" used in perception can be seen to form the bounds of the grotesque (*Prose*: 33). From a sociological viewpoint, then, "hybridisation" and "otherness" are two possible types of aberrance. According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "hybridisation" presents a particularly strong threat to the *status quo*: "the self and other

become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone” (1986: 193). In ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’, the hermaphrodite — a hybrid of male and female — has the effect of breaking up the child’s self-defined world, instilling fear of the inexplicable before bringing redemptive revelation of the unseen. Reactions to “otherness” certainly also abound in O’Connor. Outsiders, foreigners, cripples, retards are all regarded as grotesque by more ‘normal’ individuals who will not recognise their own freakishness.

As a general observation, one could say that the tragic grotesque in Flannery O’Connor’s fictional universe offers a social, cultural and spiritual context for the operation of the comic grotesque. The sinister aspect of the mode projects the evils and distortions of the present world (as delineated by O’Connor), whereas the hopeful aspect represents the world’s overlooked potentialities, truths and mysteries. According to George Santayana, “we can consider a given object either for its distortion of an ideal type or for its ‘inward possibility’” (Harpham 1982: 15). O’Connor would certainly not have disagreed. It was conceivable to her that the “greatest potential” could “show up in monstrous form first” (*Letters*: 176). A grotesque feature or creature could thus represent both deficiency and promise. Yet, how does one recognise what is distortion and what is proportion? It seems that at every turn O’Connor faced the problem of communicating with a world in which fewer and fewer implied norms and ideals seemed to exist.

Flannery O’Connor further recognised that misconceptions about the comic or affirmative grotesque have caused “the general American reader” to connect grotesquery with the “writer’s compassion”, that is, with “the sentimental” (*Prose*: 43). But she insisted that this approach to the grotesque by no means represents a gesture towards pity. Writing about a girl called Mary Ann, who had lived almost the duration of her twelve years with a large, cancerous tumour on her face, O’Connor observed:

Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look at it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face is too grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a smoothing-

down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann's, full of promise. (Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann, Prose*: 226)

Though formulated relatively late in her career, O'Connor discovered that her Introduction to the *Memoir* was an important key to her work. "In the future", she wrote to 'A' in 1961, "anybody who writes anything about me is going to have to read everything I have written in order to make legitimate criticism, even and particularly the Mary Ann piece" (*Letters*: 442). According to O'Connor's Introduction, the "good" in humanity is "under construction"; like the bad, it is grotesque. This conception coincides with the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque as essentially incomplete, "opposed to all that is finished and polished" (1968: 3). What O'Connor appears to be championing is a type of Bakhtinian "grotesque realism", whereby images are seen to be always *in process*, always *becoming*. Mary Ann's deformed face was "full of promise" because it was far from whole, far from perfected. The Sisters who cared for her, and Mary Ann herself, "fashioned from her unfinished face the material of her death" (*Prose*: 223). The young girl, was, as it were, "Caught in the form of limitation/ Between being and unbeing".<sup>35</sup>

O'Connor herself did not live to read Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, but she identified with noticeably congruous patterns of thought held by the controversial French Jesuit-palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She clearly admired Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) despite its questionable relationship to Catholic orthodoxy. In her review of his book, she cites a portion that echoes Bakhtinian notions of the essential incompleteness and interdependence of humanity — the grotesqueness of all people. "[Humanity] is very far from being fully created, neither in its individual developments nor, above all, in the collective terminus towards which it is directed" (*Reviews*: 87). O'Connor also affirmed her belief in what Teilhard, in *The Divine Milieu* (1960) calls "passive diminishments". She explained the concept simply as "those afflictions that you can't get rid of and have to bear" and considered Mary Ann to have creatively borne and built on her sufferings (*Letters*: 509). Illnesses, deformities and imperfections register deficiency and

mortality, yet encompass the promise of future wholeness on an individual and universal scale. Even death, the fearsome reality over which we have no control, holds out the possibility of hope. “Death is the sum and consummation of all our diminishments: it is *evil* itself”, Teilhard writes, “[but] we must overcome death by finding God in it” (1960: 61). How strange and fitting that the French Jesuit, who expressed a wish to “die on the day of the Resurrection”, met his end on Easter Sunday 1955.<sup>36</sup>

Not only did O’Connor recognise the potentialities of the grotesque in relation to the diminishments of humanity or to the peculiar interconnectedness of all creation, but in relation to the zone of encounter between material and spiritual. Her markings in Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958) indicate her interest in hierophany: the act of manifestation of the sacred.

This setting-apart sometimes has positive effects; it does not merely isolate, it elevates. Thus ugliness and deformities, while marking out those who possess them, at the same time makes them sacred. (in *Library*: 77)

One might even say that all hierophanies are simply prefigurations of the miracles of the Incarnation, that every hierophany is an abortive attempt to reveal the mystery of the coming together of God and man. (in *Reviews*: 58)

Eliade’s comments suggest that the grotesque can act anagogically. The misfit or freak, in being set apart, can be elevated to sacredness. A hierophany, even if not immediately recognisable as Christic, can be a reflection of the Incarnation: the ultimate fusion of Spirit and flesh. O’Connor inferred that by means of the flawed — in the extreme, by means of the grotesque — God’s redemptive goodness might be made manifest: “Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical” (*Letters*: 389).

In its capacity for sacredness, the grotesque assumes a position beyond full sentient awareness or linguistic utterance. As Geoffrey Harpham suggests, the grotesque phenomenon usually

eludes all its symptoms by impressing us with a remote sense that in some other system than the one in which we normally operate, some system that is primal,

prior, or 'lower', the incongruous elements may be normative, meaningful, even sacred. (1982: 69)

The phenomenon of the grotesque becomes a "sacred language" which can "reveal a reality in which the oxymoron is both rhetorical and substantial", "where virile maiden, serpent angel, or three in one express phenomena that language itself cannot" (Williams 1985: 176).<sup>37</sup> Indeed both the anagogical and grotesque could be seen to function as metalanguages — though ostensibly of different impetuses: one elevating, the other debasing.

If the grotesque can be compared to another literary construct, it is to paradox, which Harpham describes as "a way of turning language against itself by asserting both terms of a contradiction at once".

Pursued for its own sake, paradox can seem vulgar or meaningless; it is extremely fatiguing to the mind. But pursued for the sake of wordless truth, it can rend veils and even like the grotesque, approach the holy. Because it breaks the rules, paradox can penetrate to new and unexpected realms of experience, discovering relationships syntax generally obscures. (1982: 20)

Harpham's insight essentially supports the claim of sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Celestial Hierarchy* that "discordant figures uplift the mind more than the harmonious".<sup>38</sup> It also upholds John Ruskin's assertion in *The Stones of Venice* that the "vaster the truths", the "more fantastic their distortion is likely to be" (1885: 199). This line of argument suggests what St. Bernard feared: that encountering the grotesque could lead to the revelation of unsought knowledge. O'Connor would, no doubt, have appreciated the paradoxical reasoning suggested by William in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*: "Hugh of St. Victor reminded us that the more the simile becomes dissimilar, the more the truth is revealed to us under the guises of horrible and indecorous figures, the less the imagination is sated in carnal enjoyment, and is thus obliged to perceive the mysteries hidden under the turpitude of the images".<sup>39</sup> Henri de Lubac (1957) highlights another way in which paradox might be associated with the grotesque. Paradox is "the reverse view, of what properly perceived, would be a synthesis" (*Reviews*: 58-9). As O'Connor put it, paradox "faces towards fullness" (59), it searches for integration and looks to what is to come.

In O'Connor's grotesquely anagogical world, unlikely individuals and objects are often, almost inconceivably, sacraments of power and grace. Certainly neither saints nor conventional heroes glow in her tales. The characters, on the whole, are ridiculously flawed, "etched in images which deny them human completeness" (Asals 1982: 93). Many of them could be identified as "the much-derided... folk of the land": those grotesquely distanced from the high strata of society, about whom Jung comments, "looked at from *above*, [they] present mostly a dreary or laughable comedy". Yet, he implies that, if looked at, from *below*, these types of outcasts are "as impressively simple as those Galileans who were once called blessed" (1957: 211). As if crouching low, O'Connor imagined the heights to which her grotesque creations could extend anagogically. Her religious figures, for example, are often as undeservedly truth-bearing, as corrupt and preposterous, as the old brother in Claude Koch's *Light in Silence*. This monk, to O'Connor's fascination, "attends condemned movies disguised in an ancient sweater", yet manages to outshine "the 'progressive' elements of the community by having a vision" that proves highly significant and timely (*Reviews*: 73).

Flannery O'Connor was certainly conscious that her intentions to utilise the grotesque to anagogical ends might well be misapprehended:

It is hard enough for [the modern reader] to suspend his disbelief and accept an *anagogical* level of action at all, harder still for him to accept its action in an obviously *grotesque* character... [A] concern with grace is... simply a concern with the human reaction to that which, instant by instant, gives life to the soul. (*Prose*: 204, emphasis mine)

Modern empiricist readers may not be able to reason that a level of anagogy exists. They may find it even more unlikely that an 'action of grace' could be shown through a grotesque medium. Yet, O'Connor did not seek to meet the intellect on its own terms. She held that "the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted" (*Prose*: 41-2).

## The Negative Way

Many O'Connor readers no doubt question why the grotesque — conventionally perceived as essentially degenerative and deconstructive — should have such prominence in her work. Its affronting presence would seem to obscure the holy. An early Catholic review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* epitomises this viewpoint. It decries the disjunction between O'Connor's "deep Christian concern" and her "gratuitous grotesque" (Esty 1958: 588). In reaction to assessments of this sort, Flannery O'Connor was often critical about the ability of the Catholic Press to recognise profound, enduring art. She jested that the motto of the Press, should read: "We guarantee to corrupt nothing but your taste" (*Letters*: 139).

Flannery O'Connor thus deliberately stayed clear of all "baby", "nun" and "young girl" stories which inspire "a nice vapid Catholic distrust of finding God in action of any range and depth" (139).<sup>40</sup> Instead, she evoked in her fiction atrocities such as violation and murder, absurdities such as a hierophantic lawn statue and water stain — "action of any range and depth" — in order to find God. In her mid-career (1956), O'Connor wrote the following to the reviews editor of the diocesan paper, *The Bulletin*:

It's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively. As to natural Grace, we have to take that the way it comes — through nature. In any case, it operates surrounded by evil. (*Letters*: 144)

O'Connor did not normally distinguish between two kinds of grace, but her distinction here suggests that the fiction writer might approach the representation of grace from more than one direction. *Supernatural* grace, that is, grace from 'above', seems to call for negative, unexpected means of incursion. At one point, she asserted that grace "cuts" before it "heals" (*Letters*: 411); on another occasion, she claimed that it is "dark and divisive".<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, *natural* grace, that is, grace from 'below', seems to entreat anagogical disclosure through the creation. For O'Connor, this would chiefly entail using a sacramental world of things to communicate God's existence and intentions. Yet, she was not hesitant to point out that "natural" (like "supernatural") grace operates in a territory of "evil". Or as she said

elsewhere: “my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil” (*Prose*: 118).

A bleak assessment of O’Connor’s use of grotesquery as a means of ‘Christian’ representation would support John Hawkes’ assertion that “in the most vigorously moral of writers the actual creation of fiction seems often to depend on the immoral impulse” (1962: 94). In a teasing way, Hawkes maintained that O’Connor spoke with the devil’s voice despite her claims. At times, she did seem to imply that evil was a necessary factor in the universe. She was drawn to this point made by William James: “the world is all the richer for having a devil in it, so long as we keep our foot upon his neck”.<sup>42</sup> Whether O’Connor could keep her foot on the fiend, whether she could control the effects of her violent grotesquery, is an issue that will continue to draw enquirers to her work. Nonetheless, a more sympathetic view of grotesque degradation would appreciate the logic of the *via negativa*. Originally formulated by Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century, and becoming disseminated in Catholic thought throughout the ages, this process of negation aims to access a realm beyond reason and language where God could be truly experienced. In naming, negating and transcending the positive, the mind is transported to “an utterly nameless reality”, to a perception of the “Super-Essential ray of Divine Darkness” (Williams 1979: 304). O’Connor, in fact, highlighted the following words of St. Thomas Aquinas in Dom Aelred Graham’s *Zen Catholicism*, which suggest the Scholastic’s respect for, and imply her interest in, the negative way:

In matters of Divinity, negative statements are to be preferred to positive, on account of our insufficiency, as Dionysius says. (*Library*: 81)

On a personal level, O’Connor professed that awareness of one’s deficiency is needed in order to recognise the divine fullness:

[To] know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against the Truth, and not the other way round. (*Prose*: 35)

[You] have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it. I measure God by everything that I’m not. (*Letters*: 430)

O'Connor's regard for the negative way — alluded to in her prose and letters, and often suggested by the tenor of her fiction — has been identified with the thought of the modern mystic, Thomas Merton.<sup>43</sup> Like Merton, the powerful underside of faith, free from Catholic “smugness”, appealed to her (*Letters*: 131).

Flannery O'Connor's use of the grotesque has astutely been compared to the exercise of negative-space drawing which enables positive shapes to be seen by way of the negative (Angle 1994-5). O'Connor herself alluded to this strategy, this mode of seeing. The advice she offered Elizabeth Fenwick with respect to her writing implies that if one assumes a different perspective, the object or scene at hand might be perceived more sharply due to lack of familiarity: “Try rearranging this backwards and see what you see. I thought this stunt up from my art classes, where we always turn the picture upside down, on its two sides, to see what lines need to be added. A lot of excess stuff will drop off this way” (*Letters*: 67). Approaching one's work from a different angle, in fact, from an antithetical position, could help to distil its essence and intensify its meaning. Again, however, O'Connor acknowledged the necessity of a definite ideological starting point — often so difficult to find in a modern world. She wrote: “Of course you are only enabled to see what is black by having light to see it by” (*Letters*: 173).

O'Connor advocated an authorial approach using negative representation, but whether or not those on the other end, her audience, could see past the negative to the positive is another matter. Through a reliance on the negative way, she at times risked hermeneutical breakdown between herself and the readers. Yet, one could argue that her aim was never, after all, to present meaning in an unequivocal, consumable way. Joseph Zornado claims, in this regard, that her grotesque fiction “often clears itself away as a meaning-bearing icon in order to introduce the reader to something other, to the mystery latent and invisible in the manners” (1997: 27). Perhaps the role of silence in O'Connor's work could further be seen to illustrate this principle, that the absence of utterance embodies the unknowable (Swan 1988: 82). It seems that like the anagogical, the grotesque takes one beyond the explicable and

definable. Yet, unlike anagogy, one could say that it does not lead one to the presence of grace, but to an apparent absence thereof. “There is always an intensity about [the grotesque]”, O’Connor reflected, “that creates a general discomfort, that brings with it... a kind of *memento mori* that leaves us for an instant alone facing the ineffable”.<sup>44</sup>

In considering the relevance of the *via negativa* to O’Connor, it is important to note that this approach to the holy was not necessarily considered antithetical to liturgical orthodoxy.<sup>45</sup> O’Connor herself implied that her Catholic belief was not founded on a hubristic sense of knowing the entire truth, but on an understanding that orthodoxy guarded truth. “Faith”, she asserted, “is a walking in darkness not a theological solution to mystery” (*Prose*: 184). The Catholic writer should not, therefore, attempt to reduce truths to palatable reflections, or to depict simplistic morals. In a 1963 letter to Sister Mariella Gable, O’Connor stressed the importance of mystery and experience in writing about faith and vision.

I know the writer does call up the general and maybe the essential through the particular, but this general and essential is still deeply embedded in mystery. It is not answerable to any of our formulas. It doesn’t rest finally in a statable kind of solution. It ought to throw you back on the living God. Our Catholic mentality is great on paraphrase, logic, formulas, instant and correct answers. We judge before we experience and never trust our faith to be subjected to reality. (*Letters*: 516)

In creating fiction, it was O’Connor’s purpose that there should always be left “that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula” (*Prose*: 153).

Flannery O’Connor argued further that in pursuit of mystery, one should not succumb to penning the “ideal”, but to put down “what you see” (*Letters*: 516). O’Connor insisted that fiction does not lend itself to an affirmative view of life and faith without limiting the writer’s freedom to observe what humanity has done with the “things of God” (*Prose*: 150-1). The grotesque in fiction allows the writer to show the bleak reality of human depravity and postlapsarian evil, while suggesting, by the apparent absence of good, the light of divinity. It is notable that O’Connor considered the genre of fiction particularly suitable as a vehicle for her Christian — or grotesque — realism. Like human nature, she considered fiction inherently resistant to imposed authority:

Fiction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics for the very reasons that make it what it is. It escapes any orthodoxy we might set up for it, because its dignity is an imitation of our own, based like our own on free will, a free will that operates even in the teeth of divine displeasure. (*Prose*: 192)

It can be argued, furthermore, that fiction — resistant to idealism — is particularly suited to the modern era, in O'Connor's words, to "an age which doubts both fact and value" (*Prose*: 49). Like György Lukács, O'Connor regarded fiction as an appropriate literary mode for reflecting and interrogating the modern human condition. According to Lukács: "Epics are the literary products of integrated ages of faith, when the world seemed adequate to the demands of soul", but "novels are the expression in literary form of the 'problematic' ages of doubt".<sup>46</sup> It has been suggested, moreover, that the short story form is especially suited to the modern period. G. K. Chesterton (1906) contends that the short story captures a sense of the "fleetingness and fragility" of modern life.<sup>47</sup> And V. S. Pritchett (1953) argues that the "very collapse of standards, conventions and values... has been the making of the short story writer who can catch any piece of life as it flies by".<sup>48</sup> It was, indeed, O'Connor's intention as a short story writer to show the fragmentation of the world, but it was her bold aim also to suggest, in the context of what is lacking, the existence of ultimate wholeness.

## Connecting Seen and Unseen

In O'Connor's only named lecture on the grotesque, she jests about issues pertaining to the mode, but also addresses somewhat more seriously "the kind of fiction that may be called grotesque with good reason, because of a directed intention on the part of the author" (*Prose*: 40).<sup>49</sup> O'Connor calls attention to the departures from "customary realism" that are evident in the grotesque: "strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left" (40). She further contends that the characters in "grotesque works" own an "inner" though not necessarily an outer "social" coherence: "Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns towards mystery and the unexpected" (40).

Alluding to Thomas Mann's pronouncement, O'Connor alleges that the grotesque is the "true anti-bourgeois style" (*Prose*: 43). She would no doubt appreciate Joyce Carol Oates' view that the grotesque is "the only kind of fiction that is real".<sup>50</sup>

The grotesque, though not of the realist mode *per se*, necessarily appertains to the real world of nature and of human interaction. It also bears upon the world of the spirit, a domain of existence equally real to O'Connor, the mediocrally minded Catholic. She claims that the Catholic writer, like the prophet, is a "realist of distances" who sees far things close up and who is concerned with "a realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth" (*Prose*: 179). Indeed, the writer of grotesque fiction

look[s] for *one 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 everyone sees. It's not necessary to point out that the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it almost of necessity is going to be violent and comic, because of the necessities it seeks to combine. (*Prose*: 42-3, emphasis mine)

O'Connor's commentary on some characteristic features of the grotesque is cursory ("It's not necessary to point out that the look of this fiction is going to be wild...violent...comic"). But she elaborates on the construction of the grotesque, proposing that *one image* is sought to join *two points* — one point being material, the other immaterial. A single image is sought to join the earthly and the spiritual. In stressing that the yoking of these dissimilar realities entails violence, she registers a strong apocalyptic sense of how grotesque images might function. As these grotesque images "connect" or "combine" (and as such "embody") the visible *and* the invisible, they yield turbulent, funny, forcible displays of the mysterious — potentially of the revelatory. Her premise was that for "the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself" (*Prose*: 113).

In that O'Connor's grotesque images attempt to unite invisible and visible, not simply by degrading what is high, as one might suspect, but by drawing the focus of action to a middle zone of dynamic juncture, they strangely reflect the propensities of the anagogical images. The middle realm of O'Connor's imagery would appear to be poised between utter

chaos of hell and pure spirituality of heaven, between present and eternal time, between the apocalyptic and quotidian. Geoffrey Harpham proposes that although the grotesque “is more comfortable in hell than in heaven, its true home is the space between” (1982: 8). Insofar as O’Connor sustains the sense of two realities — above and below — one could say that her fiction, to borrow Harpham’s apt terminology, is “an art of the margin marked by constant interpenetration” (1982: 185-6). To apply the words of O’Connor’s narrator in ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’, one could argue that her art occupies a “jungle of shadows”: a complex interplay of light and dark, of opposing impulses. It is this condition of interpenetration that marks O’Connor’s work as distinctive, as stupefying. If you pretend to understand, Thomas Merton warns, you may find yourself “among her demons practicing contempt”.<sup>51</sup>

In that Flannery O’Connor’s fiction attains to both anagogical and grotesque realism is precariously positioned on the threshold of what might be accepted as Christian. At the same time, it wavers on the boundary of what an unbelieving readership might find alienatingly, disagreeably religious. Neither to a religious or a secular audience is her work entirely comfortable or accessible. She was drolly aware that “what is one thing for the writer may be another for the reader” (*Prose*: 148-9). Indeed, what impels the writer to a place of truth may only launch the reader into confusion. Does she, in the end, cause the anagogical and grotesque to come into uneasy relation in her work such that her Christian concern becomes unrecognisable? Could she, like Milton, be accused of being so adept at describing the demons and depravities, that she is “of the Devil’s party without knowing it”?<sup>52</sup> Does her fictional framework insist so strongly on its own orthodoxy, that her anagogical concerns become overshadowed by the grotesque? The closing concern of O’Connor’s essay ‘Novelist and Believer’ to some extent recalls the fearful impression that eventually plagued French Catholic, François Mauriac. “It is the mark of our slavery and of our wretchedness”, he reflected, “that we can, without lying, paint a faithful portrait only of the passions”.<sup>53</sup> Although Flannery O’Connor’s aim was to convey “the image at the heart of things”, would she in the end only be able to show “our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil

we are possessed by”<sup>7</sup><sup>54</sup>

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## Chapter Two Notes

<sup>1</sup> Appearing in the order cited are the sources of these terms: Di Renzo (1993), Andreas (1989), Muller (1972), Montgomery (1979), Castex (1984), Feeley (1982), O'Donnell (1986).

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Di Renzo (1993: 9) and also Karl P. Wentersdorf (1984) on scatological figures in Gothic manuscripts.

<sup>3</sup> See Williams on St. Wilgefortis (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Cited from Poem 107 in *Middle English Lyrics* (1974: 109).

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor's literary respect for the proponents of these groups was no doubt qualified by her criticism of their theological beliefs. The Agrarians' manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* communicated a notion of theism which was unspecific (see Wood 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick J. Ireland argues that in the years since O'Connor's death the term 'grotesque' has become significantly less suitable to distinguish Southern literature from Mainstream American fiction. "Non-southern writers like Joyce Carol Oates, John Irving, Larry Woiwode, Donald Barthelme, and scores of others have come to envision the world and its reality in terms as bizarre as anything in O'Connor" (1987: 186).

<sup>7</sup> Andreas specifically does not here refer to late nineteenth and twentieth century meanings of the term "gothic", as it might be used in relation to the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley Wollstonecraft and Edgar Allen Poe, for example (1989: 23). (For the purposes of his paper, Andreas renames this genre "pseudo-gothic".)

<sup>8</sup> See Ronald Emerick. (1989) on the literary "kinship" of Hawthorne and O'Connor.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor would undoubtedly have endorsed Andrew Delbanco's *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost Their Sense of Evil* in which he argues that "a gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources for coping with it" (1995: 3). He contends that in the context of twentieth-century American culture, evil has long been depicted as a foreign 'other', a means of evading personal responsibility for the monstrous realities of a gun-happy society, napalm, nuclear explosions, death camps.

<sup>10</sup> In *Confessions*, Augustine argues for the substantiation of all created things, even if pristine qualities are lost: "So we must conclude that if things are deprived of all good, they cease altogether to be; and this means that as long as they are, they are good. Therefore, whatever

is, is good; and evil...is not a substance, because if it is a substance it would be good" (1943: 148). Echoing this understanding, O'Connor wrote: Catholics believe that all creation is good and that evil is the wrong use of good" (*Letters*: 144). A Thomistic outlook, founded on Augustinian thought, substantiates the role of the senses and of reason in coming to a knowledge of the divine (see 'Reading Creation' in Chapter Three).

<sup>11</sup> As becomes salient from O'Connor's reviews of books devoted to study of the Bible, she considered it highly important that Catholics gain personal Scriptural knowledge (see *Reviews*: 41, 121, 155, 166, 169).

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Harpham argues that the "sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately and ominously in something else" (1982: 11).

<sup>13</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are taken from F. N. Robinson's *The Riverside Chaucer*.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Ficken notes that O'Connor's use of this term is more personal than political — though she may have been aware that Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett utilised the term she made no obvious link to their ideas. "[A]n approach to modern experience with a faith that is at once grounded in tradition and in concrete realities, and at the same time, imaginative, flexible, consciously modern and totally unsentimental", is what she seemed to mean of Christian Realism (Ficken 1981: 57).

<sup>15</sup> Spivey points out that Martin Buber's term, the "eclipse of God", is more pertinent to the modern world than Nietzsche's designation because it implies the possibility of belief despite the overwhelming tide of unbelief (1995: 23).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Schaub (1991: 119). See also William Van O'Connor (1962).

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Kayser (1963: 20).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Ganim (1995: 28).

<sup>19</sup> The strikingly dissimilar views of the two theorists result partly from their differing sociological assumptions and study of different historical periods. Certainly this was Bakhtin's explanation: Kayser studied "Romantic and modernist forms", focused primarily on the individual, while he, Bakhtin, interpreted "the archaic and antique...the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, linked to the culture of folk humour" (1968: 46). In spite of their specific foci and contextualisations, both hypotheses have nonetheless been readily applied to a wide range of literary texts and cultural forms. Kayser's 'threatening grotesque' has been widely applied beyond its original European post-Renaissance parameters, as Rebecca Butler (1985) and others infer. Stallybrass and White (1986) similarly view "the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon" which moves beyond Bakhtin's "troublesome *folkloric* approach" (1986: 26). In Bruce Gentry's examination of the 'massacre of the innocents' in both the medieval and modern era, Gentry resolves that "both forms of the grotesque have

been achieved in each period” (1986: 12).

<sup>20</sup> Freud’s definition is cited in Strachey *et al* (1955: 220).

<sup>21</sup> Guided by Kayser, Gilbert Muller (1972) views O’Connor’s grotesque world as a ludicrous, alienated universe that needs to be overcome by grace. Inspired by Bakhtin, Anthony Di Renzo (1993) approaches O’Connor’s fiction through the ways it embodies the extraordinary contradictions that characterise the arts of the late Middle Ages. Similarly, Bruce Gentry (1986) reads the grotesque in O’Connor more positively, influenced by Bakhtin’s ‘carnavalesque grotesque’ and even more so by his theory of heteroglossia. See Gary M. Ciuba’s review of Di Renzo’s *American Gargoyles* for a succinct summary of approaches to O’Connor’s use of the grotesque (1993-4: 143).

<sup>18</sup> From ‘*Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem*’ in *S. Bernardi Opere* (vol. 3), p.106

<sup>23</sup> See Apostolos-Cappadona (1995: 57-8). Other motions against the “sports of fancy” and “oddities” of church embellishment included the thirteenth-century tract *Pictor in Carmine* and, in part, Archbishop St. Antonio’s fifteenth-century *Summa Theologica III* (Harpham 1982: 34).

<sup>24</sup> Laurie Finke (1992: 75) contextualizes *jouissance* as the “inexpressible” which mystics alone sense; quoting Lacan, that “which goes beyond” (1982: 146).

<sup>25</sup> Trans. Di Renzo (1993: 1).

<sup>26</sup> Many verses from the Book of Psalms reveal the connection between the elevation of vision and worship. Probably the most famous is the opening section of Psalm 121 (or Psalm 120 as in the Douay version below):

I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains:  
Whence is to come my help?  
My help is from the Lord,  
The maker of heaven and earth.

<sup>27</sup> From Di Renzo’s translation of St. Bernard (1993: 1).

<sup>28</sup> Citations from St. Bernard in this section are taken from in D. W. Robertson’s *A Preface to Chaucer* (1962: 177).

<sup>29</sup> See Kayser (1963: 185).

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Stitt (1985: 27).

<sup>31</sup> O’Connor does refer to Thomas Mann, who originally wrote in German, but not to the critics of earlier centuries. The landmark studies on the grotesque by Kayser and Bakhtin in particular, as well as by Arthur Clayborough and Lee Byron Jennings, were published either a short time before

or after her death in 1964.

<sup>32</sup> About a story that had been called “grotesque”, O’Connor says: “I prefer to call it literal in the same sense that a child’s drawing is literal. When a child draws he doesn’t intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees” (*Prose*: 113).

<sup>33</sup> From an unpublished manuscript cited in Asals (1982: 121).

<sup>34</sup> Clara Claiborne Park, for one, argues that O’Connor exploited the grotesque for her own cathartic release. She reads O’Connor’s fiction as “the black repository... of [her] rebellion and disappointment and anger” which invites the reader “to join in the immemorial laughter elicited in kicking a cripple” (1982: 254).

<sup>35</sup> From T. S. Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’ in *Collected Poems* (1974: 195).

<sup>36</sup> Cited in *The Album* of Teilhard de Chardin (1966: 214).

<sup>35</sup> Harpham (1982: 174) points out that the *term* ‘grotesque’ itself is a radical form of *catachresis*: it “presents no ideas to the mind” (Guerlac 1985: 53).

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Harpham (1982: 20).

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Di Renzo (1993: 162).

<sup>40</sup> See Donahoo (1997) on O’Connor’s occasional, humorous use of Catholic characters and settings in her stories and on the historical and cultural context of the Catholic Church in the 1950s and 60s.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Wood (1988: 81).

<sup>42</sup> O’Connor’s marked this sentence in her copy of James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1961: 56).

<sup>43</sup> See Zornado (1997), Kilcourse (1994-95).

<sup>44</sup> From an unpublished manuscript housed in the Flannery O’Connor Collection, Georgia College & State University, cited in Asals (1982: 231).

<sup>45</sup> The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* claims the negative way was not an escape from the rituals of the Church, but rather an intense manifestation of the spirit of orthodoxy (Zornado 1992: 122).

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Wright (1988: 111).

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Shaw (1983: 17).

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Shaw (1983: 18).

<sup>49</sup> 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction'. This paper was read by the author in the fall of 1960 at Wesleyan College for Women in Macon, Georgia. At that time she asked that it be given only local distribution as she might "sooner or later revise it for publication" (*Prose*: 236).

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Ireland (1987: 186).

<sup>51</sup> From Merton's *Prose Elegy* in Friedman & Clark (1985: 70).

<sup>52</sup> From William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in *Complete Writings* (1957).

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Driskell and Brittan (1971: 25).

<sup>54</sup> See *Prose*: 168.

## Chapter Three

### ***A Good Man Is Hard to Find:* The Insistent Pursuit**

He thunders and kills  
from below, in, above;  
he consumes all dross.

He is stern  
like love  
and hard  
like a cross.

— *Extract from Nancy Thomas' 'Hard God'*

I was found by those who did not seek Me;  
I was made manifest to those who did  
not ask for Me.

— *Isaiah 65: 1*

In the Hellenic world man was seeking  
God, in the Hebrew world God was  
seeking man. Real history begins when  
man accepts the God Who is, Who seeks  
him.

— *Flannery O'Connor on Eric Voegelin's Israel  
and Revelation*

### **A Hazardous Passage**

Some months before *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* was published in May 1955, Flannery O'Connor introduced her collection to her friends, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, as "nine stories about original sin" (*Letters*: 74). A tenth story of similar mien was subsequently accepted for publication.<sup>1</sup> If sin is the issue, then readers are not disappointed to find massacre, murder, arson, extortion and betrayal defiling the pages, not to mention the callous evils of prejudice, arrogance and deceit. Corruption appears to

wrack O'Connor's fictional world — corruption often associated with her region. To understand the South, writer Geoffrey Norman claims, one needs to come to terms with the idea of sin, “doomed from the garden, sweaty, unstoppable sin”. Who better is there to show it, he asks, than Flannery O'Connor? She does not ameliorate the harrowing and heinous manifestations of sin, yet neither does she disregard the divine source who confronts its power.

The author offers a warning (or dare) at the beginning of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* as to what the reader — and the characters — will have to face:

THE DRAGON IS BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, WATCHING THOSE WHO PASS.  
BEWARE LEST HE DEVOUR YOU. WE GO TO THE FATHER OF SOULS, BUT IT  
IS NECESSARY TO PASS BY THE DRAGON.

This rather dramatic epigraph, taken from fourth-century St. Cyril of Jerusalem, cunningly implies that in the stories both the “Dragon” and the “Father of Souls” will be encountered at various points along the same “road”. The admonition is neither to ignore the draconian threat nor to draw too close, but to remain uneasily aware of the risky course towards revelation and the divine — and toward the end of the book. The bold words of the ancient church father rather incongruously introduce ten modern stories, which inexorably move towards crisis, stories sure to stir up raucous laughter and sinister repulsion — and perhaps even moments of sober reflection.

To create the title of her collection, Flannery O'Connor audaciously borrows from a rollicking American folk song, written by Edie Green and popularised by Bessie Smith in 1927. In O'Connor's intrepid way, she uses a popular quip to allude to a serious biblical premise — that human nature needs to be assessed in relation to God's perfection. If you like, “a good man is hard to find” is a wry understatement of the biblical pronouncement that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23). But Flannery O'Connor's stories are, of course, concerned with more than transgression itself; the fictions labour to reveal the Source of goodness, even in the utter privation of virtue. A subtextual inference of the collection is *not* that God is hard to find because “good” people are few and far between — or less euphemistically, non-existent. If anything, a notional undercurrent would convey that encountering the divine is possible *since* imperfectability and depravity abound. In O'Connor's cosmos, as in the Hebrew

world, God insistently pursues the imperfect and depraved: men and women who cannot by their efforts meet holy standards. The spiritual impetus of O'Connor's mature fiction can thus be described as *anthropotropic*, as differentiated from *theotropic*.<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin's conception of history, which implies an acceptance of existence under God, illuminates O'Connor's fundamental understanding of conversion as surrender to the Almighty.<sup>4</sup>

The *grotesque* mode, conveying the laughably disturbed human state and, yet, its potential to unite with God, and the *anagogical*, revealing divine presence and eternal destiny, interact in intriguing and complex ways in this collection. As the God of O'Connor's world seeks out individuals, He reveals His grace and truth sacramentally through vessels often represented as grotesque and through the scapes of nature sometimes skewed in description. At other times, O'Connor's God discloses His mystery mystically — in the grotesque absence of obvious goodness and of affirming gesture. One can be sure that encountering God in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* does not depend on upright human examples. In fact, no feisty characters look purposefully for God, yearning for *unio mystica*, as occurs, for example, in the stories of Patrick White. None of O'Connor's protagonists can be likened to a beacon light searching the dark air as if "hunting for the lost sun" (*Stories*: 242). Instead, God uncovers Himself to those He chooses — invariably, to the disinterested, as the prophet Isaiah understood.

Like O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* (1952), the stories of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* could be said to reflect various stages of engagement with evil. Yet, the collection does not, to the same overpowering extent, portray participation in a world of sin, chaos and human eccentricity. For a start, the protagonists of the short stories do not see reality in its apocalyptic dimensions as starkly as the peculiar hero of the novel, Hazel Motes. Unlike Hazel, they do not live in state of constant awareness of holiness and sin, salvation and damnation. At a young age, Hazel comes to identify that "the way to avoid Jesus [is] to avoid sin" (*Wise*: 16). Growing up, he thus makes every effort to live cleanly, but, despite himself, he cannot escape the divine presence:

he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might suddenly be walking on water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. (*Wise*: 16)

Hazel is all too aware that following Jesus means surrender to an outrageous Being who will lead him along dark routes and promise him nothing in this world. When he returns from the Second World War at age twenty-two, he determines to undo the “deep black wordless conviction” (16) of his youth by defiantly breaking every Commandment he can. He thus discovers the negative approach to God. Hazel goes as far as founding the Church Without Christ which teaches: “Blasphemy is the way to truth” (146). Indeed, the further he retreats from righteousness, the nearer he becomes strangely drawn to the haunting presence of God. In a terrible state of dissatisfaction, Hazel finally turns away from gratification to deprivation. He silences, punishes and blinds himself in a grotesque attempt to win self-made salvation. The story’s ending is left mystifyingly open. When the landlady looks into Hazel’s dead, blind eyes, and closes her own, she envisages him moving further and further away as a “pin point of light” (226). *Wise Blood*, as many critics agree, illustrates the *via negativa* and presents Hazel as a crude, unwilling mystic.<sup>5</sup>

Flannery O’Connor’s first collection of short stories moves some way beyond the theological and modal parameters of the first novel. Whereas *Wise Blood* glaringly projects the bleakness of a desacralised world with little, if no, possibility of sacramental reality, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* demonstrates in a variety of ways the infusion of spirit. Although the human environment of the short stories is often grotesque, anagogy becomes possible because the visible world is attributed a life beyond what can be seen at the surface. If *Wise Blood* infers that self-castigation is the means to discovery, then *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* conveys that affliction from *without* ushers in unsought knowledge. Frederick Asals observes that the mortifications depicted in the collection pummel the body and the emotions primarily to cleanse the “doors of perception”(1982: 205). He points out, furthermore, that the characters are not removed from the world in the ascetic manner of *Wise Blood*, but are “returned to a world of matter, through which the spirit gleams” (205). It is notable that in one or two stories, a milder movement follows the affliction. The renderings of this movement could be said to foreshadow the

impetus of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* which strains to move beyond the harsh moments of divine discipline to show anagogical awakening. A crucial difference between *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* lies in the source of the impetus which instigates change. In O'Connor's collection of stories, the blows are not self-impelled, but divinely inflicted. Hazel Motes constructs the idea of a "new Jesus" who is, unthreateningly, "all man" (*Wise*: 134), but the characters of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* typically discover that the 'old' Jesus is indeed God and that He is to be encountered in the most unlikely of shapes and skins.

To express a vision of a Godless world reduced to animalistic and mechanistic behaviour, Flannery O'Connor created in *Wise Blood* a motley crew of miscreants in an environment lit, not by fiery, sacramental suns, but by gaudy neon signs — "PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, HOTEL, CANDY" (*Wise*: 23). Following the novel's publication, she informed her mentor Caroline Gordon:<sup>6</sup> "My first book was about freaks, but from now on I'm going to write about folks" (in *Three*: xv). With a new project in mind, her first collection of short stories, O'Connor, the creator of the bizarrely memorable Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery, apparently came to recognise the problematic nature of her heavy reliance on grotesque cartooning.<sup>7</sup> John F. Desmond argues that if O'Connor had continued in the vein of her first novel, she would have not advanced beyond writing as a "comic satirist" (1987: 61). Anthony Di Renzo asserts that *Wise Blood*, so extreme in its vision, forced a revision of her style and approach to the grotesque (1993: 28). It seems O'Connor's cartoon-like satire in her early publishing career threatened to obliterate reference to Christian symbols, to dehumanise characters to the point of incredibility, and to render Christ utterly transcendent. In *Wise Blood*, Christ is no more than the haunting presence of an obscured ideal. The "sour triumphant" words of the train porter in the novel — "Jesus been a long time gone" (*Wise*: 21) — sarcastically express what Hazel wants to believe.

In the stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and indeed in her second collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Flannery O'Connor comes to rely far more on the natural world, on sensuously redolent settings and situations, than in her early work, to convey spiritual realities. She seems to have concurred with Andrew Lytle's opinion that

“the end of *Wise Blood* got too allegorical, almost fantasy”, that there should have been “the natural action which contains and represents the supernatural or imaginative”.<sup>8</sup> In composing the stories to be collected in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O’Connor perceived the need to more clearly contextualise her stories in space and time, as well as to humanise her characters to a greater degree: to make them more believable, more complex, perhaps in some cases more empathic. She wrote in 1955 to ‘A’: “For the things I want them to do, my characters apparently will have to seem twice as human as humans” (*Letters*: 116). Yet, Flannery O’Connor doubtless remained chary of aggrandising or sentimentalising characters she wished to be “large and startling figures” (*Prose*: 34). Perhaps by her phrase “twice as human”, she meant as imperfect, idiosyncratic and funny as a human could be, yet more wholly extreme, more preoccupied by mystery and violence, more expressive than the ordinary person about his or her spiritual frustration. O’Connor took exception to the notion “that all fiction has to be about the Average Man” (*Prose*: 80). After all, St. Augustine taught that a person’s cruel acts register a perverted desire for deeper meaning, for a life beyond the commonplace and conventional, ultimately for God. If the individual fails to identify correctly the deep need and is drawn into the world of evil, his or her transgression is, in its own way, a strange affirmation of divine reality (Wood 1988: 95). O’Connor alludes to the role of sin as an ironic register of grace; sin is “the contradiction, the interference, of a greater good by a lesser good” (*Letters*: 124). Her point echoes Jacques Maritain’s position that “[e]vil does exist in things, it is terribly present in them. Evil is real, it actually exists like a wound or a mutilation of the being; evil is there in all reality, whenever a thing — which, in so far as it is, and has been, good — is deprived of some being or of some good it should have”.<sup>9</sup> Even in *The Misfit*, the most brutal of men, O’Connor could see a potential worshipper.

On receiving the Kenyon Fellowship in 1952 following the publication of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor commented to her astute literary friends, the Fitzgeralds: “I reckon most of this money will go to blood and ACTH<sup>10</sup> and books, with a few sideline researches into the vulgar” (*Letters*: 49). In the 1950s, O’Connor did invest in and discover many books, notably the scholarly works of Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson,

Baron Friedrich Von Hügel, Romano Guardini, Karl Adam and Mircea Eliade, as well as works of fiction by Catholic writers, such as Caroline Gordon and J. F. Powers, which indirectly supported a shift on her part towards a fuller expression of sacramentality without abandoning the grotesque.<sup>11</sup> In the works of Maritain and Gilson, O'Connor gained a firmer grasp of Thomistic principles, especially the validity of "reason" in service of "revelation", the role of the visible world in revealing Christ.<sup>12</sup> Through reading Von Hügel and Guardini, she deepened her belief that nature should not be overlooked in the search for spirit, yet, on the other hand, that reality should not only be grasped at surface level. Alluding to the power of the sacramental, Guardini says: "the simpler the word expressing a truth, the more tremendous and at the same time the more deeply realized do the facts become" (in *Reviews*: 17).<sup>13</sup> In Karl Adam, O'Connor read of a deep respect for the "Christology of the living Church" which reinforced her own sense of the powerful immanence of God in His earthly Body (in *Reviews*: 55).<sup>14</sup> Via Eliade, O'Connor espoused the notion that the deficient and 'profane' could be sacred and sacramental.<sup>15</sup> Of J. F. Powers, she said: "he has a sense of form which controls what he sees and hears in such a way that the many levels of meaning which exist in the literal one are all brought together successfully to operate in the story" (*Reviews*: 14).<sup>16</sup> In Caroline Gordon she recognised the striking combination of a sordid life betrayed and a "conversion is elaborately prepared for" (*Reviews*: 16).<sup>17</sup> Flannery O'Connor's development of understanding, specifically her growing appreciation of "the anagogical", in the years after her first novel conceivably underpinned her experimentation with the comic or positive grotesque — new insights into the "vulgar", if you will.

Following *Wise Blood*, as I have argued, O'Connor incorporates more fully and penetratingly the mode of anagogy which affirms *presence*. The anagogical would seem to allow the depiction of spiritual encounter and transformation — rather than its disavowal and, hence, its implication. In a 1955 letter to author Robie McCauley, O'Connor humorously alluded to the shift she made in mode after her first stark novel: "Everybody who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression [from a story from in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*] that I'm a hillbilly Thomist" (*Letters*: 81). Her 1955 collection received a number of reviews

revealing a bewildered fascination with, rather than simply a distaste for, her vision, as was the case with *Wise Blood*.<sup>18</sup> It seems that the short stories were able to convey a little more assuredly to some the conceivability of radical conversion experiences or dark encounters with God. However, many reviews still gave little attention to spiritual meanings. *The Times* reviewer, for instance, spoke of “ten witheringly sarcastic stories” set in a lurid South.<sup>19</sup> O’Connor’s first essay, ‘The Fiction Writer and His Country’ (1957), which communicates her Christian intentions had not, of course, been published at this stage. The enriching and affirming effect this essay was to have on O’Connor criticism suggests the great challenge in interpreting her work, especially her earlier more obscure stories, without aid of some description.

In Flannery O’Connor’s mature period, one could say that she navigated a difficult route towards effectual representation, moving through, and being affected by, the oppositional influences of affirmation and disaffirmation that are intrinsic to the anagogical and grotesque modes respectively. Shortly after *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was published, she indirectly drew attention to her struggle between a positive and a negative approach to spirituality and to literary expression: “if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it” (*Letters*: 90). O’Connor aimed to depart from an *exclusively* negative or abstruse means to the divine, but at the same time she drew back from conventional, positive renderings of spiritual development. She was terribly aware that pious accounts easily become “subjective”, “musty” and “turgid” (*Reviews*: 28). Besides, she did not believe that humans could imitate Christ’s *via positiva* footstep by footstep; the difficulty in reaching the Father, by being waylaid by the Dragon, is what she more readily depicts.

In spite of the moderately more positive response to *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* O’Connor gained the impression that most reviews still regarded her as “the Sour Sage of Sugar Creek” (*Letters*: 96) — an acerbic, eccentric writer with an unfathomable cause. Indeed, she was not unaware of the interpretative difficulty her work presented. In early 1954, while working on the collection and her second novel, O’Connor shared with fellow writer, Ben Griffith, that the “effort to maintain a tone is a considerable strain, particularly as I never know exactly what tone I am maintaining” (*Letters*: 69). We can indeed

recognise an interplay of different tones across the spectrum of her stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: some unnerve, some would seem to affirm, still others leave one perplexed and stunned. Perhaps, not surprisingly, one or two stories included in the collection reflect the satirical strategy of her first novel. An early story, 'A Stroke of Good Fortune', intended at one stage to be part of *Wise Blood*, is all but dominated by the sinister grotesque. The growing foetus in Ruby's womb does not give any intimations of hope, but only of supreme, almost omniscient, vengeance and control: "It was as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting, with plenty of time" (107). Connections to the world of the spirit and ultimately to the Person of Christ, are not obviously drawn — the allusions are so slight as to be passed over altogether. In another rather anomalous story, 'A Late Encounter with the Enemy', which burlesques the heritage of the Confederacy, General Sash is grotesquely trammelled into his encounter with the past, but like 'A Stroke of Good Fortune', the story does not effectually convey that Christ is the haunter. Because these two stories do not focus on the ultimate aim of anagogy — to reveal the divine — I shall not discuss them further in detail, but instead concentrate on the eight stories which grapple with the grotesque in pursuit of the anagogical. I shall attempt to sketch out a range of ways in which the anagogical and grotesque modes counterpoise and interpenetrate each other in these stories, while examining in most detail those where the dramatic action and spiritual operations are rendered most compellingly. These are fictions conveying the intensity of interaction between high spiritual possibilities and low carnal realities.

The title, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, alludes to the individual, the lone person, who is first and foremost implicated in spiritual encounter. O'Connor's prevailing consciousness of the universal human condition is nevertheless suggested by many stories in the collection — a meditation on which she further expands in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The title story sets up the first of four episodes in which males on the margins of society disrupt or destroy the lives of established women, in all but one case, with brute intention. In 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find', the man called The Misfit is an infamous murderer and pretends nothing less. In 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', Tom Shiftlet appears to be a maimed wanderer seeking work, but proves to be a

frenzied charlatan. In 'Good Country People', Manley Pointer turns up as a Bible salesman, yet turns out to be a specialist thief of prostheses. In 'The Displaced Person', a story somewhat distinct from the previous three, Mr Guizac arrives as a destitute War refugee but leaves dead on a stretcher, having forever changed the lives he encountered. As Joyce Carol Oates comments, interpersonal tension between strangers — between intruders and denizens — forms the dramatic fulcrum in these tales (1983: 157).

Thomas Hill Schaub (1991: 123) reflects that the sexual dynamics of O'Connor's adult-protagonist stories remind us of the source of the collection title, the popular song which coyly urges: "hug him in the morning, kiss him at night, give him all your loving, treat him right". The lyrics resound: "A good man is hard to find / You always get the other kind". The troubling inference of these stories, Schaub argues, is that the female characters, for the most part, only seem to bear the potential to become 'good' women — that is, women finding their place under Christ — under the influence of brusque and brutal men (1991: 123). In the first three cases, the bad man is a type of "American Adam" who escapes responsibility from God, society and women (Ragen 1989: 56).<sup>20</sup> What is unsettling, furthermore, is that the male stranger, who sets in motion the action, which indicates divine visitation, often looks like the Devil. Having said this, the anagogical/grotesque dynamic is a complex one in these stories — the consequences of the intrusions by men are often spiritually ambiguous. The intrusions, which effect a form of retribution or expiation, do not always catalyse revelation in the women ('The Life You Save May Be Your Own', 'The Displaced Person'), nor do the male perpetrations necessarily go unpunished ('The Life You Save May Be Your Own', 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'). The male-divine connection in the collection is not simply and unquestioningly made.

In O'Connor's memorable child-protagonist stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, strange phenomena, if not necessarily strangers, intrude upon the lives of the central figures. In 'A Circle in the Fire', the invaders are three renegade teenage boys. In 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', the primary agent of change is an hermaphrodite in a travelling fair. In 'The Artificial Nigger', the source of spiritual challenge is a garden statue of an American Negro. In 'The River', the unfamiliar rite that precipitates crisis is

baptism. O'Connor apparently intended that, in at least some of her tales in the collection, redemption be pictured or intimated. Her intention can be inferred from the way she reacted to the assumption, articulated soon after the collection's publication, that "it is probably impossible to know how to become [a good man]" (*Letters*: 147). "*It is possible to know how to be one*", she asserted. "God became man partly in order to teach us, *but it is impossible to be one without the help of grace*" (147, emphasis mine). If the action of grace, and the attribution of goodness through redemption, is shown anywhere in her collection, it is arguably in her child stories. Yet, as in the men-women tales, there is no dependence on worthiness to invoke grace. As I will later discuss, the greater degree of redemptive movement in these child stories, compared to those already discussed, is linked to sacramental revelation and to the occurrence of children in significant, if not principal, roles in the stories. In two cases, the spiritual responses of the adults are connected to the influence of the children.<sup>21</sup> In the child stories, individuals recognise the anagogical to a greater extent, but can never bypass the grotesque.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Flannery O'Connor makes her way through a hazardous passage in portraying human encounters with God. She aims neither to give way to the extreme deficiencies of negation nor to the excesses of affirmation. The degree of her leaning varies from story to story — one or two push at the limits, one or two overbalance into the territory of the grotesque — but, taken as a whole, the fictions locate themselves in that boldly intermingled zone which belongs totally neither to the grotesque nor the anagogical. Each story in the collection incorporates the grotesque in a particular way to propel, yet complicate, movement towards possible anagogical breakthrough — as such, each story achieves a new angle on the human-divine interrelation. The intermingled arrangement of adult- and child-protagonist stories in the collection potentially deepens the impression of variation in modal handling across the spectrum. At some stage in each story, divine grace manifests itself destructively, or at least threateningly. The dark jaws of the dragon are seen before the light at the end of the road.

## Shooting Every Minute of a Life: 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'

From the outset of Flannery O'Connor's title story, the narrator draws attention to the fact that the grandmother, in the providential scheme of the fictional world, lives to die. The fastidious old woman is herself conscious of defining her day-to-day existence in the light of death, but for the wrong worldly reasons. In setting off on a family holiday to Florida, she congratulates herself on her immaculate appearance tastefully finished off with a spray of cloth violets at her neckline. She reasons that, in the event of a roadside accident, anyone who sees her lying dead would know "that she was a lady" (*Stories*: 118). From O'Connor's apocalyptic perspective, however, it is in dying — in ending a fatuous and misdirected life by recognising sin for what it is — that the woman's life acquires meaning. In the words of the grandmother's roadside executioner, The Misfit: "She would of been a good woman... if it had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life" (133).

'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is one of Flannery O'Connor's most stupefying and most anthologised of stories. It boldly and sophisticatedly integrates the comic, the horrific and the beautiful. The grandmother's gruesome murder at the hands of a serial killer, along with her five family members, remains a crucial point of debate among critics, especially in the light of O'Connor's assertion that the old woman in the end gains a "special kind of triumph", that the "action of grace" occurs in her soul (*Prose*: 111, 113). To John F. Desmond, the old woman clearly receives "a new vision" (1987: 31). But, for Stephen C. Bandy, the suggestion that the "spiky, vindictive" grandmother receives and extends grace is "to do violence to the story". (1996: 109, 116). For Frederick Asals, the final image of the "beatific corpse in a pool of blood" speaks of the ambivalence of her salvation (1982: 152). Indeed, the notion that roadside slaughter should be necessary to seal the woman's redemption is, to most minds, grotesque. Yet, to O'Connor, it is a necessary fulfilment of the story's anagogical propulsion. From the beginning of the family journey to its alarming end, intimations are given as to the inescapability of death, yet also to the availability of sacred life beyond the surface of existence.

Carter Martin affirms that the grandmother's identity with grace has been prepared for throughout the story (1987: 154). Martin's point alludes to the accretion of symbolic detail pertaining to the potential for anagogical disclosure of the divine. In this story, Christ's presence is revealed through the visible world before any other means, although the characters do not penetrate the surface of reality to grasp this truth. Early on, the old woman keenly points out scenery visible from her car window — in the words of the narrator: "blue granite" outcrops, "red clay banks slightly streaked with purple", intricate "green lace-work on the ground" (*Stories*: 119) — but no one else pays any attention. In her line of vision, says the narrator: "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled" (119). The sacramental status of the trees is connoted by their emanation of light and vitality. As Romans 2: 20 reads: "[God's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made". Even the worst-looking arboreal specimen captures the light and reflects its Creator. Analogously, even the "meanest" person, in spite of the scarring of sin, is a divine image-bearer. The self-satisfying, prattling grandmother, who at least appreciates the natural world, cannot yet identify such spiritual truths — in an instant, she switches from admiring the landscape to making an inane and condescending comment about "a cute little pickaninny" (119). However, in moments before death, she sees in the Misfit what she has failed to see all along: her broken spiritual state before God. And, unexpectedly, The Misfit will to his horror recognise the divine imprint in the mean old woman: the presence of God, which he believes, is nowhere to be found.

Because the grandmother fails to draw close to God sacramentally, she will have to suffer the absence of His presence and ultimately confront Him the negative way. Travelling to Florida, she remains caught up in her fussy, vain world of reminiscing about the past and plotting to get her own way on the vacation. It is not coincidental that along the way she sees "five or six graves" (*Stories*: 119) and she passes through "Toombsboro" (123). Following the grandmother's misleading guidance, the bickering family takes a detour into a remote part of Georgia and, as a result of her hidden Siamese cat suddenly emerging, her son, Bailey, rolls the car into a ditch. Above them, the woods loom "tall and dark and deep" (125). Far from sparkling and resplendent, the trees next to the road

bear down on them. The environment takes on a sinister tone, reflecting a shift in mode: the comic start to the journey turns eerily tragic. Now that the old woman's outward journey is over, her inward journey begins.

The grandmother's own manipulative words, directed earlier at Bailey, come back to taunt her: "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like [The Misfit] a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did." (117). The awful truth is that through her own dark wilfulness, she has brought her progeny right into the territory of the murderer and has no moral ground to stand on. A "big black battered hearse-like" automobile appears bearing The Misfit and his two armed henchmen (126); the shocked family find themselves in an environment that reflects and reinforces the stranglehold of evil. "Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth" — the trees appear monstrous and devouring. The grotesque surroundings instil, in Wolfgang Kayser's terms, a "fear of life" (1973: 185). And as the Misfit himself notes: "Ain't a cloud in the sky... don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither" (*Stories*: 127). The sky, the only place they can look for succour, is bland and opaque suggesting the distance of God. "It is a terrible thing when God keeps silence", says Karl Barth, "and by keeping silence speaks" (1963: 136). Only in silence and darkness — in the apparent absence of the divine — can the grandmother, for one, come to an awareness of her badness. Yet, the absence could also be connoted as the presence of judgement.

The old woman at first cannot identify the notorious criminal. She senses that "she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was" (*Stories*: 126). Then on recognising his face as being that of The Misfit, she insists: "I know you must come from nice people!" (127). However, it is only on the verge of death and hysteria, having heard each family member being shot, and having had The Misfit negate all her assertions as to his goodness, that her 'metaphysical memory' surfaces and she is able to recognise her deep kinship with him in sin. *In extremis*, her head "clear[s] for an instant" and she murmurs: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (132). Earlier she had tried to flatter him with the label "a good man", but now she is forced to name him truthfully (Archer 1986: 19). When the grandmother witnesses the Misfit's contorted face close to her own, she sees an image of her degenerate self. In the negative

space it opens, she recognises that Christ is everything she is not. As the old woman names the man, she identifies herself as “the Grand Mother of offspring temporarily claimed by the devil” (Archer 1987: 103). The truth she utters in the instants before being shot, and her silence in death, mean more than a lifetime of words. Grace comes through her identification with evil as she realises: “No one is good but One, that is, God” (Matthew 19: 17).

On hearing the grandmother’s words (“You’re one of my own children!”) and feeling her touch on his shoulder, The Misfit reacts by shooting her three times in her chest, in the core of her person. In ending her life, he effectively does away with the sin which obscures the divine image.<sup>22</sup> She falls to the ground with “her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (*Stories*: 132). Yet, in shooting her, The Misfit testifies to the effect that her straight-seeing and accurate naming has on him. The grandmother’s hand on his body and her words of affirmation, parental in sentiment, are too much for him to accept. In that moment he experiences the shocking touch of one indwelt by God, a *povorello*, however grotesque she may be. He senses and rejects the presence of the Trinity somehow sacramentalised in her ageing body: her gesture connects heaven and earth, the past, present and future. In that God becomes a felt presence before him, the Misfit’s existential philosophy of life is struck an exterminating blow. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he had reasoned, then all you can do is “enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing someone or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him” (*Stories*: 132). In assuming the authority to kill, The Misfit had lain claim “to nothing short of total freedom and the unlimited display of human pride” (Camus 1956: 282). As William Pfaff explains: “To kill and not be killed is — emotionally, not logically — evidence of worth and intimation of immortality” (Pfaff 1989: 107).<sup>23</sup>

The apocalyptic interval of the grandmother’s utterance clearly affects The Misfit. In a gesture not unlike Pontius Pilate’s washing of hands, he removes his spectacles and cleans them; his eyes are “red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking” (*Stories*: 132). The grandmother’s Christic touch effectively detaches the lenses that provide his self-justified means to see. Looking now at her ruptured corpse, he sees more than an old

woman; he recognises his culpability in the death of Christ. The perverse enjoyment of killing loses its substance and he barks in outrage: “It’s no real pleasure in life” (133). O’Connor’s contention, which has been so vehemently disputed, is that the anagogical gesture will “grow to be a great crow-filled tree in [his] heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become” (*Prose*: 113).<sup>24</sup> The lack of textual evidence has provoked Ben Satterfield, for example, to accuse O’Connor of being a “propagandist, not an artist” (1989: 44). However, in O’Connor’s understanding, conversion is a process, often a long, slow violent one — a process she did not dramatise from beginning to end in her short stories. In her view, *The Misfit* experiences the Real Presence as a communicant might choke on consecrated bread and wine. She deemed this encounter to have an enduring, convicting effect. Later, however, she seemed to recognise that she would have to render the experience more fully, or even revert to narrative indication, to make the internal change more obvious.

In ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’, one could say that two different means of anthropotropic pursuit are pictured. First, the grotesque absence of the divine causes the grandmother to see her own abysmal sinfulness and thereby Christ’s blamelessness. Second, the anagogical presence of God in the woman causes the destruction of *The Misfit*’s ideological stronghold and leaves him spiritually naked to make a decision for eternity. The most frightening notion conveyed is that of destroying a life in order to redeem it — such is the potent logic of the grotesque. The antithetical terms of the title story, projected in the child-like smile of the dead woman and the snarl of the living murderer, foreshadow that in the collection as a whole both acceptance and rejection of God occur .

### **Moving in, Moving on: ‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own’**

The one-armed wanderer, introducing himself rather unreliably as Tom T. Shiftlet from Tarwater, Tennessee, is a peculiar mix of the free-ranging “American Adam” and a diabolically driven deceiver. The carefree male hero, like the devil of whom St. Peter speaks, roams free seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5: 8). Mr Shiftlet says to Mrs

Crater, skirting round the issue of his identity and waxing philosophical: "Maybe the best I can tell you... is, I'm a man" (*Stories*: 148). By "man" he, no doubt, means "male" and not simply human and fallen. He lives to move on, never to be pinned down by a woman or by God, by guilt or the past. Masquerading as a pseudo-saviour, Mr Shiftlet succeeds in his deception and thereby acquires the ultimate male American means to 'freedom': an automobile.<sup>25</sup> Mr Shiftlet, in effect, holds to the heretical doctrine that Hazel Motes formulates in his early days of preaching the anti-gospel: "No one with a good car needs to be justified" (*Wise*: 107). This devious wanderer can be banded together with the other 'bad men' of the collection, The Misfit and Manley Pointer, yet he does not gain their ironic prophet status, that is, he does not inadvertently and unwillingly direct others to Christ by grotesque means. Indeed, Tom Shiftlet remains somewhat of an anomaly in O'Connor's stories in that, as a devilish figure, he fails to accomplish "ends other than his own" (*Letters*: 367). In this story, Mr Shiftlet the intruding male is, in fact, the one pursued. In ultimately failing to surrender, he is driven to eternal restlessness: a fitting punishment for one obsessed with motion.

'The Life You Save May Be Your Own' has been thought to boast a physical and human landscape more desolate than most of O'Connor's other well-known stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Considered to reflect *Wise Blood* in some measure, it has been called "a theological cartoon... little more than a caricature" (Gentry 1986: 113). Another critic argues along similar lines that it presents "a tableau of grotesque forms acting out the modern psychomania of the wasteland" (Clasby 1991: 518). However, I would note that the potential for anagogy is not missing in the story: the natural world is imbued with divine presence, as is the scapegoat figure of Mrs Crater's thirty-year old retarded daughter, Lucynell. Mr Shiftlet, however, completely misreads the sunsets and rain-laden skies and sacrilegiously betrays Lucynell who is, not insignificantly, identified as "an angel of Gawd" (*Stories*: 154) by the boy at the Hot Spot diner where her new-found husband leaves her sleeping. As a result, the movement-driven man receives no anagogical vision and is propelled further into the dejection of the grotesque.

Tom Shiftlet first arrives on Mrs Crater's land in the guise of a deformed Christ, his cut-off arm betraying a hidden fact of his past. In ambling up to the farm house, he



are “grotesque” and “dangerous” (*Library: 77*).<sup>27</sup> The innocent one reveals and challenges the ordinary person’s wilful proclivity to sin and bears constant witness to the divine. According to St. Augustine, nature deviates from the norm because humanity needs to be reminded of God’s sovereignty and involvement in human lives (Friedman 1981: 3). An individual like Lucynell thus becomes, in Eliade’s terms, a natural “bearer of mystery” (*Library: 77*): she is indwelt by the divine and implies a system of values contrary to the world (“the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” [1 Corinthians 3:19]). “God is as present in the idiot [child], as in the genius”, O’Connor affirmed (*Letters: 99*).

To Tom Shiftlet’s detriment, his last reference to his idiot bride is as a “hitchhiker” (154). He abandons her at the Hot Spot diner and makes his way West like so many other lone American heroes, but he becomes “more depressed than ever” (155). Like The Misfit, he acutely feels the pleasurelessness of life or dejection: the spiritual disposition which patristic theology once considered “a root sin” (Giannone 1989: 51). Contrary to the popular understanding of dejection as the result of alienation, O’Connor shows it to be the cause thereof (1989: 51). In trying to deflect, rather than confront, his moroseness, Shiftlet offers a lift to a sullen runaway boy on the side of the road. The man eulogises his own abandoned mother in an attempt to shift his depressive guilt. The boy, realising that Shiftlet’s display of sentiment only camouflages culpability, flings himself out of the car and verbally shatters the illusion of human goodness: “My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!” (*Stories: 156*).

The boy’s invective: “Go to the devil!” is apparently played out in the closing scene. An ugly “turnip”-shaped cloud, the exact colour of the boy’s hat, descends over the “reddening ball” (155) of the sun and an even uglier cloud lurks behind the car (156). The powers of the atmosphere, in sympathy with Lucynell and the young hitchhiker, build to a crescendo, soon to break loose in judgement. Shiftlet feels as though the “the rottenness of the world” is about to overwhelm him, so he invokes God to “wash the slime from this earth!” (156). In response to his despicable cry, a “guffawing peal of thunder” sounds and “fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops” (156) crash onto his stolen car. Though he has escaped the burdensome Lucynell, he cannot flee from the grotesquery of his engulfing sin or the judgement above. In fact, God’s wrath is manifested in a comic-

grotesque way reminiscent of Psalm 2: “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh... And distress them in his deep displeasure”. Because Tom Shiftlet fails to make the sacrifice — to take up a life with Lucynell — he loses the opportunity for anagogical communion, for meaningful access to the divine. To try and avoid the wrathful downpour, he steps on the gas. But he is, after all, headed for “Mobile”; he does not halt his selfish state of flux for anyone. Overseen by an assiduous Follower, he would seem to cry: “what path untrod/ Shall I seek out to ’scape the flaming rod/ Of my offended, of my angry God?”.<sup>28</sup>

### **Desecrating the Sacrifice: ‘Good Country People’**

Nineteen-year old Manley Pointer is the most treacherously successful con man in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Feigning stupidity, he stumbles into the Hopewell’s parlour to peddle his Bibles and pronounces Mrs Hopewell to be “a good woman” — “friends” have told him so (*Stories*: 278). If there is anyone less likely to dupe the woman’s irascible daughter, Hulga, a formidable student of Heidegger and Malebranche, it is this laughable teenage salesman. Yet, Manley Pointer, the suggestively named male intruder, effectively plays the part of the devil who brings Hulga to a point of ontological crisis. He demolishes her positive bastions of selfhood and grotesquely subverts her trust in his naïveté. In showing her the realities of true evil, he negatively points to the existence of God. Once devastated, Hulga gains a measure of anagogical vision which deepens the experience of her fall from knowledge and offers hazy glimpses into the realm of the spirit.

Wickedly entangling serious religious themes and elements of raucous comic inversion, ‘Good Country People’ is one of Flannery O’Connor’s funniest, yet most caustic, of stories. To Anthony Di Renzo, who emphasises its comic character, the story resembles a bawdy medieval fabliau that uses degradation to holy ends (1993: 73). To Richard Giannone, who stresses the story’s focus on *disgrace*, ‘Good Country People’ is O’Connor’s “fullest account of the sorrowful mystery of dejection” (1989: 68). O’Connor acknowledges both its carnivalesque and disturbing qualities; she calls it “a low joke” (*Prose*: 98). It is particularly low because the author does not deny a comic affinity with

Hulga Hopewell, the slouching, sarcastic, fiercely independent, wooden-legged intellectual (*Letters*: 106). Here O'Connor "cartoons with cruelty" (Updike 1983: 291), not least of all targeting herself. Josephine Hendin perceptively suggests that story writing may have been "the only, and perhaps unconscious way, that she could express all the contradictions within her" (1976: 17). Similarly, Louise Westling, citing Eudora Welty on D. H. Lawrence, intimates that O'Connor stood in need of writing "in exorcisement" (1985: 173).<sup>29</sup> Although aspects of herself may have found their way into Hulga, Flannery O'Connor asserted the necessity of writing about characters more "primitive" than real people so that she could "dominate the existence" that she characterised (*Letters*: 106). She cautioned against the voyeuristic tendency in criticism, which attempts to discover the author through the medium of the character (*Letters*: 158).<sup>30</sup>

In 'Good Country People', the hayloft is the central arena of ludicrous horseplay and intense spiritual climax. Here O'Connor burlesques seduction and courtship conventions to dramatise the metaphoric stripping of Hulga's substantiated self. Even after the first few sticky kisses from Manley, Hulga is cool and calculating, true to her Malebranchian loyalties, not surrendering her mind "for a second to her feelings" (*Stories*: 287). Foremost in her mind is her plan to re-educate the gullible country fellow in the ways of nihilistic truth. She had dreamt the night before that after seducing him, she would take "all his shame away" and turn it into "something useful" (284). A god-like confidence in her power to transform a person only serves to reveal that at the core of her being is *belief*, not a fundamental nothingness. In between kisses, she announces to Manley: "We are all damned... but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see" (288). (She has espoused the Heideggerian hypothesis that there is no fixity or substance to reality; hence she castigates science's intention "to know nothing of nothing" [277].<sup>31</sup>) Her hubristic statement is especially ironic considering that Manley has, without her noticing, removed her spectacles: her aids to clear physical vision. Now that her sight is impaired, she becomes more able to see anagogically, if "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13: 12), what she has not acknowledged before: the natural surrounds, the world of things and, in the end, ironically the outline of Christ.

Hulga Hopewell can, however, only come to recognise the vast extent of her empty deception when she is stripped of the entity she has proudly come to equate with a “soul” (288) — the wooden leg she acquired after a shooting accident at the age of ten. Because she imputes to it an ontic value it would not ordinarily have, the appendage has, in effect, become *disincarnated* (Desmond 1987: 44). Moreover, it has become fetishised signalling a kind of protection against self-knowledge (Burke 1993-4: 45).<sup>32</sup> In an analogous way, her self-appointed name “Hulga” also serves to protect a less verbal, secret self. “She [once] had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweaty Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act” (*Stories*: 275). Her name, like the leg, represents a hefty, masculine persona concealing, yet submitting to, a secret feminine figure: the fantasy “goddess” of love, Venus (Asals 1982: 103). Hulga’s unadmitted, unconscious desire is that her unique, erotic self be recognised. This is exactly what Manley appears to do in his simple, sly observation: “You ain’t like anyone else” (288).

Hulga is completely taken off guard by her plaintive lover’s request to see the jointure where wood meets flesh, but she surrenders because she considers that for the first time she is “face to face with real innocence” (289). In handing over her wooden leg to Manley, she loses her self-substantiation, but does not miraculously find it again in him. Manley, the eager “Chrastian” proceeds to desecrate her sacrifice. Joy, her name given at birth, cannot now come to the fore. He stashes away her leg in his valise and, in a perverse, pseudo-epiphanal act of worship, takes out of his hollow Bible, prophylactics, liquor and pornographic cards. He lays them out before her “like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess” (289). The grotesque consummation of the seduction is the complete letdown that leads to the implosion of all Hulga’s mental constructs. Her awakening is more a hellish moment of truth than of grace, Anthony Di Renzo observes (1993: 79). As she peers into the hollowness of Manley’s Bible, realising that none of his words hold true, she recognises the falsity of her own proclaimed faith that nothingness is at the centre of existence. Despite herself, she had assumed that his utterances matched his thoughts. “Aren’t you... aren’t you just good country people?” (290), Hulga murmured, unconsciously echoing her do-gooding mother. He replies, delivering the last

blow to her intellectual scaffolding, “I hope you don’t think... I believe in that crap” (290), “I’ve been believing in nothing since I was born!” (291).

A comic let-down is even more enervating to the human make-up than tragedy, William Lynch claims, because it turns “the telescope [of tragedy] around so that the eye looks through the greater end, and everything has become, not a sea incarnadine, but a disconcertingly small puddle” (1960: 101).<sup>33</sup> An uneducated fraud shows up the ridiculous, yet awful, extent of a belief in Nothing. Manley’s utter *lack* of integrity and rootedness (he continually moves on and changes his name) is the means by which Hulga is exposed terrifyingly to her own absurd, free-floating intellectual and spiritual state. Through the ‘negative way’, she is broken down to a place of helplessness. As Hulga is not able to laugh at herself, the more it becomes inevitable that others laugh at her.<sup>34</sup> Manley departs in haste, leaving behind a purple-faced Hulga. She moves her “churning” countenance towards the outside and through her squinted eyes sees Manley’s “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake” (*Stories*: 291). The phoney Bible salesman assumes the appearance of Christ moving over water. In his terrible and uproarious deficiency, Manley Pointer directs Hulga’s attention to the *antithesis* of everything he is: the real Christ. The pseudo-miracle garishly and grotesquely communicates the reality of what lies beyond. For the once-vehement nihilist, such a miracle would be “the greatest embarrassment”, nothing less than a “scandal” (*Letters*: 231).

Writing to her publisher, O’Connor claimed confidently that this story would “set the whole collection on its feet” (*Letters*: 75). There is nothing quite like its acerbic humour and bizarre marriage of opposites to grab the imagination. Yet, it cannot easily be denied that the story disconcertingly provides the most lashing example of a woman shamed and a ruthless male left unpunished. The story strongly combines use of the grotesque and anagogical: the shaming, negating movement of the grotesque essentially ushers in anagogical vision of an ironic Christ. Through inversion, Hulga Hopewell comes to recognise the possibility of what is. This story again alerts attention to the prevailing question of *goodness* and pushes the notion to an extreme — goodness, issuing

from God, is only to be found in the very depth of existence, beyond all human definitions and, indeed, beyond all human negations.

### **Assailing the Imbalance: 'The Displaced Person'**

It is not insignificant that Flannery O'Connor's longest and final story in the collection, 'The Displaced Person', provides an unexpected, strong level of resonance in relation to her first piece 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'. Framing the collection, these two stories present outcast figures who allude to contrary aspects of Christ's action in the world. In William Bonney's terms, The Misfit and the Displaced Person "tangentially connote the behavioural extremes of the mythic Jesus, who came to bring a sword and to redeem through his death" (1990: 347). In killing the six holiday makers, The Misfit *grotesquely* pictures the aggression of Christ as He targets people for salvation. In being killed, the Displaced Person *anagogically* shows the blood-letting sacrifice that the Son of God made. Both outcasts, one steeped in meanness, the other largely fuelled by self-determination, rupture the warp and woof of the established lives they encounter.

Neither The Misfit nor the Displaced Person can, of course, be taken strictly as types of Christ. It is particularly tempting to conceive of the latter, the Polish War refugee, in these terms as he most closely lives out the role of the sacrificial victim in the collection. However, throughout her writing career, O'Connor remained suspicious of simple analogues and veered away from creating any representative form betraying a conventional, "treacly" rendering of Christ or a saintly figure. Implying her avoidance of obviously allegorical figures, O'Connor remarked to Cecil Dawkins: "I have never found a writer who could make Christ talk" (*Letters*: 369). To Denver Lindley, she also confessed: "I know nothing harder than making good people believable" (*Letters*: 129). 'The Displaced Person' is O'Connor's attempt at bringing to life a man who shares features of the Suffering Servant, but who remains distinct as a peculiar, partly humorous character — he brandishes "a broad toothless grin on one side" (197) and bobs "down from the waist" to kiss Mrs McIntyre's hand (*Stories*: 195). In the spirit of Robert Fitzgerald's 1962 article, Stanley Hyman (1966), Jill Baumgaertner (1988) and Anthony

Di Renzo (1993), among others, consider 'The Displaced Person' to be one of her most outstanding pieces. Carol Shloss, however, questions the story's success, in particular its ability to invoke analogical and anagogical connections to the Crucifixion. "At most", Shloss argues, "the analogy places the experience charted on Mrs Intyre's farm in the context of an archetypal situation of human intolerance" (1980: 78-9). It seems that after publication O'Connor herself suspected its "understatement" and limited ability to convey "a kind of redemption" (*Letters*: 118). It was arguably her initial motivation to create a story somewhat more open to interpretation than most previously written. Portraying an oblique picture of the Crucifixion at the close of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* could be seen to counterpoise the stark opening depiction of a Christ-haunted serial killing.

The tripartite structure of 'The Displaced Person' marks the three broad stages of Mr Guizac's sojourn on the dairy farm: his momentous arrival, his resented settlement and his calamitous departure. The successive sections also trace the shifts in the farm owner's attitude towards the Pole: from Mrs McIntyre's initial delight at his proficiency, to her self-pitiful anger at his validation of miscegenation, to her bewildering fear of manipulation at his hands. Largely owing to his foreignness, Mr Guizac is viewed as a threat before he even reaches the dairy farm accompanied by his sponsor, the old Catholic priest. Mrs McIntyre's farm help and incongruous companion, Mrs Shortley, can only imagine the Nazi-stricken refugee and his family as sub-human, as "bears" with "wooden shoes on like Dutchmen and sailor hats and bright coats with lots of buttons" (*Stories*: 195). What strikes her on first seeing them is that they actually look "like other people" (195). Mrs Shortley, however, gives in to her overactive, jealousy-fuelled imagination and dreads that "like rats with typhoid fleas", the Guizacs, foreign and Catholic, "could have carried all their murderous ways over the water" (196).

In this story, *foreignness* to a strong degree determines what is considered grotesque — that is, until the protagonists are finally forced to confront the grotesqueness of their own sin and to recognise the anagogical importance of the 'foreigner'. Indeed, biblical injunctions to extend kindness to the "alien" or "foreigner" are many.<sup>35</sup> The afflicted refugee and the lone exotic peacock, both out of context in the American South, ultimately point to the supreme Displaced Person, Christ. That the term 'foreigner' is

often considered synonymous with 'stranger' is illustrated by the French word '*l'étranger*' which means both of the above.<sup>36</sup> The reality of xenophobia, racism and religious bias in the American South of the 1950s heightens the context of Mr Guizac's rejection.

O'Connor reflects wryly that the region is "traditionally hostile to outsiders, except on her own terms" (*Prose*: 200). She advocated that "good Georgia advice" runs in this vein:

"don't marry no foreigner. Even if his face is white, his heart is black" (*Letters*: 209).

Southern xenophobic attitudes were often so extreme that they can be likened to medieval perceptions of foreign peoples as monstrous and bestial (Friedman 1981). Mrs Shortley's paranoia about Mr Guizac's corrupting influence ominously anticipates Mrs McIntyre's later accusation that "he's upset the balance around here" (*Stories*: 231). The farm owner's words, of course, recall The Misfit's remonstrance that Jesus has "thown everything off balance [*sic*]" (131). By the end of the collection, the destruction of stability comes to be associated with the ultimate stranger, Jesus.

In O'Connor's mind, Mrs McIntyre's iron-handed, manipulative way of running her establishment amounts to a reign of evil (*Letters*: 118). The role of the Displaced Person, therefore, becomes that of a prophet sent to assail the imbalance of power.

O'Connor's interest in the prophetic function is clear from her innovative explorations of the role in *Wise Blood* and particularly *The Violent Bear It Away* and from her in-depth reading in the area.<sup>37</sup> In this 1954 story, however, Mr Guizac is insentient of his appointment, let alone prophetically incensed with overturning the *status quo*. If The Misfit, influenced by the devil, is an "unwilling instrument" of God (*Prose*: 118), then the Displaced Person is largely an unwitting agent of divine justice. The prophet's purpose, according to Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* (1978), is to attack the "royal consciousness" of an oppressive organisation. Of the three aspects of this royal consciousness to be overthrown, the first is a "religion of immanence": the belief that God stands above a culture rather than judges it. The second is an "economics of affluence": the assumption that prosperity signals God's favour. The third is the "politics of oppression": the assurance that prosperity stems from God, not the subjection of the poor (Martin 1994-5: 140). In identifying with the black farm workers, the Displaced Person confronts the numbness of those oppressed, and in ultimately destroying the system, he

brings an end to the royal consciousness of Mrs McIntyre, the official proponent, and of Mrs Shortley, the unofficial overseer. His prophetic gift is that of *seeing* (*Letters*: 367): “Black and white... is the same” (*Stories*: 215).

In Part I, Mrs Shortley laboriously makes her way to a hilltop from where she can view the Guizacs. Her look “graze[s]” the tops of their heads, revolves in the air like a “buzzard” and alights on them as if on a “carcass” (197). From a height of disdain, Mrs Shortley angrily watches the Polish refugees flourish in their new environment in the ensuing weeks; during this time she receives “inner” visions of ghastly sundered bodies and fiery Apocalyptic beasts. The culmination of her most startling vision and accompanying prophecy is a literalisation of what she seethingly dreads, a barbaric physical undoing: “The children of wicked nations will be butchered... Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?” (210). Yet, it is not the European refugees who inflict death but a severe apoplexy as she and her family leave the farm early one morning before they can be dismissed. “[F]ierce heat” begins to swell in Mrs Shortley’s face as a “dark yellow sun” starts to rise in “a sky that was the same slick dark gray as the highway” (213). The enormous woman flails around violently grabbing onto limbs “as if she were trying to fit [them] onto herself” (213). She then grew suddenly still and “her eyes seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country” (213-4). The grotesque, pieced-together, body of Mrs Shortley, not severed from the “material roots of the world” (Bahktin 1968: 19), suggests an excruciating but liberating end to a life of false identification with Mrs McIntyre’s hegemony. Entanglement with the body parts of her family and with a miscellany of other objects in the confined space of a car symbolises a painful identification with the “ten million billion” (199) dead and displaced people of Europe, the oppressed blacks, the disadvantaged Guizacs. The sacramental experience of joining the universal body of redemptive suffering anagogically transports her to the “frontiers” of new life. Even in the grey slickness of her sinful life, the sun can rise because she has come apart and united with the afflicted, not least of all with Christ.

At the end of Part II, Mrs McIntyre makes a similar journey to Mrs Shortley’s to a high point on the farm. From this ascendant position, she assures herself that she can

overcome the Guizacs, just as she has handled other troublesome workers on her farm. The imperial implications of her ascent signal a warning. Indeed, after declaring: “This is my place”, her heart beats furiously as if some “interior violence had already been done to her” (224). In her polemic on the mound, Mrs McIntyre reveals her trust in wealth as providential provision (the religion of immanence) and personal security (the economics of affluence). She cannot appreciate the man’s previous wartime suffering nor the hardship he endures on her farm (the politics of oppression). Mrs Shortley’s violent death and last prophecy (“Who will remain whole?”) augur Mrs McIntyre’s own undoing. Though bloody-minded and wilful, Mrs Shortley receives insight, which parodically illustrates the Thomistic belief that “not the best people... have the best dreams” (White 1953: 127). The prophetic gift — of seeing far things close up — is given not earned.

Part III of the story uncovers just how closed Mrs McIntyre is to the spiritual realm. After a month of agonising about how to rid herself of the Guizacs, she receives another visit from the old priest, Father Flynn. Solidifying herself against any feelings of tenderness, she informs him of her plans to evict the Poles. In a scene where place, time and eternity meet, in the sudden splendid display of the peacock, she receives the opportunity to recognise that Mr Guizac’s coming is providential, as is Christ’s coming to earth. Witnessing the “[t]iers of small pregnant suns” and “shimmering, timbrous noise” (226) of the peacock’s tail, the priest gasps at an anagogical picture of the Transfiguration — the event at which Christ’s identity as God’s Son is revealed (Matthew 17: 1-8). Seeing the peacock lower his tail and pick at grass, and hearing Mrs McIntyre remonstrate about Mr Guizac, the priest utters: “He came to redeem us” (226). The hardened farm owner misses the significance of his words which bivalently refer to the stricken refugee and the Messiah without “form or comeliness” (Isaiah 53: 2). If the afflicted man symbolises “the historical Christ”, as Gilbert Muller suggests, then the resplendent peacock pictures “Christ transcendent and divine” (1972: 110). Like Mrs Shortley and many of O’Connor’s protagonists, Mrs McIntyre remains oblivious to the truth expressed in the things closest to her. Teaching “the mysteries which are the proper nourishment of the spirit”, according to a Hebraic understanding, are “daily things, communal realities, history”.<sup>38</sup> Because both Mrs Shortley and Mrs McIntyre ignore the transcendently

connected sun and peacock — the bird has “a tail full of suns” (*Stories*: 198) — and repudiate Mr Guizac, they suffer an undoing. Anagogical signals abound in their world, but in determinedly overlooking them, they choose the way of negation.

In the final scene of ‘The Displaced Person’, Mrs McIntyre watches the large tractor slide, at the instigation of Mr Shortley, drive straight over the man lying on the icy ground. The Negro, Sulk, “jumps silently out the way” and Mrs McIntyre starts to shout but “[does] not” (234). Their eyes unite in a look that freezes them “in collusion forever” (234). Mr Guizac does not remain whole, yet neither does Mrs McIntyre. The “little noise” (234) that the man makes as the tractor wheel breaks his backbone plagues her the rest of her days. Mrs Shortley’s violent death forces her into throbbing connection with the greater expanse of humankind, but Mrs McIntyre’s complicity in Mr Guizac’s death propels her into a place of abysmal alienation. After coming to, she watches the Pole receive the last rites, feeling as though she is in “some foreign country” (235). When the ambulance takes away his bloody corpse, she observes “like a stranger” (235). The anagogical effect of being implicated in his death is that she is transported not to the “true country” of heaven, but to a living purgatory. Mrs McIntyre experiences in her body something of the oppression she inflicts on her workers and the sense of alienation that foreigners like the Guizacs experience. Her body becomes a tormented enclave of psychic and spiritual forces: an “estranged” isolated self (Kayser 1963: 185). She is put to bed and ultimately forced to auction off her cows at a loss. Her hands and head begin to “jiggle” and a “numbness” develops in one of her legs; her eyesight fails and her voice goes (*Stories*: 235). In her state of dreadful deprivation, she can only now listen to the instruction of Father Flynn, her sole visitor, and to the last resident peacock, whose piercing cry conveys a bond with the transcendent.<sup>39</sup> In her purgatory there is the “possibility for interior development” (*Reviews*: 76) — a long, slow painful suffering which cleanses and leads to redemption — but little intimation is given as to what will happen. The only signal of hope that she will become a good woman is the peacock’s cry, “Eee-ooo-ii!”, once described by O’Connor as “a cheer for an invisible parade” (*Prose*: 15).

## Defying the Order: 'A Circle in the Fire'

Within the ambit of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 'A Circle in the Fire' can be viewed as a bridging story between the 'adult violation' and the 'child encounter' fictions. Like a good number of O'Connor's women, Mrs Cope's territory and personhood are invaded; in this case, by rough, thirteen-year-old boys. Indeed, much of the narrative space is given over to the proprietor's concerns about her farm, paranoia about disaster, and ineffectual attempts to evict the intruders. It is, however, through her clear-eyed, impetuous daughter, Sally Virginia, that we gain perspective on the situation. To the young, unadulterated Cope, the painful imprints of grace first come. Then from the girl's startled, renewed perspective, we witness the anagogical searing of the almost tyrannical Mrs Cope.

This story is one of the four most important fictions situated at the collection's centre where the anagogical and grotesque powerfully integrate and where conversion is more obviously achieved than elsewhere in the volume. In various unexpected and scandalous ways, 'A Circle in the Fire', 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', 'The Artificial Nigger' and 'The River' reveal the insistent penetration of God into otherwise predictable existence. The greater degree of human-divine union effected in these stories is apparently attributable to a greater recognition on the part of the characters that grotesque personae, objects and actions are prophetic or sacramental, a recognition reinforced by the anagogical resonance of the existing world. Pain is not absent in the child-protagonist stories, but expiatory action leads to contrition or surrender. One might say that the greater emphasis on incarnational movement in these child-protagonist stories provides some balance to the ascetic impetus, which invariably precedes it. It is significant, of course, that children are the targets of divine pursuit. However, in two cases, 'A Circle in the Fire' and 'The Artificial Nigger', parental figures are also deeply affected by the anthropotropic pressure to acknowledge their sinfulness and ultimately to participate in the divine. Christ's assertion that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Mark 10: 15) seems to tacitly inform this quartet of tales.

Sally Virginia, the twelve-year-old into whose consciousness the reader partially has access, is a defiant, sharp-witted tomboy. Like the unnamed girl in 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' she is just *pre*-adolescent — apparently a noteworthy factor in Flannery O'Connor's world. In 1956, the author herself reflected that at age twelve, there was "something about 'teen'" that was "repulsive" to her (*Letters*: 137). O'Connor presumably refers to the bewildering awkwardness that can characterise sexual awakening. However, she probably also alludes to the waning of spiritual interest that evidently results from the encroaching influence of adult scepticism. In O'Connor's schema, early adolescence marks the pivotal stage when individuals start becoming prone to the effects of secularist thought. O'Connor's children might be designated as being under fourteen which in many cultures is the canonical age of initiation.<sup>40</sup> In Catholic thought, "the age of reason", to which O'Connor refers a number of times, is seven. On reaching this age, individuals are deemed capable of making reasoned choices and therefore become accountable for their sins.<sup>41</sup>

One might say that because children are generally more trustful, or fearful, of supernatural reality, they penetrate the literal and recognise the anagogical more readily than otherwise conditioned adults. For example, when Sally Virginia looks at the view, she does not simply behold a silhouette of trees, but a "blank sky... pushing against the fortress wall" (176). She sees evidence of a cosmic force that threatens her mother's egotistically fortified establishment. Her mother only ever remarks on the sky being "gorgeous" (176). Flannery O'Connor demonstrates a sense in which children are closer to transcendent reality, yet she does not subscribe to a Blakean conception of children as untainted, as having a "radiance all of their own".<sup>42</sup> Even infants, in her Catholic understanding, are in need of baptism to annul the effects of original sin. In a qualified sense, she reflects the Wordsworthian conception of the boy being father to the man: the child is intuitively wiser and freer than the socially conditioned adult.<sup>43</sup> O'Connor's work, at a basic level, evinces the Jungian notion of the child archetype as a "source of instant reverence" who appears to prevent the "unbasing" or unmooring of the individual from a vestigial spiritual understanding (Blasingham 1987: 103). Howard R. Burkle acknowledges that O'Connor's child protagonists are "sensitive to God in ways that adults

are not” and points out that they are “strange” and “markedly laconic” as if preoccupied with the unseen, deeper matters of life (1989: 63-5). Although O’Connor’s children have access to natural wisdom, yet they still succumb to temptation and sin. It is as difficult to identify a conventionally “good” child as it is to find a “good man” in the collection. From a theological perspective, O’Connor remains cynical of children termed “cherubic” or “saintly” and, from an authorial standpoint, avoids including this uninteresting, if imaginary, species in her fiction (*Prose*: 222). Mrs Pritchard’s suspicion that “a boy thirteen year old is equal in meanness to a man twict his age” (*Stories*: 186) is apparently borne out in ‘A Circle in the Fire’.

A literary friend of O’Connor’s, Ben Griffith, was apparently the first to mention that there exists in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* a “strong kind of sex potential” that contributes to the tension adumbrating the ultimate spiritual intrusion (*Letters*: 118-9). His observation is particularly applicable to ‘A Life You Save May Be Your Own’, ‘Good Country People’ and for our immediate purposes, ‘A Circle in the Fire’, which Richard Giannone (1989: 85) considers a depiction of a double attack: one against the land (mythologically considered female), the other against the twelve-year-old herself. Sally Virginia is first alerted to the possibility of incursion through purveying the landscape. One day she notices that the “wall” of natural forest on the farm is “black”, not the usual gentler “gray-blue”, and that the normally bland sky is “a livid glaring white” (*Stories*: 175). That same day Powell Boyd and his friends, W. T. Harper and Garfield Smith, arrive uninvited from inner-city Atlanta. They affront prim Mrs Cope and coarse Mrs Pritchard, the tenant farmer, with “white, penetrating stares” (179). The *whiteness* of the sky’s glare and the boy’s stares indicates the same offensive impetus. In this story, the male intrusion is unexpectedly, grotesquely connected to the powers above. Watching the three teenage boys from her bedroom window, Sally Virginia grows “red-faced with excitement” (180). Over-protected by her mother, she does not often have contact with male counterparts. While sensing the spiritual and physical threat they bring, she nevertheless finds herself becoming sexually conscious. Later, trying to quash this interest and excoriate the femininity her mother tries to encourage, she appears from her window and pulls out her tongue at the boys “as if she were going to vomit” (185).

Ironically, Sally Virginia's exposure to their maleness in the end contributes to her spiritual awakening. As D. G. Kehl argues, sexual tension can be a register of "the *Sehnsucht*, or bittersweet longing for the transcendent" (1995: 261). Although cynical about heavy-handed application of Freudian psychology, O'Connor acknowledged: "Freud was a great one wasn't he for bringing home to people that they weren't what they thought they were" (*Letters*: 490-1).

The use of melodramatic dialogue and action in 'A Circle in the Fire' propels the narrative towards the inevitable apocalyptic climax. Mrs Cope displays the fearfulness that is typically accentuated in melodrama: not the ordinary anxieties of everyday existence, but "neurotic fantasies" and "the fear of God" (Bentley 1970: 201).<sup>44</sup> She is so uptight about all calamity coming "at once" that she has to "thank the Lord" all the time for what she has (*Stories*: 177). The countless references to fires, hurricanes, iron lungs, European box cars, guns, fighting, stealing and poisoning contribute to an inescapable sense of pending violence (Asals 1982: 135). By inferring what is to come, O'Connor's intends that the "element of suspense... will be transferred from its surface to its interior" (*Prose*: 108-9). She hopes her readers will recognise the deeper analogical significance of the fire and devastation, in addition to the literal tragedy.

On the first evening of the boys' unwelcome stay, the sunset takes on a dangerous fiery appearance. The sun is "swollen and flame-colored" and ominously hangs "in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods" (*Stories*: 184). By the third day, the season appears to be changing: the sun now rises as an eerie "pale gold" (190) and the wind picks up speed. Still buttressed against intrusion or change, the treeline is a "hard granite blue" against the white glare (190). The scene seems set for a confrontation between the intrusive and defensive forces, between the hardy denizens and the fleet-footed intruders. For Sally Virginia, the third day of the boys' anarchic stay is the day of reckoning. Exasperated by her mother's ineffectual, patronising way of handling the hooligans, she sets out in a makeshift sheriff's outfit to stalk the "enemy" (191). Crashing through the woods and muttering words of vengeance, she aggressively shoots the "bare-trunked" pines with her phallic toy pistols (191). But when she suddenly hears the raucous laughter of the three boys and catches sight of their

bare glistening bodies wildly circling the cow trough in the sunlight, she becomes “prickle-skinned” and silent (191). Leaning against a pine, she experiences the intrusion of their laughter and frenzied bodily display as strongly as she feels the pressure of the tree bark against her face. Overhearing Powell’s bloody reasoning, reminiscent of Milton’s Satan, (“If this place was not here anymore... you would never have to think of it again” [192]), Sally Virginia recognises the full potentiality of evil, the frailty of her own defensiveness, and the stirrings of latent libido. In being exposed to the boys’ naked state of abandonment and their openness to sinful whim, she awakens to inner desires for spiritual and sexual meaning, she is purged of her childhood innocence and acquires a more flagrant knowledge of good and evil, as if in post-lapsarian Eden. After leaning heavily against the tree which supports her view of the boys — both the forbidden tree of Eden and the propitiatory tree of Calvary — the bark leaves an “embossed white and red” (192) imprint on her cheek. The imprint is a sacramental sign of the Cross; in Giannone’s words, a mark of “confirmation” (1989: 86). Considered the “complement and completion” of baptism, confirmation is thought to leave “an indelible mark on the soul”.<sup>45</sup> It marks an entry into receiving and participating in Christ’s redemptive suffering as she moves on into early womanhood.

As Sally Virginia escapes the woods that the ecstatic destroyers set alight, she feels a “new unplaced misery”: a peculiar universal sorrow, which she soon comes to recognise in her mother. In Mrs Cope, the misery appears “old”, stretching back to almost the beginning of time, and it “might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself” (193). Her face, once neatly composed, now assumes something of the tangible agony experienced by the black American, the holocaust Jew, and the impoverished, inner-city boys. Mrs Cope can no longer thank God, in pharisaical fashion that she is not like the unfortunates. Her face undoes its completeness, it becomes grotesquely unfinished and open, embodying a personal death but encapsulating a new life within a community of suffering. Her countenance changes from being a “private egoistic form” to “something universal representing all the people” (Bakhtin 1968: 19). Mother and daughter see anagogically that “Christ takes on... all men’s flesh” (*Reviews*:

95). In Blakean terms, they come to recognise that “all must love the human form, / In heathen, turk, or jew; / Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too.”<sup>46</sup>

Now initiated into human anguish, Christ’s pain and bestowed grace, Sally Virginia turns back to see the “unchecked” fire ravaging the land inside the line of defensive trees. The flames literally level Mrs Cope’s self-defined territory as they bring judgement, purgation and purification.<sup>47</sup> As Sally Virginia listens hard, she hears faraway “shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them” (*Stories*: 193). Having faced the fire, she perceives the ruffians as “prophets”: counterparts of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who, in effect, overthrow a despotic kingdom, or transpose the “royal consciousness” in Walter Brueggeman’s terms, because they refuse to uphold the oppressive order. The young “prophets” are protected from the fire in a sacred circle symbolic of “the unbroken unity of the cosmos” (Harpham 1982: 8).

O’Connor’s invocation of the prophet motif from the book of Daniel has been criticised by John F. Desmond who claims it oversteps the “plausible bounds” of the story to show “the import of the action” (1987: 30). However, it seems to me that the cosmic affinity created between the teenage intruders and nature itself prepares the way for the boys’ identification as harbingers of godly judgement. “Gawd owns them woods and her [Mrs Cope] too” (*Stories*: 186), declares the smallest of the arsonist-prophets. Anthony Di Renzo points out that like Powell’s eyes, O’Connor’s treatment of the boys comes “from two directions at once” (1993: 125). They are both vandals and holy messengers. The “destroyer” emblem on Powell’s sweatshirt alludes to the demonic impetus, but the fact that the destroyer is “broken in the middle” (*Stories*: 179) suggests the boys’ ironic service to Christ, the One who broke the enemy’s power (Colossians 3: 15). O’Connor does not try to dissolve the paradox. She allows the devil to do his “groundwork” and the divine to use the despicable as a medium of grace.

## Not Disputing the Way It Is: 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost'

For a story that remained relatively unnoticed in the early years, Flannery O'Connor's 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' has attracted much attention in recent times. An early critical comment records an overtly moralistic view: a Catholic reader from Boston, presumably referring to the parallel drawn between the freak tent and mass, "couldn't understand how anybody could HAVE such thoughts" (*Letters*: 82). But it seems that not everyone takes offence, not even the most likely. In 1962, O'Connor pointed out that a few nuns have mentioned the story "with pleasure" (*Letters*: 487). It is revealing that individuals devoted to Catholic belief and service were able to appreciate the core image of the hermaphrodite: a grotesque Host whose influence is anagogical. They did not apparently take offence at the literal embodiment, but saw through to a higher truth. James W. Horton's position in essence supports the nuns' approval. He duly disparages the bias that assumes "religious interpretations must ultimately relegate the body to insignificance, and sexuality to the realm of the sinful or the purely procreative" (1994-5: 30). This story is surely one of O'Connor's most daring and artfully rendered, given that it intrepidly and dextrously deploys subject matter normally kept inside the carnival grounds to embody an esteemed doctrine and to represent union with God.

The story's protagonist is another twelve-year-old, specifically unnamed, who stands at the threshold of puberty and spiritual discovery. Not dissimilar in appearance to Sally Virginia, "the child" is fat-cheeked, plump and boasts a mouth of metal braces. She is one of O'Connor's uppity young women who kick out against the aspirations of their mothers and the norms of society. There is a sense in which O'Connor gives voice to some of her own forbidden anger at society through one such as "the child".<sup>48</sup> However, she does not typically leave her young female characters at their point of rage. In this story, O'Connor manoeuvres the child to an explosive new awareness of her self in the greater scheme of eternity. William Bonney observes that 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' stands alongside 'The Artificial Nigger' at the collection's structural centre to mark the depth of transformation that takes place in the central character (1990: 348). The twelve-year-old's relative openness to cogitating upon the spiritual truth of being 'a temple of the

Holy Ghost' allows her to experience three distinct, yet deeply interconnected, eucharistic phenomena sacramentally — the incarnational existence of the carnival hermaphrodite, the Host lifted high in the monstrance, and the Real Presence of the sun in the afternoon sky. On accepting the mystifying truth of the Incarnation, she undergoes a type of confirmation when a nun's crucifix unforeseeably presses against her face. This moment, one of spiritual change, is a short-lived discomfort in comparison to the bruising and beatings that the majority of O'Connor's women suffer. In rebelling against conformity to adult femininity, the child (not given a typical girl's name) appears to evade the extreme discipline deemed necessary for a "lady" to win the "genderless state of grace" (Prown 1995: 71).

The child's giggly fourteen-year-old cousins from the convent, Joanne and Susan, first raise the notion of being 'a temple of the Holy Ghost', as they parody Sister Perpetua's cautionary advice about what to say if approached suggestively by a young man. Their joke wrongly suggests that sex and holiness, body and spirit, are incompatible. The rest of the story is devoted to strongly redefining the parameters of God's true presence in the world. The weekend of the cousins' visit is for the child a season of encounter with body after body: the developing ones of Joanne and Susan, the monkey-like shapes of their chaperones, obese and ugly bodies of the taxi-driver and lodger's suitor, the hermaphroditic form of the freak she hears about. Neither enamoured with her own physical make-up nor with the bodies of others, the astute twelve-year-old places her faith in mental adeptness and bodiless spirituality. Paradoxically, only once she accepts her God-created body can she also accept her well-developed brain. In order to become a saint, her head does not need to be "cut off... very quickly" (*Stories*: 243) as she piously imagines.

When her cousins return from the fair that Saturday night and gossip about the "you-know-what" (244), the child immediately thinks of a mutant with two heads. Although she cannot envisage what makes this freak both male and female, she phenomenologically experiences the essence of the grotesque — "the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (Harpham 1982: 11). She feels the ambivalence one typically does towards one such as the hermaphrodite: "[Unlike] the

fabulous monsters”, Leslie Fiedler contends, “the “true freak is one of us, the human child of human parents, however altered by forces we do not understand into something mythic and mysterious, as no mere cripple is” (1978: 24). Still desperately trying to make sense of this biological conundrum, she falls asleep and gives way to a dream in which a crazy admixture of a Catholic mass and a Protestant tent revival is created (Di Renzo 1993: 88). In her seemingly blasphemous night-time vision, the hermaphrodite elevates his/her body to the level of sacrament, thus anticipating the child’s actual participation in Communion the following day and her subsequent vision of the sun as a Host in the sky. “A temple of God is a holy thing”, the freak says, celebrating the sacredness of the double-sexed body, and indeed of all bodies (*Stories*: 246).

The image of the hermaphrodite operates simultaneously on two levels. The metaphor evokes the suffering, limitation and division implicit in a postlapsarian existence; at the same time it arouses the sense of ideal integration. It is thus both grotesque and anagogical. The hermaphrodite has been feared and despised throughout the centuries, but he/she has also been idealised, even venerated. At various moments in history, from as far back as Plato, the hermaphrodite has (not uncontentiously) symbolised a paragon of human completeness — “a reconciliation of the divisions within the self and world” (Asals 1982: 120). In the later Middle Ages, Pierre Bersuire (d.1362) provided the myth of Hermaphrodite in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* with a Christian interpretation. The son of Mercury, signifying the exalted Christ, came down to this world according to his father’s instruction to bathe in the water of mercy. In a pure blue pool, symbolic of the Virgin, he united with the nymph, that is, human nature: Hermaphrodite was thus formed and serves as a picture of the incarnate Christ (Rubin 1994: 107). The hermaphrodite could further be said to picture an ideal state — an antelapsarian age or a future heavenly existence. Galatians 3: 28 might be applied as a motif of a redeemed condition of harmony: “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. One might say that after the resurrection there will be no more sharply drawn, that is, divisive, distinctions. Horton (1994-5: 38) suggests that the hermaphrodite in the dream helps to initiate both the child (asexual) and the adult congregation (sexual) into the idea of a new

spiritual nature (supersexual). Yet, it should be stressed that an otherworldly, androgynous ideal can only be seen as grotesque here on earth.

The following day, the child accompanies her mother to take Joanne and Susan back to their convent where they will participate in mass. To escape the girls' nonsensical chatter, she lifts her head out the window to gaze at an "ivory sun... framed in the middle of a blue afternoon" (*Stories*: 247). But she is almost blinded by the sunlight when the veil of her hair flaps open. Not long after, in the Eucharistic service at Mount St. Scholastica, she sees the priest raise the monstrance with the Host "shining ivory-colored in the center of it" (248). She immediately thinks of "the tent at the fair that had the freak in it" (248). The strong sun, the holy wafer, the hermaphrodite become equated: they are all sacraments of the Holy Spirit. The child, whose mind was now "quiet" heard the freak saying: "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be" (248). For the child, danger lies in denouncing the truth of the Incarnation: no physical or mental shape, however deformed or weak, can be scorned if the Spirit is to be honoured. For the child, surrender to God and to the mystery of the Incarnation involves "an acceptance of what God wills... an acceptance of [one's] individual circumstances" (*Letters*: 124).<sup>49</sup> The effect of the child's surrender to the holiness of matter is "purity". O'Connor distinguishes this state from that of "innocence" in that purity comes "with experience or with Grace so that it never can be naïve" (*Letters*: 126).

The child's moment of 'confirmation' comes after the mass when a large nun swoops down on her in an embrace and crushes her face into the crucifix attached to her belt. In a comparable way to Sally Virginia, the child's cheek is imprinted with the sign of the Cross, a mark of the sacrifice made for acceptance as a 'holy temple'. Driving home, she is challenged to embrace a more vivid understanding of what the new life entails. Directly facing the sun, no longer needing a screen of hair to cover her tainted humanity, she anagogically views the presence of the blood of the Crucifixion in the "huge red ball" raised "like an elevated Host" (*Stories*: 248). Grace has removed the barrier; the physical route ahead "has no end/ the horizon/ has been abolished".<sup>50</sup> And as the sun sinks out of sight, it leaves "a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (248). Before her is not a tarred freeway, but a road of raw earth sacrificially hewn

out by Christ which shows the extension in the world of His sacrificed Body. In the company of the hermaphrodite, the two-hundred-and-fifty pound taxi driver, the ridiculous cousins, she is a part of this sacramental Body, part of the Communion of Saints. The grotesque interconnectedness of this corporate Body is anagogical; it inversely foreshadows the radical, harmonious commingling that will occur in the world to come.

### **Melding the Defeated: 'The Artificial Nigger'**

'The Artificial Nigger', occupying a central position in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, is certainly one of Flannery O'Connor's most unforgettable, intriguing and deeply controversial of short stories. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering her tendency towards extremes, O'Connor once named it her "favorite" piece in the collection (*Letters*: 101). O'Connor's reasons for identifying it as such plausibly include the multidimensionality of meaning in the story and its closure, which leaves little room for misapplication of her Christian intention. The categorical Christian ending stands out as pronounced in her work and is the source of some debate. Edward Strickland argues that in the context of the preceding action the declarative ending is "implausibly absurd" (1989: 104). Carol Shloss, on the other hand, regards O'Connor's narrative overtness in this story as a welcome change from the "oblique insult" that the author normally levels at "monstrous" readers apparently too religiously insensitive to grasp her meaning (1980: 123). The other main issue of critical dispute relates to O'Connor's deployment of a racial leitmotif to reflect on the redemptive quality of suffering in the story. "[A]llegorical fodder for contemplation of... grace" (1992: 66) is what Toni Morrison terms this idea.<sup>51</sup> She considers that using a tragic historical reality to convey a theological point belittles the concreteness of that reality. Others, however, read the deployment of the "artificial Negro" as "the ultimate anti-racist emblem" (Wood 1993-4: 113) and as an "agent of reconciliation" (Shackelford 1989: 81). Given the sensitivity of the issues at hand — race and plainly-stated Christian conversion — 'The Artificial Nigger' is a demanding, provocative story to negotiate. From a modal viewpoint, it is also difficult. It ambitiously

incorporates the grotesque in the service of anagogy, but in the end surrenders to explanatory narrative commentary.

The structure of O'Connor's 1955 story centres on Mr Head's arranged trip to what he considers hell, to the city of Atlanta. The allusions to Dante's *Commedia* are almost unavoidable.<sup>52</sup> His hope is that the trip will purge Nelson of any pretensions of grandeur as a result of his being born there and will redress the boy's mysterious aloofness and self-assurance which <sup>is</sup> a constant source of irritation to him. A peculiar resemblance exists between the sixty-year-old grandfather and ten year-old boy which is more than genetic; the fifty years between them is all but dissolved by the disposition they each bear. The grandfather's expression is "youthful" by daylight whereas the boy has a look that is "ancient" as if "he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it" (*Stories*: 251). On one level, Frederick Asals suggests, this odd pair "represents an ineluctable dualism, the divided self that is the inheritance of fallen man". As the story shows, the dualism is "doomed not only to incompleteness but to rending conflict" (1982: 121). On another level, the duo illustrates the alienating effects that sinful pride has on relationships — effects that human contrition and divine mercy can apparently overcome.

Nelson Head is one of Flannery O'Connor's 'aged' children who carries an air of disgruntlement, but also of sagacious perspicacity. Having grown up solely with his parochial, opinionated grandfather in backwoods Georgia, he has experienced a dearth of tangible affection. Like O'Connor's other 'old' youngsters — Harry Ashfield, Mary Fortune Pitts, Rufus Johnson — this deficiency has caused a measure of emotional hardening and a premature awareness of enduring suffering. It seems clear to O'Connor, an early sufferer herself, that the "weight of centuries lies on children" (*Letters*: 137). A related intuition she has is that children have a God-given ability to see far things close up, a prophetic burden. "What interests me", she writes to 'A', "is simply the mystery, the agony that is given in strange ways to children" (*Letters*: 394). In 'The Artificial Nigger', O'Connor uses Nelson's relative clear-sightedness of right and wrong to challenge his grandfather's narrow vision. The old man, however, only mercilessly shames the boy and ultimately denies him before strangers: an action that reflects a Peteresque denunciation of Christ.

Owing to Nelson's vestigial childlikeness, his preparation for conversion is less harsh than the old man's: it entails more of a jolting awakening than an expiatory process. His first-ever sighting of a black person suggests a relative objectivity and openness to truth. When the "coffee-coloured" individual strides past them on the train to Atlanta, Nelson refers to him simply as a "man" (*Stories*: 255). However, when he is deeply humiliated by his sneering grandfather, the boy transfers his anger, "a fierce raw hate" (256), to the Negro. The corrupting influence of the old man takes its hold, but within the providential scheme of the trip, is later dislodged. The disengaging actions occur appropriately in the context of two subsequent encounters with Negro figures in the city. The encounters are significantly anagogical: the bewildering but distinct grotesqueness of each figure manifests a sacred truth that erodes Nelson's acquired callousness. Kathleen Sullivan Porter, drawing on the work of Frank Gonzalez-Crussi, calls these sacramental encounters "mental touches" (1997-7: 17). A mental touch, according to Gonzalez-Crussi, uses the *sum* of the senses to reach emotion. "There is more to seeing, tasting, hearing, touching and smelling", he argues, "than is understood by these sensations in the scientific-rationalist scheme (1989:28). As in 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', O'Connor uses in this story a mental touch or encounter with mystery, which takes the place of a violent physical encounter, to effect transformation in the character.

Nelson's first anagogical encounter occurs in a black neighbourhood which the Heads unknowingly enter after walking in circles, Dantean fashion, around Atlanta City. Seeing a large "colored" woman standing in a doorway, Nelson warily approaches her for directions. To his terrible surprise, all his faculties become paralysed. Without being able to help himself, he drinks in "every detail" of her (*Stories*: 262). His eyes travel up her body and make "a triangular path from the glistening sweat on her neck down and across her tremendous bosom and over her bare arm back to where her fingers [lie] hidden in her hair" (262). The black woman is at once the taboo dark temptress (comically foretold on his fortune card) and the forbidden reincarnation of the mother he had been denied. Nelson wants her "to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her" (262). The woman occupies the grotesque Oedipal interval between lover and mother. She introduces serious-minded Nelson to a new world of energy and enigma, arousing his as-

yet-undiscovered sexuality and repressed longing for love. The effect she has on him anticipates the eruptive spiritual awakening to come. The source of the woman's allure, Richard Giannone suggests, is ultimately in the "mother-love of divine mercy" (1995: 60). The mental touch Nelson receives sends him "reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel" of unfamiliarity — "He had never had such a feeling before" (*Stories*: 262). He cannot now escape the "black forms moving up from some deep part of him" (264).

To Mr Head, the black woman can only be seen as a "Medusa" whose monstrous power can turn Nelson's racist convictions to stone, or as a "Francesca" who can lure him from the (white) all-male environment of his past.<sup>53</sup> He exploits the situation as a means to emphasise to the now tender Nelson how much he needs his knowing grandfather. But, by the time he and the boy encounter the plaster statue of the Negro mounted on a wall of a smart white suburb, the old man is "ravaged and abandoned" (267). His cruel denial of Nelson has caused him to see the true extent of his moral depravity while it has further alienated him from the devastated boy. Grandfather and grandson lean almost at the same angle looking at the "artificial Negro" who appears neither "young [nor] old" (268). The unseen burden resting on their shoulders "recalls the heavy stone of self-elation" weighing on the proud in Dante's *Purgatorio* (Giannone 1989: 94). In the presence of the bent figure with chipped eye, Mr Head and Nelson both experience a riveting mental touch. The statue's "wild look of misery" (268) detracts from any sense of age; it overwhelms the Heads' senses to such an extent that it "dissolves their differences like an action of mercy" (269). The tacky racist figurine captures Mr Head and Nelson in "the present moment" of apocalypse (Harpham 1982: 16). The grotesque figure of the South's shame becomes a hierophant, a manifestation of the divine, which anagogically reveals the extreme sorrow of Christ

The Heads' bent posture suggests that they both bow to the enormity and eternity of suffering that the "artificial Negro" enshrines. The figurine is, in effect, a *povorello*, a little poor man of God, whose stigmata Mr Head and Nelson mystically sense. They gaze at the effigy as a "monument to another's victory" that brings them together in "common defeat" (*Stories*: 269). The agonised figure is, on an anagogical level, Christ whose redemptive sacrifice effectively levels differences and provides

forgiveness for sin. In recognising their shared sinfulness, they look to each other for acceptance. It seems that Nelson regains a desire for a childlike “assurance” and that Mr Head indicates a desire to be elderly and “wise” (269).

Encountering the Negro figures allows the black forms in Nelson’s subconscious mind to “melt his frozen vision in one hot grasp” (267). The mental touches he receives necessarily issue from encounters with black personae. As O’Connor commented somewhat controversially: “In southern literature the Negro, without losing his individuality, is a figure for our darker selves, our shadow side”.<sup>54</sup> As Nelson comes to recognise his unacknowledged guilty self, he too comes to embrace the redemption of that sin. It appears that Mr Head, in acknowledging self defeat, also comes to see the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Yet, it seems that, unlike Nelson, he is not yet ready to fully accept salvation. Though humbled, he does not yet understand the fullness of what he sees — as can be judged from his flustered, ill-sounding comment following their stunned silence: “They ain’t got enough real [Negroes] here. They got to have an artificial one” (269). His patronising remark is nevertheless, at a literal level, pertinent: the exclusive white suburb needs stark reminders of black suffering and the cost of redemption.

Mr Head’s final initiation into agony over sin comes on their return to their rural country junction. Their journey through the alienating hell of self-discovery is finally over. Having taken all day to find the station again, they return home in the dark. The clearing in the woods at the junction, reminiscent of the sacred arena in ‘A Circle in the Fire’, is radiant with moonlight. With new eyes, the Heads view their surrounds. Before they left for Atlanta in the dark, Mr Head proudly imagined that the silvery moon “cast a dignifying light over everything” (249), approving his “moral mission” (250) for the day. Now the effects of the moonlight are seen through a filter of his human frailty: “the sage grass [shivers] gently in shades of silver and the clinkers under their feet [glitter] with a fresh black light” (269). That the light is “fresh” and “black” connotes the redemptive change that they have undergone in acknowledging their shadow selves and in recognising the suffering of the afflicted Negroes and of Christ. The splendour of the natural scene lightly evokes a transcendent milieu. Mr Head and Nelson are anagogically

transported into divine time, *kairos*, to view heaven and earth. The glittering details of the scene anticipate, and bring into the present, the beauties of heaven, as do the “silvered leaves” and “jewelled paths” of the medieval poem *The Pearl*.<sup>55</sup> Treetops surround the clearing “like the protecting walls of a garden” which suggests that the clearing becomes an Eden, but as Frederick Asals points out, a “New Testament” version which accounts for the price that Christ has to pay for human access to Paradise (1982: 84). In this sense, the “garden” is also a Gethsemane.

The sudden appearance of the moon, in symbolic terms, communicates that a ‘death’ is not final, but followed by a new ‘birth’ (Eliade 1959: 157). The baptism of fire — of suffering — that Nelson and Mr Head undergo in their hellish experience of Atlanta allows them now to receive new life. The penultimate paragraph gives voice to the narrator’s extraordinarily full account of Mr Head’s final acceptance of the “agony” of suffering and the “mercy” of bestowed love as he stands “very still” (*Stories*: 269) taking in the truth of the scene before him. The “action of mercy” then covers his pride “like a flame” — like the “hot grasp” of the feminine black force in Nelson’s subconscious — and “consume[s]” it (269-70). He receives the warmth of forgiveness: what Giannone calls the “female gift of divine mother-love” (1995: 66). At “that instant”, says the narrator, “he feels ready to enter Paradise” (*Stories*: 270). Nelson, also affected by the anagogical effulgence of the natural scene, composes his expression to watch his grandfather with “a mixture of fatigue and suspicion” (270). But his face “lighten[s]” as the train disappears “like a frightened serpent into the woods” (270) — the debt of sin, the evil, has been exorcised from his grandfather by the agony of the inferno and by the mercy of the warm, black source. In this complexly woven story, the grotesque is shown to operate anagogically. However, to reinforce the significance of the spiritual change, a final anagogical scene, sublimely invoking heaven, is depicted. This closing scene predicts the greater reach of Flannery O’Connor’s second collection: the action goes beyond divine discipline to show divine mercy. But the story also marks a limit as to the explicit use of the narrative voice; the author does not again venture to the point of explaining the gospel.

## Carrying off the Adopted: 'The River'

From the beginning of Flannery O'Connor's 1953 story, it becomes clear that four- or five-year-old Harry Ashfield is anything but young in spirit. His inherited surname indicates that he exists to expire, to return to the ash of the earth, to join the deceased in final rest. The grandmother in O'Connor's title story, on the other hand, lives long and frivolously, and as such, provides a foil to the 'elderly' Harry. Whereas Harry dies at an early age to live spiritually, the grandmother waits all her life to recognise the anagogical message of the ashes — that eternal life should be seriously prepared for in the present.

Like Nelson Head, Harry carries the burden of old age. He resembles an "old sheep waiting to be let out" and is termed "old man" by his taciturn, hung-over father when he leaves for the day with his sitter, Mrs Connin (*Stories*: 158). Harry, born into familial lovelessness, feels the absence of goodness deeply at a young age. A doleful fourteenth-century lullaby expresses this weight of original sin: "Lullay, lullay, little child, why weepest thou so sore?/ Needs thou must weep — it was ordained thee yore/ Ever to live in sorrow, and sigh and mourn always/ As thine elders did before thee in their day./ Lullay, lullay, little child, child, lullay, lullow,/ In a strange world a stranger art thou".<sup>56</sup> Harry is O'Connor's most neglected child besides ten-year-old Norton in 'The Lame Shall Enter First' who suffers the living disdain of his father in the wake of his mother's death. It is no coincidence that both Harry and Norton, lacking healthy touch, come to inflict fatal violence on themselves while seeking tangible comfort (Porter 1996-7: 16).<sup>57</sup> In both O'Connor's collections, she seeks to show the grotesqueness of child suicide, while daringly suggesting an immense anagogical import to the action.

What is both appalling and ludicrous about Harry's drowning is that it is also a baptism: a spiritual breakthrough to God's Kingdom. That the little boy's death has "positive religious value" is, however, "absurd" to Mark Sexton. In his view, the fundamentalist river baptism which precedes Harry's self-immersion "neither define[s] nor restrict[s] that experience" (1989: 9). Joseph Zornado (1997: 40, 45) superficially agrees with Sexton that a positive religious encounter does not occur in the story, but he argues that O'Connor aims to evoke a negative, ineffable experience of mystery: a

concept she takes to a further extreme in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Taking a different view, Jill Baumgaertner stresses that the story “presents sacrament... in its most profound form” (1988: 90). The ambiguities cannot be escaped and simple interpretation is beleaguered. O’Connor draws on the grotesque by presenting Harry’s self-baptism as suicidal and the preceding Protestant baptism as disorienting and surrounded by evil. Yet, the narrative attention that O’Connor gives to Harry’s neglected condition and to the radiant countryside where the baptism takes place has the effect of tempering the reductive impetus of the grotesque imagery and prepares the reader to consider the death as a sacramental embrace.

Leaving the city behind on the way to the healing meeting, little Harry loses many of his aged inhibitions as he makes “wild leaps” and dashes off as if to “snatch the sun” (*Stories*: 163). His inner emptiness diminishes as the pleroma of the visible creation fills his senses. He has told Mrs Connin that he wants the preacher to heal him — of hunger, he “decided finally” (159). The boy’s hunger can be read as a yearning for inner satiation, which cannot be satisfied by earthly food. Like saints of past centuries, Harry will discover that his appetite can only be assuaged by participating in the sacraments, by participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. Apparently St. Catherine of Siena could not at one stage hold down any food, except the Communion elements (Asals 1982: 217).<sup>58</sup> Harry’s desire for a new birth is suggested by his impulsive decision earlier to call himself after the preacher “Bevel”. But before he can enter into a new baptismal life, he will have to face death, as is adumbrated by the macabre imagery used to describe events leading up to his self-baptism. Not insignificantly, the group walking down to the river look like “the skeleton of an old boat” (*Stories*: 162). As Harry/Bevel walks carefully through the woods he symbolically moves through a dark screen, a rite of passage, into the unfamiliar. It is his first time in a wooded area and he looks “from side to side” as if he is “entering a strange country” (163). At the bottom of the hill, the woods open “suddenly” and he sees “the reflection of the sun... set like a diamond” on the river (164). Anagogically, this scene can be read as a passage through baptismal death into a resplendent world of new life. As the Scriptures say of baptism: “For if we have been

united together with [Christ] in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection” (Romans 6: 5).

At the healing ceremony, Harry-Bevel becomes rudimentarily aware of the cosmic battle between good and evil that brews in the natural arena. He hears the preacher holler: “Believe Jesus or the devil!” (*Stories*: 166). He sees “two silent birds revolving high in the sky” and landing “hunch-shouldered” (166) which we would understand as a demonic version of Christ’s baptismal dove. He watches the ugly Mr Paradise with the cancerous “purple bulge” on his ear conspicuously exposed to testify against divine healing (166). When the boy first hears Bevel Summers’ message he considers it “a joke” (167) — all he has ever known is adult insincerity and equivocality. But when he witnesses the bony-faced preacher maintain his stern look and he hears the eerie laugh of Mr Paradise he listens again: “If I Baptize... you’ll go by the deep river of life... You’ll count” (168). The Southern preacher coarsely alludes to an essentially Catholic understanding of baptism. As explained by Friedrich Von Hügel, baptism is “the all-important fact of our attainment to personality... through our birth and incorporation into a world... already awake to and penetrated by that spiritual life which, as yet, only slumbers within ourselves” (in Troeltsch 1957: 27). It is this subconscious drive to “count”, to belong, that impels the bewildered little boy to return the next day to complete what the preacher started. He wants the river to “have” him once and for all, not to expel him from its waters (*Stories*: 173).

The next morning in his parents’ unkempt apartment the boy forages for food and overturns ashtrays out of boredom and defiance before the idea of becoming one with the river dawns on him. It came “as if he didn’t know what he’d been looking for” (172). In rubbing ash “carefully” into the carpet, he foreshadows his own death by echoing the Christian ritual performed on Ash Wednesday (Zornado 1997: 41). He realises that he is unhappy being both Harry and Bevel: a reality that is reflected by the narrator’s choice to call him simply “the child” from this point (Garson 1987: 115). Arriving at the river, he sees the waters “shimmering reddish yellow” (*Stories*: 173) and plunges in. The river radiates the same colours as the “the low grove of red and gold sassafras” (165) and the glow of human faces in the sunlight (Giannone 1989: 75). The colours suggest the

sacramental transfer and energising that take place when, on the third attempt, the child plunges below the surface is caught by the “waiting current” and is pulled “swiftly... forward and down” (*Stories*: 174). His third attempt is, in fact, grotesquely catalysed by the sudden appearance of “a giant pig” bounding after him: the figure of Mr Paradise trying to rescue him. The child had earlier come to associate pigs with evil on seeing a picture at Mrs Connin’s of Jesus driving demons into a group of hogs.<sup>59</sup> Seeing the demonic-looking creature chasing him causes the boy to launch forward into the reddish-yellow water; the creature symbolises the hell that the dry world holds. “Children know by instinct that hell is an absence of love”, O’Connor once remarked, “and they can pick out theirs without missing” (*Letters*: 244). Under the water, the child felt “all his fury and fear” (174) leaving him as he moved on towards a new place of adoption as a son. Through his irrevocable, consummatory baptism, one can say that the waters become both “a tomb and a mother”.<sup>60</sup>

Although it seems that O’Connor intended Harry/Bevel’s baptism to mark his anagogical entry into a new spiritual state, it remains a scandal that he should kill himself to achieve it. A point made by Mikhail Bakhtin nevertheless serves to highlight the plausibility of degrading a sacrament such as baptism in order to reinvest it with potent significance. Bakhtin argues that degradation of a sacrament “does not imply merely hurling it into the void of non-existence, into absolute destruction”, but transferring it instead “into the reproductive lower stratum” of the grotesque, “the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (1968: 21). In ‘The River’, Scriptural baptism — dying to self — is essentially distorted by being literalised.<sup>61</sup> The all-demanding cost of following Christ is thus made alarmingly blatant.

In her child stories, O’Connor deliberately de-ceremonialises or degrades sacramental ordinances in order to present anew the profundity and enormous costliness of baptism and confirmation as markers of participation in the divine life. Flannery O’Connor believed primarily in the objectivity of the sacraments and rites, not in the subjectivity of their ceremonial trappings — a radical understanding for one who participated wholeheartedly in the rituals of the Catholic Church. “I don’t count as anything an appreciation of the music and liturgy”, she once pronounced, “Mass could be

said out of a suitcase in a furnace room and the same sacrifice would take place” (*Works*: 1085). Taking into account flawed human nature, Flannery O’Connor reflected in a 1955 letter: “I think most people come to the Church by means the Church does not allow, else there would be no need of their getting to her at all” (*Letters*: 93). Her premise in fiction writing was always the insufficiency of human endeavour and, more darkly, the great propensity for human evil. Her hope was always in the God who could see beyond grotesquery to the stuff of new beginnings.

## Hard Pressed

If Flannery O’Connor was clear about Christian ideals, she was certain also of worldly shortcomings. To her mind, there was no way that the grotesque state of a faltering world could legitimately be ignored in attempts to convey the truths of divine transcendence. When accused of the apparent contradiction between the “accurate naming of the things of God” and writing “about good men being hard to find”, she advanced, echoing Jacques Maritain: “the only way I can explain this is by repeating that I think evil is the defective use of good” (*Letters*: 129). In portraying evil, O’Connor thus presents the state of what exists in the paucity or absence of godliness. O’Connor’s insistence on portraying the underbelly of reality could be seen as pre-empting an accusation such as Patrick White’s: “The churches defeat their own aims... through the banality of their approach, and by rejecting so much that is sordid and shocking which can still be related to religious experience”.<sup>62</sup> By depicting the grotesque, O’Connor aimed to show the enormity of what is deficient while, at the same time, to imply through inversion the extent of what is possible, thereby to invoke the anagogical.

The ‘adult-violation’ stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* depict violence and sexual threat as precipitating a negative way to the divine. The women targeted to receive grace are forcefully relieved of all human securities and impelled to a state of seeing their sin in full proportion. The grandmother views her depravity in the contorted face of the Misfit and comes to realise that God is everything she is not. Hulga recognises the vastness of her self-deception in the repugnant shape of Manley Pointer and sees the

negative image of who Christ is. Mrs McIntyre feels in her body the torturous emptiness of her oppressive sin and, at best, intuits that heaven is nothing like her purgatory. Across this spectrum of stories, furthermore, there is some intimation given of the sacramental in the midst of asceticism: The Misfit's hardened exterior is electrified by the grandmother's touch; Mrs Shortley's body experiences the redemptive torment of the world's suffering. The 'child-encounter' stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* show the intent visitation of God in ways that disrupt and disorient in order to move the individual towards salvation. Sally Virginia, "the child", Nelson and Harry are each ultimately propelled to discern the divine image in the levelling fire, the hermaphrodite, the bent Negro figurine and the sunny waters of death. The "unwished-for God"<sup>63</sup> again and again strongly impresses Himself on the young and the old, the respectable and the unrefined. In this collection, narrative attention to a world infused with life deepens the sense that God is not far away even if all the characters do not ultimately unite with Him. The stories thus seem to address the demanding question voiced in *Wise Blood*: "Where in your time and your body has Jesus redeemed you?" (*Wise*: 160).

Commenting on *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1955, Flannery O'Connor admitted: "The stories are hard... because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism" (*Letters*: 90). Christian realism seeks to be true first to the abysmal extremity of the real before suggesting the heavenly. It seeks to reflect the great need for redemption and the immense cost to be paid for it. In the same piece of correspondence, O'Connor claimed to have shown a few of the "rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem to be born" (*Letters*: 90). In paraphrasing a line from William Butler Yeats' 'Second Coming', a poem that on one level prophesies the apocalyptic evils of the twentieth-century, she implies her endeavour to record something of what might result if a God-consciousness continues to wane. Reckless violence and abuse will prevail: families will be murdered on roadsides, the handicapped will be discarded, child suicides will mount. Yet, O'Connor's particular paraphrase of Yeats could also be said to picture individuals in a state of 'becoming', to show the progress of rough and incomplete characters as they move towards salvation. Good people, especially good adults, are so hard to find because they appear in forms that are so difficult to recognise.

In O'Connor's first collection of short stories, she strove not to replicate the nihilistic milieu of *Wise Blood*, but yet held that transgression for all its repugnance should be depicted lest sin become "conspicuous by its absence" (*Reviews*: 13). When her tales were described as "horror stories", she held that the interpreters grasped "the wrong kind of horror" (90). She did not wish to generate horror gratuitously or cathartically, but to depict the violent effects of violating moral laws. O'Connor further considered the "horror" to lie in portraying present reality as ultimate. A naturalistic reading of 'The River', for example, would probably yield little more than an outcry against a young child's hideous deception. For Harry Ashfield, however, the present is a lonely nightmare from which he escapes at all costs. O'Connor acknowledged how much harder it is to represent the reality of a spiritual hope that remains untainted by the present than it is to show an imperfect, often cruel, modern world. She often could find no other way than through the negative.

What Flannery O'Connor ultimately tried to avoid in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was a stagnation on the "darkling plain" of despair. She was all too aware of a mode of representation "which expresses its ultimate concern in images that have not yet broken through to show any recognition of a God who has revealed himself" (*Prose*: 160). Her high aim in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was for anagogical projection beyond the grotesque. Yet, readers of O'Connor's 1955 collection may indeed be hard pressed at times to see beyond the brutalities and absurdities of the stories. They will no doubt find it difficult to discern the friends of God from His enemies, the path to the Father from the route fleeing His influence. In story after story, "God/ elects to keep on haunting/ like some holy ghost".<sup>64</sup> Like the seekers in T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', O'Connor's readers who come to the stories with religious preconceptions will doubtless confront the unexpected. The reader, who encounters in the stories divine destruction in place of divine embrace, might cry like one of the Magi: "I had seen birth and death/ But had thought that they were different."<sup>65</sup> The "Father of Souls" is present at the end of the road in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, but the "Dragon" often obscures the view. However, it may also be argued that the Dragon is but a phase of the Father and in meeting the foe, some characters and readers negatively meet the One towards whom they are headed.

Both the source of light and darkness of obstruction are discernible; we see a “jungle of shadows”.

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## Chapter Three Notes

<sup>1</sup> In December 1954, O'Connor wrote to the Fitzgeralds that she intended to dedicate her new volume to them. At this stage, she had sent off the manuscript of nine stories to Harcourt, Brace & Co., but a few months later in February 1955 requested the inclusion of her latest story 'Good Country People'. In the end, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* comprised ten stories, the order of which she directed (*Letters*: 73-5).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Peat & Young (1990: 90).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Asals (1982: 223) refers to Abraham J. Heschel's *The Prophets* (1962) as the source of these terms.

<sup>4</sup> See O'Connor's review of *Order and History* (*Reviews*: 60-1).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Desmond (1987: 55), Asals (1982: 40-64) and Di Renzo (1993: 26). O'Connor herself calls Hazel's life “a search for God through sin” (*Letters*: 116).

<sup>6</sup> See Beck (1996-7) for an enquiry into the beneficial, but demanding, literary mentorship Gordon offered O'Connor.

<sup>7</sup> Considering that O'Connor had for years been an amateur, but accomplished, visual cartoonist, her affinity for the caricatural grotesque is not surprising. See Baumgaertner (1988) to view several of O'Connor's cartoons produced for her weekly student newspaper *The Colonnade*.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in John R. May's collection of letters (1979: 346).

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Victor White's *Soul and Psyche* (1960: 154) and marked by O'Connor in her copy of the book (*Library*: 28).

<sup>10</sup> The nature of O'Connor's lupus required that she have intermittent blood transfusions and daily injections, or after 1955, orally administered dosages of ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Gilson's *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* [1924] and *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* [1938], as well as Maritain's *The Range of Reason* (1952).

<sup>13</sup> From *The Rosary of Our Lady* (1955).

<sup>14</sup> From *The Christ of Faith* (1957).

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<sup>15</sup> See Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959).

<sup>16</sup> From *The Presence of Grace* (1956).

<sup>17</sup> From *The Malefactors* (1956).

<sup>18</sup> Following the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *The New York Herald Tribune* hailed her as "a shining new talent" who employed "the regional to communicate the universal" (Stallings 1955). The magazine *Commonweal* considered that "here, in rural miniature, are the primary intuitions of man (in Schaub 1991: 134). The reviewers of *Wise Blood* had been far less approving. The anonymous Kirkus review, representative of many other pieces, claimed that "for the more zealous avantgardists", O'Connor's novel is "a grotesque", but "for others, a deep anesthesia" (in Brinkmeyer 1995: 71). See Matthew Gamber's article for insight into the reaction of the American Catholic Press to O'Connor's novel and her work over the years (1996-7).

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Driskell & Brittain (1971: 10).

<sup>20</sup> In his 1955 study, R. W. B. Lewis argues that American literature of the past century and a half has been dominated by the 'American Adam', the lone male hero of the frontier set on making a mark for himself in history, while avoiding at all costs entanglement with women and society. Both Lewis (1955) and Leslie Fiedler (1982) argue that the prevailing image of the 'American Adam' grew out of a denial of original sin, out of the 'hope of innocence', that the Transcendentalists promulgated.

<sup>21</sup> Although Mr Head and Mrs Cope are the primary focalisers in 'The Artificial Nigger' and 'A Circle in the Fire' respectively, the role of the pre-adolescents in the two stories is crucial. Nelson and Sally Virginia undergo a journey towards God-consciousness that reflects — and affects — that of their parental figures.

<sup>22</sup> "The soul's essential nature", Augustine taught, "is to be an image of God. The fall of man was an obscuring of the divine image by a dissimilitude, an 'unlikeness' superimposed on it. But the image itself is indestructible: every man retains his 'capacity for the eternal'" (in Asals 1982: 219).

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Di Renzo (1993: 155).

<sup>25</sup> See Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951). In this study, McLuhan discusses the intense popular interest in automobiles in the 1940s and 50s and their symbolic import as vehicles to geographical, social and sexual freedom.

<sup>26</sup> 'Reaction to a Retard' in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 385).

<sup>27</sup> Next to a paragraph on the "perfect" in Mircea Eliade's *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958: 14), O'Connor had written these words. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor expanded on this understanding: Rayber recognised that his retarded four-year-old, Bishop was his only link to the world of the spirit (*Violent*: 182).

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<sup>28</sup> From 'Judgment and Mercy' by Francis Quarles in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 42).

<sup>29</sup> Welty in *Eye of the Story* refers to Lawrence as one who wrote with "cruelty", but who did not necessarily lack "compassion" (1978: 98).

<sup>30</sup> O'Connor argued that "you have to look at a novel or a story as a novel or a story; as saying something about life colored by the writer, not about the writer colored by life". The writer "distorts herself to make a better story so you can't judge her from the story" (*Letters*: 158).

<sup>31</sup> The section that O'Connor quotes is from Heidegger's inaugural lecture at Freiburg: 'What is Metaphysics?'. See Wood (1992) for further discussion on Heidegger and O'Connor.

<sup>32</sup> Burke cites Ernest Becker: "The fetish object represents the magical means for transforming animality into something transcendent and thereby assuring a liberation of the personality from the standardized, bland, and earthbound flesh" (1973: 235).

<sup>33</sup> See Di Renzo (1993: 79).

<sup>34</sup> According to Reinhold Niebuhr: "What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life" (in Wood 1992: 113).

<sup>35</sup> For example: Psalm 146: 9, Leviticus 19: 34, Deuteronomy 10: 19.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Camus, for good reason, chose *L'Etranger* to constitute the title of his 1947 novel.

<sup>37</sup> O'Connor reviewed a number of works concerning the prophetic duty in biblical and modern contexts; for example: J. C. Chaine's *God's Heralds* (1955), Eric Voegelin's three volume *Order and History* (1956-7), Claude Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (1960), Bruce Vawter's *The Conscience of Israel* (1961) and Gustave Weigel's *Modern God: Faith in a Secular Society* (1963). See also Karl Martin on the prophetic in O'Connor (1994; 1994-5).

<sup>38</sup> From Claude Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, cited in Di Renzo (1993: 38).

<sup>39</sup> In O'Connor's essay 'King of the birds', first published in 1961, she writes of the peacock's cry: "He appears to receive through his feet some shock from the center of the earth which travels upward through him<sup>is</sup> released" (*Prose*: 14-5). Mrs McIntyre, on first meeting the priest, explains that over the years she has let twenty or thirty peacocks die off on her farm as she does not like "to hear them scream in the middle of the night" (198). The haunting quality of the bird's cry seems to have its origin in the depths of mystery. As far back as *Piers Plowman*, the narrator "marvelled at/ His splendour along with his crude/ Screaming voice." (Trans. Ronald Tamplin in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* [1995: 132]).

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<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Sullivan Porter (1996-7: 16) observes that Joanne and Susan, Marion Francis Tarwater and Rufus Johnson, all fourteen, are aware of their sins but have not outrightly denied grace (or the possibility thereof). Significantly, it is at age fifteen that Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* denounces the faith of his childhood. Alluding to the encroachment of adulthood and its accompanying cynicism, O'Connor writes to Ted Spivey: "from 15 to 18 is an age at which one is very sensitive to the sins of others" (*Letters*: 346).

<sup>41</sup> See *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967 vol.1: 197)

<sup>42</sup> In 'Holy Thursday', originally included in *Songs of Innocence*, William Blake celebrates the sanctifying and uplifting effect the children have on the service. He creates a strong contrast between the lively, colourful boys and girls and their dour overseers:

.....  
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of little lambs,  
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to Heaven the voice of song,  
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of Heaven among.  
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;  
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

(*Selected Poems of William Blake*, 72-3)

<sup>43</sup> William Wordsworth writes in 'My Heart Leaps Up':

The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish all my days to be  
Bound to each by natural piety. (*The Penguin Book of English Verse*, 261)

<sup>44</sup> Frederick Asals (1982: 136) notes Bentley's contention that "'melodramatic art' imitates what is "beneath the surface", whereas naturalistic art focuses on what is above.

<sup>45</sup> See *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967 vol.4: 147)

<sup>46</sup> From Blake's 'The Divine Image' in *The Element Book of Mystical Verse* (1997: 237).

<sup>47</sup> Fire is extraordinarily rich in symbolism. I have highlighted only a few of its symbolical meanings and effects. Concerning fire as judgement, the prophet Jeremiah writes: "I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings... I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all things around it" (21: 14). Regarding fire as purification, O'Connor refers to the flames "we bring on ourselves — as in Purgatory" (*Letters*: 387). With respect to fire as purgation, Beverley Randles says that the effects are "fusion and homogeneity" (1988: 242).

<sup>48</sup> A number of critics argue for O'Connor's identification with these implacable young women, some suggesting that she insists on self-recrimination (Kahane 1974, Park 1982, Westling 1993-4).

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<sup>49</sup> This concept O'Connor came to closely associate with "passive diminishments" once she discovered Teilhard de Chardin's designation in 1959-60.

<sup>50</sup> From 'Eternity Seen from North Avenue November 3' by Luci Shaw in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 123).

<sup>51</sup> In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison outlines her theory of "American Africanism" which highlights the problematic relationship between history and eternity in much of white literary discourse, the danger being to dehistoricize and distance the historical struggles of black people.

<sup>52</sup> At an early stage, the narrator suggests the connection between the Heads' trip to Atlanta and the pilgrim's journey through the *Inferno* in Dante's *Commedia* by reporting that Mr Head's compares himself to the worthy guide, Vergil (*Stories*: 250). An early paper by Gilbert Muller (1969) explores O'Connor's allusion to the Dantean journey. Later critics such as Deanna Ludwin (1988) and Richard Giannone (1989, 1995) further elaborate on the story's parodic treatment of the medieval grand narrative.

<sup>53</sup> References to Medusa and Francesca are found in Dante's *Inferno* (IX. 50) and (V.34) respectively.

<sup>54</sup> From an unpublished manuscript cited in Asals (1982: 86).

<sup>55</sup> From *The Pearl* cited in Nolan (1977: 152).

<sup>56</sup> From 'Born to Sorrow' in the *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 435), trans. Veronica Zundel.

<sup>57</sup> Porter refers to Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses* (1991) which elaborates on the importance of touch, the "oldest" and "most urgent" sense for children and adults, the lack of which can lead to disfunctionality and aberrant behaviour.

<sup>58</sup> Similarly, young Tarwater found that he could not hold down normal food because he was prophetically impelled to eat "the bread of life" (*Violent*: 21) — that is, "to do the will of the Father" (John 4: 34) by baptising the idiot child, Bishop. In Harry/Bevel's case, consummatory self-baptism is the ultimate means to satiate — or destroy — hunger.

<sup>59</sup> The pig is the grotesque animal *par excellence* in a Western world strongly influenced by Judaeo-Christian thought. In the Old Testament, swine were religiously codified as unclean, and in the New, marked as fitting prisons for demons. A light-coloured pig's disturbing closeness in flesh colour and diet to the European may be an unsettling reminder of the animalistic traits of the human (Stallybrass & White 1986: 47, 50).

<sup>60</sup> The words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem cited in Dillistone (1955: 87).

<sup>61</sup> The power of baptismal grace is not considered to be annulled by the grotesqueness of a distorted sacrament. Young Tarwater understands that the baptismal words he unintentionally spoke, have the effect of saving Bishop: "I didn't mean to...I only meant to drown him" (*Violent*: 209).

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<sup>62</sup> An extract of a letter to Dr Clem Semmler cited in Myers (1981: 215).

<sup>63</sup> The phrase is Martin Buber's (1957: 73).

<sup>64</sup> From Thomas John Carlisle's 'The Great Intruder' in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995 22).

<sup>65</sup> From Eliot's *Collected Poems* (1974: 109).

## Chapter Four

### ***Everything That Rises Must Converge:* The Drive to Deliver**

[The] earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God... For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs.

— *Romans 8: 19, 22*

Now the universe is composed of things distinct from one another and of contrary natures; and yet they all converge into one order, with some things acting on others. Therefore there must be one ordainer and governor of the universe.

— *St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles*

Love is creative, Your love brings to birth  
God's image in the earthiest of earth.

— *An extract from Robert Winnet's 'Love's Insight'*

### **The Immense Sweep**

In November 1962, Flannery O'Connor knew what the title of her second collection of short stories would be, but felt, at this stage, that there was insufficient "variety" amongst the stories she had written to constitute a volume (*Letters*: 498).<sup>1</sup> In the remaining twenty-one months before her death in August 1964, she wrote the unforgettable short stories of 'Revelation', 'Parker's Back' and 'Judgement Day' which, in effect, complete the story cycle entitled *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, published posthumously in 1965.<sup>2</sup> Rather than significantly broadening her experimentation with form following the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1955, she concentrated on intensifying her

vision and refining her technique in the context of a greater awareness of community and history.<sup>3</sup> “The longer you write the more conscious you are of what you can and cannot make live”, she reflects very late in her career (1963). “What you have to do is try and deepen your penetration of these things” (*Conversations*: 107). Flannery O’Connor’s second collection explores further possibilities of rendering moments of the conversion process in the individual and collective movement towards the End.

To the statistically minded, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* would have to be considered more cut-throat and pessimistic than O’Connor’s previous collection. Six out of nine stories end in excruciating death — a violent stroke, goring by a bull, matricide, fatal child battering, suicidal hanging and gruesome assault. On the level of action, it is, to use Anthony Di Renzo’s summation: “a compilation of accident forms and obituary notices” (1993: 189). The increased ratio of body-count to story has led several critics to believe that O’Connor’s outlook darkened in the years before her death. For example, Josephine Hendin contends: “The violence that dominates nearly all of these stories is the slow violence of disease” (1976: 102). In a similar vein, Alice Walker claims that the “bleak vision” of O’Connor’s “imminent mortality” could not escape influencing a number of stories (1975: 78). Other critics, however, argue that O’Connor in her painful latter years developed a more acute appreciation of suffering, progression through death and universal participation in the divine design.<sup>4</sup> While the brute force in her stories cannot be denied, it is not, I believe, pictured as an end in itself. Capturing something of Flannery O’Connor’s final years and her last stories, Robert Coles reflects: “She sat there in Baldwin County, Georgia, dying, burning with life” (1980: 160). In at least three stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the infliction of force comes some time before the end of the story in order to explore the effects of that encounter. Sarah J. Fodor astutely comments in this regard that O’Connor’s characters are at times taken beyond “the ambiguous moment of loss” that characterises her earlier stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* to show “what that moment means to them” (1997: 223). To a greater degree than her previous collection, the action moves beyond the point of expiation or judgement to intimate the nature of what is to come.

The collection's allusive title to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin offers a useful entry-point into understanding the anagogical significance of the hard lessons and grotesque endings depicted in many of her stories. As Margaret Whitt points out, the captivating, but cryptic, Teilhardian expression— "everything that rises must converge" — is the only one O'Connor adopted from a serious piece of prose without referring to it literally in the fiction (1995: 110). The high-minded idiom would no doubt sound hilariously misplaced in most of her characters' mouths! Besides, it serves a higher function: the expression would seem to reverberate epigrammatically across the spectrum of her stories, informing, and reflecting on, each piece differently, in seriousness or comedy. The expression, given in context below, refers to the destination of the 'Omega Point' — the ultimate place of "supreme consciousness" in Christ towards which all of creation is moving (Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man* 1959: 258). The following address, translated into several languages after the Jesuit's death in April 1955, was intended to reach far and wide across the earth:

Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge. (Teilhard, *Building the Earth* 1965: 11)

Teilhard's concept of the progress of evolution might be best visualised as a globe, Dorothy McFarland proffers (1976: 43). Lines that radiate upwards and outwards from the base of the sphere, the beginning of the evolutionary process, represent an increasing diversity of life forms. Where they reach the mid-point of the globe, the diversification halts, signifying that humankind has come to dominate the earth. However, as the lines begin to move ever closer together from this point upward towards the topmost pole — the Omega Point — a convergence of consciousness begins to occur. At the ultimate Point, union with Christ will ultimately happen and the universe be brought into unitive perfection (1976: 43). O'Connor's own words of exhortation in 1962 to a struggling Catholic student echo a Teilhardian optimism: "I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how . . . incomprehensible God must be to be the God of heaven and earth" (*Letters*: 447). She

praised the Jesuit-palaeontologist's ability to stretch the imagination and to expand narrow visions of reality.

Do we see a positive progression of this sort being made explicit in O'Connor's nine stories? It would be immensely difficult to insist on a categorical Yes. Yet, it would be presumptuous simply to read the Teilhardian title as ironic. The modal variation across O'Connor's corpus of stories resists a critical pressure to flatten the collection into a one-dimensional message. If there is an incessant sweep of kataphatic or positive progression in the collection, it follows a directive that renders the process complex. It is notable that a downward, destructive movement often occurs before intimations of upward movement. The people of O'Connor's universe are too ordinary, too flawed, too obstinate to lower themselves of their own accord and thus rise in co-operation with a divine incentive. They implicitly countervail the exhortation: "humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." (1 Peter 5: 6). Because many characters disregard the humbling and challenging sacramentality of their existing worlds, they are propelled to a place of deprivation. In a state of alienation from God and others, some come to recognise their own evil, and in that negative space, some acknowledge its contrary: God's goodness. Essentially, the characters need to be brought low (the influence of the grotesque) before they can move upwards (the effect of the anagogical) towards convergence with God and others. The aim of the expiatory action is to set in motion a process of redemptive birthing, although the process can be resisted as Mr Fortune illustrates in 'A View of the Woods'.

On discovering *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1959, Flannery O'Connor readily took to the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Between 1960 and 1963, she reviewed three volumes published and translated after his death by permission of the Society of Jesus, in addition to three books on his work.<sup>5</sup> Before being introduced to Teilhard's scholarship, O'Connor had, of course, already assimilated ideas concerning a universal (spiritual and physical) evolutionary movement which she had to some extent registered in earlier stories. As early as *Wise Blood*, she conceived of "some vast construction work" 'visible in the night sky "that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete" (*Wise*: 31). And in 1953, she wrote about "the old red river" of redemption

moving slowly towards the Kingdom of Christ (*Stories*: 165). Her exposure in the 1950s to Carl Jung's work, for example, prepared her to read Teilhard. She later came to identify the chief point of difference between the two scholars as centring on the role of the Church. The analytical psychologist considered the Church "to have fulfilled its great biological purpose", while the Jesuit-palaeontologist held that it "fulfils a continuing evolutionary purpose that will be completed at the end of time in Christ" (*Letters*: 383). Her earlier reading of Friedrich Von Hügel's *Essays* (*Reviews*: 41-2), exposed her to praise for Charles Darwin, praise of his "thirst for concreteness" and "richness of experience... of the many-levelled world which our own activities apprehend" (in Kirkland 1989: 40 n.8). In 1956, she praised Bruce Vawter's *A Path through Genesis*, which urges interpretation of the Bible in the light of modern archaeological and scientific discoveries (*Reviews*: 32). While assimilating Teilhard's ideas, she came across other works that seemed to support his basic propositions. In Henri De Lubac's *Further Paradoxes* (1957), she read of the universe in growth being paradoxical (*Reviews*: 59). In Claude Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (1960), for example, she discovered the Hebrew concept of "time-creation" — the notion that the world is in a state of becoming as it moves towards the Parousia (*Library*: 22).

As can be gathered from O'Connor's many comments on Teilhard de Chardin, O'Connor did not, in the first instance, stringently appraise his work from a theological point of view; she claimed to approach his work as a creative artist. The poet "whose sight is essentially prophetic", she reflected, "will at once recognize in this immense vision his own" (*Reviews*: 87-8). For the poet/prophet/writer, Teilhard's conception of the universe is vivifying. His notion of "spiritualizing matter" (*Reviews*: 87) is, in O'Connor's sense, coincident with the artist's objective of revealing the transcendent through the concrete. Like William Lynch, she considered the artist and the theologian to be "natural allies" (*Reviews*: 75). In this regard, she liked to cite Joseph Conrad's view that the artist's aim is to "render the highest possible justice to the visible universe... because it suggest[s] an invisible one" (*Prose*: 80).<sup>6</sup> To O'Connor, the notion of spiritualising matter magnifies the presence of the anagogical in and through the literal.

As John L. Darretta suggests, Teilhard's theory of convergence offered O'Connor a "theological poetry" (1987: 21), a means by which to attribute to the denouements of her stories a cosmic significance. Through Teilhard, O'Connor gained creative impetus to apply a more positive overarching design to her stories than before. Yet she never relinquished her strong Catholic understanding that without Christ present in the real and fictional universe, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold".<sup>7</sup> In Brian Wicker's words, Christ is "the arch-enemy of cosmic collapse: the centre of a life-asserting organization and energy directed towards defeat of an otherwise inexorable process of disintegration" (1975: 30-1).<sup>8</sup> O'Connor felt free to respond to the Jesuit-palaeontologist as an artist, but she admitted that the theologian or scientist has to struggle far harder to evaluate his hypotheses (*Reviews*: 87-8). Indeed, she did not claim authority to comment from a scientific point of view, but did dare to speak from an amateur theological perspective, in asserting that Teilhard's emphasis on the sacredness of matter is a "very old way" (87). She held that his understanding of cosmic interconnectedness is a scientific reinterpretation of the Pauline mystical body — "In him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). Furthermore, O'Connor almost certainly read Aquinas's meditation on God's "governance through providence" in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the thesis of which would seem to undergird and even inform Teilhard's basic proposition — "things distinct from one another... all converge into one order".<sup>9</sup>

To O'Connor, there seemed sufficient theological support for Teilhard to be studied seriously if not espoused in totality. He effectively reintroduced an account of spirit into the closed world of the naturalists (a recapturing of the medieval imagination); he again faced the scientific age towards Christ. "It is doubtful if any Christian of this century can be fully aware of his religion", she commented, "until he has reseen it in the cosmic light which Teilhard has cast upon it" (*Reviews*: 108). She grew impatient with the deep-seated suspicion in Catholic authoritative circles, suspicion that apparently stemmed from dwelling on the letter, not the spirit, of his writing (*Letters*: 486). (That she felt so strongly about letting his voice be heard, suggests that his message struck a very personal note — for hope?) Jacques Maritain, for one, seriously questioned the validity of his radical evolutionist thought. In *The Peasant of the Garvonne* (1968),

Maritain argues that Teilhard's vision "is enchanted with the spectacle of the divine ascent of creation toward God. But then what does it tell us of the essential, of the mystery of the cross and redemptive blood? Or of the grace whose presence in a single soul is worth more than all of nature or of that love which makes us co-redeemers with Christ, and those blessed tears through which his peace reaches us?"<sup>10</sup> While O'Connor did admit that Teilhard's work is "incomplete and unclear on the subject of grace", she nonetheless argued that the Jesuit did *not* believe it "comes up from the bottom instead of down from the top", that is, from the creation rather from the resurrected Christ (*Letters*: 486-7).<sup>11</sup>

Probably so taken with Teilhard's affirmation of the world, O'Connor remained strangely uncritical about his tendency to pantheise Christ and oddly quiet about his unorthodox conception of evil. She no doubt found his voice singular, "a cry out of the gathering dusk" to borrow a phrase from one of her own stories (*Stories*: 268).<sup>12</sup> In *The Divine Milieu* (1960), the volume that serves as a religious meditation to his first scientific work, Teilhard writes that "evil is an annihilation which makes room for God's entry into the world". In the same work, he celebrates in psalm to God, "The more deeply and incurably the evil is encrusted in my flesh, the more it will be you that I am harbouring" (1960: 70). Claude Tresmontant assesses Teilhard's understanding of evil, at best, as "a temporary defect in a progressive arrangement", an evil *in matter*, like cancer in a body.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Teilhard's conception goes further: in his view, evil actually contributes to the process of cosmogenesis. Teilhard conceived of evil as essentially passive, as a diminishment that God ultimately fills and which is necessary to the spiritual evolution of the world. At Point Omega, he believed, a synthesis will occur between the "noosphere" (the universe raised towards absolute consciousness) and the "Theosphere" (God's final filling of the hollowed-out "structural hell"). Unlike Hegel's postulation, the synthesis will not be between thesis and antithesis, but "the bending of two positive halves towards union" (Montgomery 1969: 37). Teilhard himself speaks of "[a] Personal, transcendent God [who has subsumed hell] and an evolving Universe no longer forming two hostile centres of attraction, but entering into hierarchical conjunction to raise the human mass on a single tide" (1965: 75).<sup>14</sup> In contrast, a Christian orthodox viewpoint, according to

Maritain, holds that the “history of the world progresses *at the same time* in the line of evil and in the line of good”.<sup>15</sup> In 1960, O’Connor marked this passage: “The whole spectacle of things is that of a procession of things good wounded by non-being and producing by their activity an indefinitely-increasing accumulation of being and of good, in which that same activity also carries the indefinitely-growing wound — as long as the world exists — of non-being and of evil”.<sup>16</sup> At no time did O’Connor consciously forsake her own long-held belief in original sin and the devil’s reality. As her late stories bear out and as her late commentary shows, she still believed that the devil’s aim is “destruction of the Divine plan” (*Letters*: 456), yet also that he could be the tutor of “lessons that lead to self-knowledge” (*Letters*: 439). Although she was encouraged, and apparently somewhat enthralled, by Teilhard’s powerfully redemptive understanding, she did not abandon her assumptions about the human and diabolical propensity to transgress and destroy. What her interest in Teilhard seems to have done is to strengthen her understanding that divine providence works through evil as well as good, through the negative as well as the positive.

The stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* would seem to incorporate a tension between a Teilhardian visionary optimism and an Augustinian awareness of human depravity. At one extreme, the intimation is that divine energy will engulf evil in its momentum; at the other extreme, the warning is that human sinfulness will disqualify many from inclusion and fulfilment in the divine plan. It was conceivable to O’Connor that sin could affect the harmony of the whole. She marked a section in Jesuit John McKenzie’s *The Two-Edged Sword* (1956) which emphasises that, in Hebrew thought, sin is not merely “a breach of a statute” but a “cosmic disorder” (*Library*: 40). The narratives — at least those involving adults — do not show a strident positive movement towards godliness, but rather the resistance of characters to rise of their own accord. In order to correct the strong pull of sin and to place it below that of a deep-dwelling tug towards God, the characters undergo discipline from God (which might mean being handed over to the devil). If, in the place of negation, the characters come to accept responsibility for their dissension in the grand scheme of things, they become open to grace and to participating in a true rising. It is worth mentioning that, in *The Phenomenon of Man*,

Teilhard did make some mention of temporary and limited hindering effects to the process of evolutionary movement towards convergence: what he called the “doctrine by isolation” and the “cynical and brutal theories” of the modern world (1959: 262).<sup>17</sup> Evolution must, however, always begin with what is “worst” in individuals, Edward Kessler points out (1986: 96). This is the premise with which O’Connor began and on which she built. O’Connor’s dependence on descent, discipline and destruction before reception of grace and salvific ascent is corroborated by a 1961 letter: “I don’t know if anyone can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime” (*Letters*: 427).

Written between 1956 and 1964, the nine stories of the collection span nearly a decade. Many of the stories emerged during the same period that O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* was being developed (1953-60): a season of intense reflection and revision. In 1955, O’Connor wrote to ‘A’ “I am trying to make this new novel more human, less farcical. A great strain for me” (*Letters*: 111). It is credible that she aims to achieve similar ends in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, that is, to more fully incarnate her characters, to resist the pull towards a *Wise Blood* type of caricatural reductiveness and towards a mode of almost overwhelming negation. At various points in her second collection of short stories, she qualifies a satirical use of the grotesque by investing many of her distorted or exaggerated personae with anagogical significance, that is, she accentuates the potentiality of the unfinished, ugly form. For example, the frenzied faith-healer, Mrs Greenleaf, is rejuvenatingly rather than grimly grotesque: the uninhibited openness of the woman’s grotesque body suggests a coupling and birthing which, in Bakhtinian conception, is life-giving rather than death-invoking. Unified with the developing cosmos, Mrs Greenleaf is “a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth” (*Stories*: 317). On the other hand, the petite, angular Mrs May, epitomising the ‘classical’ body, resists all identification with the earth and its people — until she is gored to death by a wild bull. O’Connor’s extraordinary characters of her post-1955 period — Mrs Greenleaf, Rufus Johnson, Francis Marion Tarwater, for example — despite their manias and misgivings, acknowledge that the universe is bursting with presence and ordered by providence.

Fourteen-year-old Tarwater, even in his rebellious state, is highly conscious of the world's sacredness: he "tried to keep his vision on an even level, to see no more than what was in front of his face" (*Violent*: 21).

It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than what was needed to place something — a spade, a hoe, the mule's hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him — that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation. (*Violent*: 22)

Yet, because Tarwater distances himself from participating in the Creation, like many of O'Connor's characters in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, he has to discover displacement from God and from goodness before ultimate reconciliation can become a possibility. In the end, divested of selfhood through being homosexually raped, he comes to recognise that his invisible subtle-talking Friend is the Devil himself. Exorcising the fiend, he receives the prophetic command he has been dreading and desiring all his days — the words "silent as seeds [open] one at a time in his blood" (242).

In O'Connor's mature work, extraordinary degrading or destructive actions bring to bear pressure on the inner self to change. *The Violent Bear It Away* reveals this combative or incisive power to be divine in origin.<sup>18</sup> As the child evangelist in the novel, Lucette Carmody, proclaims from her pulpit: "Love cuts like the cold wind and the will of God is plain as the winter" (*Violent*: 132). When her eyes meet Rayber's, he "feels a deep shock [go] through him"; he is "certain that the child look[s] directly into his heart" (131). In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, in congruence with her practice in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and as a development of the impetus in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor chooses the action of piercing or penetrating to show divine visitation. O'Connor's pre-1952 work, in contrast, shows a piercing that is theotropic in nature. Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* wraps himself penitentially in barbed wire and walks in shoes full of sharp stones before shoving lime into his eyes. The movement from theotropicism in *Wise Blood* to anthropotropism in O'Connor's later work, as well as from isolation to communality, is suggested by the different closures of O'Connor's two novels: Hazel retreats from the world, but Tarwater returns to the city to warn "the children of God" of impending eschatological Fire (*Violent*: 243).

One could further argue that the endings of the stories in O'Connor's two collections differ in ways that are subtle but significant. On the whole, the posthumous volume provides a measure more insight into the nature of the climaxes, through both 'showing' and 'telling', than the first. Richard Giannone suggests that if most of the endings of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* "show how spirit drives an openness to the infinite", then Teilhardian thought frees O'Connor in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* "to enter more tender zones of feeling that this openness exposes" (1989: 157). O'Connor wrote in 1960 that she began to think "more and more about the presentation of love and charity" (*Letters*: 373). O'Connor's child-protagonist stories of her first collection anticipate the insights of tenderness and union that come in her second collection. An expression of new misery, an embraced child, a defeated human stance, a daring hope of counting,<sup>19</sup> usher in the gentler moments of her second collection: an adult man calling for "Mamma", the gasp of an artist, a counsellor struck dumb with horror, the tears of a tattooed man.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in the quieter moments, as one reviewer claimed, O'Connor is capable of producing the violence of revelation, which matches the power of physical confrontation (Poirer 1965: 22). (The reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* were noticeably more in-depth and affirmative than for O'Connor's previous work. It should be noted that the publication of her first Christian essay in 1957 gave critics a handle on what she was trying to achieve. Still, one wonders to what degree O'Connor's unfortunate death coloured the reviews written.<sup>21</sup>) Owing an Augustinian understanding of human sinfulness, O'Connor knew "how deep in you have to go to find love" — "It is what is invisible that God sees" (*Letters*: 308). In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, she shows God's actions penetrating the fibre of every person's being. It is no wonder that an icicle on the ceiling, a bull's horn and a tattooist's needle come to represent God's dealings with three of her recalcitrant characters. "The Holy Spirit rarely shows himself on the surface of anything" (*Letters*: 307), she affirmed.

If confrontations between denizens and outsiders typify the stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, then strained relationships between generations characterise the fictions of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Joyce Carol Oates (1973: 157) remarks that displaying intergenerational tensions presents a way of making explicit the psychological

and spiritual difficulty — indeed impossibility — of ascending to a higher self of one’s own accord. Similarly, in depicting uneasy interracial relationships, the human struggle involved in moving into a higher level of communal existence is implied. True to her respect for the immediate and concrete, O’Connor concentrates on the interpersonal and familial to suggest the universal and eschatological. O’Connor acknowledges the goodness of existence and the hope of ultimate harmony, yet through the same eyes sees the world degenerating into a “terrible” state (*Letters*: 90). Bryan N. Wyatt suggests that the domestic arena becomes, in effect, a “synecdoche” of this degeneration, while “providing a resistance to it” — “a tension affording possibilities for desirable modes of interaction” (1992: 69). Of the nine stories in the collection, four revolve around uneasy relationships between mothers and sons (not mothers and daughters as in the previous collection), and the same proportion of stories present problematic racial interactions between black and white. The grotesque brokenness of this world is pictured in abusive relationships and embittered social interaction (amongst other manifestations), but the anagogical unity of a future existence, a peculiar sublimity, is, on occasion, glimpsed at — for instance, in Ruby Turpin’s vision of “souls rumbling toward heaven” (508) or in Parker’s spiritual transformation into “a perfect arabesque of colours” (528).

The stories of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* are not, of course, monochromatic in tone, degree of narrative sympathy for the characters, or treatment of mode. Moreover, no story treats the interlocking of the anagogical and grotesque modes in a way that is identical to another. Needless to say, the collection requires complex responses throughout. As in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the point of view in her second collection shifts from story to story, thus implying the re-angling of the divine spotlight which targets individuals for salvation. It is through variation in point of view, differentiation in plot scenario, and distinction in handling closure, that O’Connor avoids mere repetition.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of discussion, I will not reflect the original chronological order, but examine the stories as constituting three groups, beginning with the widow-son stories of ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’, ‘The Enduring Chill’ and ‘Greenleaf’. (‘The Comforts of Home’, also falling within this category, will for the sake of brevity be omitted from discussion.<sup>23</sup>) The group following, comprising ‘A View

of the Woods' and 'The Lame Shall Enter First', centres on fraught child-parent figure relationships and traces an inexorable movement towards heinous death of the young and their conceived spiritual rebirth. The final three fictions could not foreground three more different characters — a loquacious, matronly woman ('Revelation'), a brawny, tattooed man ('Parker's Back') and a sickly, bigoted pensioner ('Judgement Day') — yet all three tales generate consciousness of redemption beyond discipline, beyond death.

Flannery O'Connor's second collection of short stories, like her first, is constituted in the 'inbetween' place, neither completely in the light of affirmation or the darkness of disaffirmation, although individual stories may well be characterised more by the one domain than the other. At least two late stories, 'Revelation' and 'Parker's Back' suggest more explicitly than many of her earlier stories an end in redemption — without recourse to intrusive narrative commentary *en bloc* (as in 'The Artificial Nigger') or extra-textual guidance (as in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'). At least one of her pieces, 'A View of the Woods', shows the conscious rejection of Christ, thus echoing 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', but providing more contextual detail and intrusive insight pertaining to the decision. O'Connor again struggles through a hazardous passage in seeking a way of effectual representation. She finds the terms of her appeal, it seems, not in an harmonious wedding of impulses but in a bold interpenetration of positive and negative, anagogical and grotesque. If goodness is to be found in this collection, it will emerge from the effects of intervention from above and interconnection with others. Story after story strains towards the promise. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* labours with birth pangs for salvation to be unambiguously, startlingly revealed.

### **Thrusting into the Tide: 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'**

For one so outspoken about the dangers of "topicality", Flannery O'Connor uncharacteristically founds the dramatic action of her title story on an historic racial event.<sup>24</sup> 'Everything That Rises Must Converge', first published in 1961, takes place in the wake of the 1959 Montgomery, Alabama uprising that led to the much-resisted desegregation of buses in the South. A personal account, given by her impassioned liberal

friend, Maryat Lee, of an instructive encounter on a subway and a failed attempt at friendliness on an integrated bus, no doubt also provided material for O'Connor's imagination.<sup>25</sup> Among her contemporaries, O'Connor was known for her castigation of others' attempts to write about current issues. "The topical is poison" (*Letters*: 537), she writes to 'A' concerning Eudora Welty's 'Where Is the Voice Coming From?'.<sup>26</sup> To Brainard Cheney, she speaks of "the curse of topicality", but judges that his novel has overcome it (*Correspondence*: 109). Although she acclaimed the importance of everyday reality in fiction, she was chary of handling current issues that could easily inspire polemical and hackneyed pieces. The key to understanding why she used the "topical" as a basis for her title story would seem to lie in her application of the "physical proposition" she found in Teilhard. She writes to Roslyn Barnes that in this story she applied his conception "to a certain situation in the Southern states & indeed in all the world" (*Letters*: 438). The Teilhardian principle — everything that rises must converge — afforded her the means of expressing the topical as universal. Through a Teilhardian prism she could see the totality of the conflict as global. As Anthony Di Renzo suggests, words like "*integration and segregation, union and secession*" take on a cosmic as well as a local meaning in O'Connor (1993: 199). The idea that issues of race are not an end in themselves comes under strong censure from Toni Morrison, but gains a measure of regard from O'Connor's contemporary, yet socially distant, Georgian, Alice Walker. Morrison remains set against the strategy of rendering "timeless" the historical struggle of blacks (1992: 66). But Walker concedes, perhaps through gritted teeth, that "*essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture" (1975: 77). 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' may, however, not be the "essential", or quintessential, O'Connor story in that it does not use the accidents of this world to suggest the next as manifestly as many other stories.

As we know, O'Connor's confessed aim, as a fiction writer, was to be true "to time and eternity", to what she "sees and believes", to the "relative and absolute" (*Prose*: 177). Time *and* eternity, the tangible present *and* mysterious future, are of course both crucial to the construction of the anagogical and grotesque modes, as she saw them. In this famous opening story, however, she does not appear to gain that eternal perspective

as clearly as in, for example, 'The Artificial Nigger' (despite its tendency to 'tell' not 'show') or as dramatically as in 'Revelation'. In 'Everything That Rises Must Converge', O'Connor does not obviously "bend" the central actions in order to "show a hidden truth" (*Prose*: 179) — she does not rely heavily on the contorting power of the grotesque to represent racial conflict. Her subject matter has become so "inherently interesting" and striking in itself, Rob Johnson suggests, that she gives less attention to distorting it — and therefore perhaps to suggesting its spiritual significance (1992: 20). Bryan Wyatt calls O'Connor's story: "the most uniformly realistic of the volume" (1992: 68), which supports my observation that it incorporates both the grotesque and anagogical to a lesser degree than others.<sup>27</sup> O'Connor's 1961 story is an important one, nevertheless, in introducing the Teilhardian meditation into the collection and in conveying that Teilhard's proposition cannot be unthinkingly applied or disqualified.

The journey that Julian and his mother make into town can be read as an opportunity for discovery and change. Although it is only an outing to a 'reducing' class at the Y, it takes on proportions beyond the ordinary. Walking out of their apartment in a once-fashionable part of town, Julian remarks to himself how rundown the area has become, thus revealing an unspoken desire to return to better days. The narrator indicates that the "sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities" (*Stories*: 406). The mordant eventuality of the story is symbolically inferred right at the beginning. If mother and son do not espouse change, they will stagnate in the "dying violet" as "bulbous" and "liver-colored" entities.

While waiting for the bus to take them into town, Julian's mother discusses, in a fashionably derogatory way, the recent racial integration of transport services and other changes occurring as a result of the civil rights movement. Her pronouncement regarding the improved status of black Americans indicates the nature of her history and loyalties: "They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (*Stories*: 408). The "florid"-faced woman, once aristocratic, fails to recognise the importance of true acceptance in integration; in Teilhard's terms, she fails to "move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love" (1965: 11). At one level, the story illustrates the

repercussions of resisting the historical process of change and, at another level, suggests the consequences of moving against the universal movement towards mystical oneness.

In ostensible contrast to his prejudiced mother, Julian Chestny, the underemployed writer, casts himself in the role of the black sympathiser. It is not difficult to gather from O'Connor's treatment of the character, however, that Julian's energies are in fact devoted to himself alone. He implicitly resists participation in a universal progression towards unity because, like O'Connor's other pseudo-intellectuals, he keeps his distance from others, especially from his mother, his progenitor and an emblem of his "ultimate Parent" — God (Wood 1988: 119). To escape her senseless chatter on the bus, Julian withdraws "into the inner compartment of his mind": the place "where he spent most of his time" (*Stories*: 411). Only within "a kind of mental bubble", can he feel "free from the general idiocy of his fellows" (411). As "disenchanted" with life as a fifty-year old (412), he responds negatively to the vastness of reality. He is symptomatic of the person who considers himself, according to Teilhard, "within such immensity" to be "lost". It seems that "there is nothing left for him to do but shut his eyes and disappear".<sup>28</sup> Julian's morbid reveries effectively cut him off from the concrete world, so that he remains sterile as an artist, blind to the supernatural realm, and unavailing in the universal process of interconnection.

Julian condemns his mother for hankering after her long-gone family heritage of plantation living, yet he makes a habit of mentally retreating into the old family mansion, "into the high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture" (*Stories*: 413-14). The frustrated intellectual treats his weekly trips to the Y with his widowed mother as a gesture of martyrdom. Unlike his thirteenth-century namesake, St. Julian of Hospitator, he rejects the one who appears most repugnant to him, his mother. Legend has it that St. Julian kept a hideous leper warm and alive, "mouth to mouth, breast to breast", and, as a result, witnessed the leper turning into Christ.<sup>29</sup> Julian Chestny, has no intention, however, of showing compassionate identification with his deplorable mother. In fact, he devises how he can "break" the pitiful woman's "spirit" (409). Sitting on the bus, he imagines with ecstasy the supreme taboo of bringing home "a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman" (414). His diabolical desire to destroy stems from his

claim to “organize every form of human life whether individual, family or society without reference to God”.<sup>30</sup> In the light of his “evil urge” (109), Julian’s articulated concern for the oppressed black race is “wrapped in theory”, in essence, a form of tenderness “long since cut off from the person of Christ” and, therefore, potentially capable of almost any atrocity (*Prose*: 227). Julian considers that fate is on his side when his mother’s “black double” (419) enters the bus. Bulging out of her dress and shoes, this “giant of a woman” bears a disposition that warns: DON’T TAMPER WITH ME. She is accompanied by a little boy and, to Julian’s surprise and delight, she sports the same ghastly hat that his mother is wearing proudly for the first time. He cruelly sets his mother up for dire humiliation in the face of her “double” — the impetus which, taken to an extreme, suggests parricide. Ralph Wood (1988: 119) recalls Fyodor Dostoevsky’s observation that to desire annihilation of one’s progenitors, however awful they are, is ultimately to attack God as well. When Mrs Chestny does, in the end, suffer a fatal stroke, Julian becomes horrifyingly aware of his culpability.

The closing scene of the story shows Julian, the ironic saint, trying to make a moral point in the face of a larger spiritual lesson *he* will have to learn. He tries to dissuade his mother from giving the little black boy a “bright new penny” as they get off the bus, foreseeing that the humiliating display of “old manners” will incite the indignation of the boy’s mother. Indeed, the “giant” black matron explodes at the white women’s impertinence and knocks Julian’s “dwarf-like” mother to the ground with her imposing pocketbook (419). Exasperated, Julian stoops to give his panting, red-faced mother, a hand up. As they walk on slowly towards the Y, he explains: “That was the whole colored race”, not “just an uppity Negro woman” who reacted against her condescension (*Stories*: 419).

Viewed comically, the scene shows women from different sides of “the fence”, who rise above themselves to buy an expensive hat, and then literally converge, or collide, in their upward mobility. The seriousness of Mrs Chestny’s condition only becomes evident when she does not react in any way to her son’s cruel moralising. Only when she calls out faintly for “home”, “Grandpa” and her childhood nanny, “Caroline”, does Julian realise that she is in another state of mind altogether. Looking directly at her, he sees a

“face he had never seen before” (420). The new “face” Mrs Chestny acquires in the midst of her violent stroke is reminiscent of the “new misery” Mrs Cope evinces as she undergoes terrible, purgative change. As Julian’s mother becomes grotesquely deformed, and then irretrievably detached from the world, the bewildered son enters into an awful state of alienation. The narrator indicates that a “tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him” (420); in the widening void, Julian experiences the terrifying loss of human presence. In the end, she has no name for the son who wished to see her suffer; her one functioning eye “rake[s]” his face for recognition, but finds “nothing” (420).

The means by which Julian may ultimately come to God is negative and painful. In the abyss of dislocation from his mother, he comes to see the horror of his culpability. As Julian tries to run for help, the “tide of darkness seem[s] to sweep him back to her” (420). He attempts to move away, but is resisted. He becomes caught in the horror, in the ebb and flow of a purgatorial tide which “postpon[es] from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (420). What Julian experiences is not the spiralling Teilhardian tide of rising consciousness, but the requisite horizontal, to-and-fro movement of discipline. In being propelled, again and again, back to his mother, he will face, over and over, the meaning of his relationship to her and to all the old timers and idiots of the world. As Teilhard reflects in ‘Meditation’, “A state of isolation... will end / If we begin to discover in each other / Not merely the elements of one and the same thing, / But of a single Spirit in search of itself.”<sup>31</sup> The promise of his ultimate entry into a state of contrition and freedom is signalled by a desperate cry for his mother: “Mamma, Mamma!” (420). In momentarily returning to a child-like state, he does not regress, but indicates a desire to advance into humility. The promise of anagogical freedom is suggested, but, for the present, Julian is caught in the furore of grotesque action. For now, neither the plaintive intellectual nor the reader is released to calmer waters.

## **Pinioning in Ice: ‘The Enduring Chill’**

One of Flannery O’Connor’s most lightly and comically rendered of stories about the journey to self-knowledge is ‘The Enduring Chill’. Its humour retains O’Connor’s

incisive edge, but the action does not cut as harshly; it does not obliterate the protagonist in the throes of awakening, as if to preserve the moment's sanctity. Grace is not manifested grotesquely, in the Kayserian sense of being more terrible than comic, but it is revealed through the banal, even absurd, hierophany of the bird-like water stain — grotesque in the sense that sacred penetrates profane and that the Baptismal Dove suffers degradation. One might say that the means by which a miracle is brought about in this tale is “slight or ridiculous” (*Reviews*: 61).<sup>32</sup> Joyce Carol Oates considers that the story does not have “the aesthetic power to move us” that belongs to her “more sharply imagined works” (1973: 156). But, I would argue that the story's lesser emphasis on violent grotesquery provides a rejuvenating contrast to the many tales in which brutalities occur. In my view, ‘The Enduring Chill’ shows spiritual truth in the context of uproarious comedy. John Desmond observes that the story deepens the theme of “descent into history”, that is, discovery of one's place in the world: the first necessary stage to effect “spiritual transformation within the mystical body” (1987: 74).

Confined to bed in his mother's house with an unknown but welcome disease, Asbury Fox reflects with pride that he has “always relied on himself” and has “never been a sniveler after the ineffable” (*Stories*: 378). His self-worship, his belief in his own gnostic mental capacity to create “meaningful experience[s]” for himself, is the illusory bubble which the Holy Spirit, incarnated as a water stain of a “fierce bird”, comes to puncture at the climax of ‘The Enduring Chill’. Asbury, a frustrated writer, like Julian, expends most of his energy on thinking, moreover, on fantasising — activities which preclude physical interaction with others and sensible discovery of the world. His inability to wed thought and experience, characteristic of the modern individual according to Teilhard, causes him to look at things which surround him as if “from the outside” (1959: 218-9). For Asbury, returning South to Timberoro after years in New York is a tragic event, a marked descent. From a metropolis where he could be totally devoted to “Art”, he now returns to a backwoods country junction where he has to endure his mother's conversation about “cows with names like Daisy and Bessie Button” and their “intimate functions” (*Stories*: 367). In O'Connor's universe, a sharp reorientation of focus is needed to deliver him from entrapment in sterile abstraction, and to birth him into

a world of real human identification. The emotion that impedes Asbury's call Godward needs to be brought down to earth (*Letters*: 100).

All his life Asbury Fox has longed to rise above the average, to create literary masterpieces in the vein of James Joyce or William Butler Yeats. But at age twenty-five and in a state of ill health, he has come to realise that, as an artist, he is a young failure and that Death now approaches "as a justification, as a gift from life" (370). A Kafkaesque letter written to his mother from New York, and to be delivered to her after his decease, explains that she is, in fact, the one who has "pinion[ed]" him (364). Her domesticating influence has rendered his imagination "incapable of flight" (364) like a caged hawk. Of course, in returning home to the "air" his mother breathes (365), he acutely feels her influence again — a pressure from above — yet it is more than her crooning hand: it is the Hand of God, at work. Mrs Fox, a ludicrous agent of God's affliction, is of course not herself exonerated from satire. She is another of O'Connor's hard-working, pragmatic mothers "whose insensitivity renders you furious and whose politeness makes you impotent" (Hendin 1976: 99). Her conventional wisdom and racist assumptions infuriate Asbury, but again it is the liberal son who receives the brunt of authorial censure. O'Connor often plays the devil's advocate in impugning the reformers more stringently than the racists (or sexists). Ralph Wood, in his searching article on O'Connor and race (1993-4: 102), reflects that, in O'Connor's view, rightful action against racial injustice could easily become a source of moral self-congratulation. She dangerously risks censure in order to show up hypocritical conformity.<sup>33</sup> While Mrs Fox waits disapprovingly in the next room, Asbury dismally fails at sharing a last "significant experience" with the black farm workers, Randall and Morgan (*Stories*: 80). With a sob from his sick bed, he tries to tell them that he is dying, but the two men assure him that he "certainly does look well" (380). (The painful failure to communicate recalls his unsuccessful attempt the summer before to share with the workers a forbidden secular "communion" of unpasteurised milk and cigarettes [368]). Randall and Morgan engage in the act of 'signifying' which Ralph Wood identifies as "the black verbal device for taunting oppressive whites with false praise" (1993-4: 105).<sup>34</sup> The black workers keep

Asbury at a distance, thus showing the young intellectual to be out of synch with their lives and, by inference, out of concord with a movement towards universal unity.

From the moment Asbury steps off the train to face the rising “startling white sun” at the beginning of the story to the instant he turns his head towards the setting “blinding red gold sun” at the end, he involuntarily participates in a downward movement towards self-knowledge, which will ultimately lead him upwards (*Stories*: 357, 382). The source of downward pressure, the stifling effect, which the sickly youth in the first instance associates with his mother, manifests itself in various forms during his stay in his old bedroom. Asbury cannot escape the water stain “bird” hanging from the ceiling moulding with an “icicle crosswise in its beak” (365). He comes under the “drill-like gaze” of the “asinine” physician, Dr Block (366). When he looks outside, he sees the “glaring china blue sky” (368). He is finally confronted with the “terrible eye” of the half-blind Father Finn piercing him with accusation. The unrefined, disfigured Jesuit serves as the grotesque foil of the distinguished “Ignatius Vogle, S. J.” whom Asbury once met in New York at a lecture on Vedanta. The one-eyed Jesuit bluntly restates the truth that the city priest uttered to Asbury about becoming a “New Man”: “The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are — a lazy ignorant conceited youth!” (377).

After encounter upon encounter of personal attack, Asbury develops a “terrible sense of foreboding” (381). The last humbling blow arrives in the closing scene “with the force of a gunshot”: his mother’s overjoyed voice informs him that he has no fatal illness (worthy of artists), only undulant fever, a cow’s disease (381). The weight of bathos sets in, destroying the young man’s pride and creating a void of the self. Then in being almost blinded by the light of the sunset, Asbury is plunged into the darkness of who he is: a deluded and despondent sinner. In staring back at the ceiling, the water stain suddenly becomes hierophantic and the Holy Spirit plunges as if to effect compunction.<sup>35</sup> Asbury’s “last film of illusion” is ripped away by the squall that the “fierce bird” makes in its mystical descent; the sickly individual sees that “for the rest of his days he would live in the face of a purifying terror” (382). The Bird does not alight on him, as in Christ’s baptism (Matthew 3: 16), but threatens to pierce him like D. H. Lawrence’s primeval hummingbird (“a jabbing terrifying monster”) or like the sharp “sword” that Christ claims

to bring (Matthew 10: 34). The Bird comes “emblazoned in ice”, not the Pentecostal fire that T. S. Eliot records,<sup>36</sup> to bring the enduring chill of conviction requisite to salvation. For as long as the Holy Spirit descends, riveting Asbury anagogically to the earth, to the ordinary dust of the South, he will be a good man. In the “fierce bird”, the grotesque and anagogical fuse: the divine is degraded, but sacred manifestation occurs.

In stark contrast to the triumphantly secular epiphany of Stephen Dedalus as a “new soaring impalpable, imperishable being”,<sup>37</sup> Asbury’s apocalypse is a comic deflation. Indeed, the hope of his future creativity lies in his degradation. Brought down to the raw truth of existence, to think “not what you are but that you are” (*Reviews*: 122), Asbury might well realise that an enduring artist creates “a world with weight and extension” (*Prose*: 92). Moreover, in O’Connor’s scheme, he might learn that “the human comes before art,” and that art is for “returning your talent increased to the invisible God to use or not use as he sees fit” (*Letters*: 419). The “last impossible protest” that the sickly artist mouths in the presence of God, ushers in a new life of purgation, in all likelihood anticipating a chorus that he will one day join with all the country people of the world.

### **Stabbing the Heart: ‘Greenleaf’**

Doubtless one of Flannery O’Connor’s most chilling and perplexing of stories is the one simply entitled ‘Greenleaf’. The narrator allows the widowed Mrs May, a “small woman” with gray hair rising “like the crest of some disturbed bird” (*Stories*: 313), to suffer excruciatingly. She is so cruelly treated by her two sharp-tongued sons, Wesley and Scofield, who detest anything to do with her hard-won dairy farm, that her death on the horns of an ill-pedigreed bull does not seem totally unimaginable. In fact, the bull, initially described as a gangly “country suitor”, appears less threatening at first than her fierce sons.

“You’re always yapping about when-you-die”, Wesley growls. A fear of death, and even more so, an obsession with denigration of her farm, plague Mrs May night and day. The parallels are striking between this hardened widow and Mrs Cope in ‘A Circle in the Fire’; yet there is one difference: Mrs May winces when she hears the name

“Jesus”, Mrs Cope all too frequently invokes the name of God for good luck. The narrator sardonically belies Mrs May’s true attitude: “she had a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (316). Mrs May’s icy reserve for religion no doubt gives rise to Frederick Asals’ assertion that ‘Greenleaf’ is the “single” O’Connor work in which the protagonist “seems to harbor no longing, however suppressed, for the divine” (1982: 223). He further remarks, thinking of Mrs May’s bloody impaling on the bull’s horns, that the story “marks an extreme limit” in Flannery O’Connor’s oeuvre: “Such violent overpowering of the self by a God unknown and apparently undesired appears nowhere else in her fiction” (1982: 222-3). Mark S. Sexton, however, argues convincingly that the “iron”-willed (*Stories*: 322) woman actually fosters “an unconscious, almost instinctive longing for a powerful force to destroy her materialistic self” (1990: 42). At the end of the story, when Mrs May waits on the hood of her car for the tenant farmer, Mr Greenleaf, to arrive on the heels of the bull, she considers, “almost with pleasure”, that if he should be gored and if she were to be sued, it would be “the fitting end to her fifteen years with the Greenleafs”. It would be “the perfect ending to a story” she imagines telling her friends (*Stories*: 333). Her masochistic proclivity suggests a deep, unintelligible longing to be overpowered by One stronger than herself: distorted evidence of “metaphysical memory”. The woman’s hideous death is grotesque — a dreadfully fitting fulfilment of her death-wish — and yet anagogical as it brings her brutally into contact with the God she does not *consciously* want to know.

The affliction that Mrs May suffers at the hands of her male progeny, and on the horns of the virulent bull, recalls the intrusion of male outsiders in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, who demolish female rule yet at the same time, almost inconceivably, bring spiritual deliverance. The story is particularly reminiscent of, yet more complex and brutal than, ‘A Circle of Fire’. As Claire Kahane points out, O’Connor’s widowed and divorced proprietors are again and again revealed to lack the power they think they have, which suggests that, for O’Connor, “the female role itself is burdened with anxiety, that being a woman in itself involves culpability” (1974: 127). In a similar vein, Louise Westling proposes that, for O’Connor, “independent female authority is unnatural and must be crushed by male force”. Westling does not hesitate to suggest that the “male

incursions amount to a kind of rape” (1988: 158). While sexual symbolism has traditionally been a Catholic vehicle for describing God’s intervention in human lives, as Westling reflects, in this story, O’Connor deliberately distorts and perverts the symbolism to the level of sexual assault. “The grotesque”, Ralph Wood observes, “is the artistic means O’Connor employs for the necessary act of theological aggression” (1988: 97). This perversion will, in all likelihood, leave the readers duly shocked, as O’Connor wished, but very possibly also beyond comprehension. The discrepancy between traditional uses of the erotic (to suggest the love relationship of the Bridegroom Christ to the Virgin Mary, the Church and individual worshippers<sup>38</sup>) and O’Connor’s symbolic deployment of brutal penetration, is stark and could be interpreted as little more than blasphemy and misogyny. The risk seemed worth it to O’Connor: God’s love had to be shown in ways that could not be sentimentally predicted.

Mrs May’s plight is clear: she has no one — no males — who are of any good on the farm. She is harassed by dreams of being consumed by voracious forces. She has come to see herself as her only salvation and thereby isolates herself from the unrestrained, low-class Greenleafs, the uncooperative black workers, and ultimately from her own feckless sons. This course of action, however, is antagonistic to the Teilhardian incentive to move towards, not away, from others. “To be fully ourselves”, the Jesuit-scientist conjectures, “it is in the opposite direction, in the direction of convergence with all the rest, that we must advance” (1959: 263). In this story, anagogical harmony is grotesquely pictured in the life of the fertile Greenleafs: the sprawling family, consisting of the “large and loose” mother, the father with the “high-shouldered creep”, and the five “filthy” girls. They thrive like “lilies of the field” (*Stories*: 319) — the inference being that they remain under God’s generous care, neither toiling nor spinning, as they remain close to the earth (Matthew 6: 28). In contrast, Mrs May’s “iron hand”, symbolic of her ‘royal consciousness’, is likened to “the head of a broken lily” (*Stories*: 322). Her fragility in the scheme of the universe is emphasised.

The male Greenleaf twins, O. T. and E. T., having fought in World War II, represent an advanced generation which embraces suffering, change, opportunity, growth and integration of people groups. Having returned from the War with French wives, they

set up a peaceably run, modern farming enterprise and produce many children each. Considering their ingenuity and productivity, Mrs May reflects with horror that the Greenleafs may soon become “*Society*” (*Stories*: 318). O. T. and E. T., almost identical in name, appearance, disposition and vision, stand in sharp contrast to her own sons, Wesley and Scofield, antithetical in looks, personality and outlook. The latter pair symbolises the ugly discord in humanity that hinders the movement towards mystical community. One day through “a wall of tears” (321), Mrs May denounces them as her offspring, but is later brutally rebutted by their “knife edge” accusation, given in “Greenleaf English”, that she is not, in fact, their mother (327). In the wake of this familial rupture, Mrs May sets off to destroy. Her target is the embodiment of Greenleaf contamination, the scrub bull belonging to O. T. and E. T., which threatens to infiltrate her cows with inferior genes and to constantly remind her of Greenleaf fortitude.

Although Mrs May instinctively invites destruction, it is not until the end of the tale that she realises she has a “special appointment”, observes Richard Giannone (1989: 166). Inferred from the beginning, however, is the idea that she is being beckoned and chased and targeted. The opening scene depicts the scrub bull appearing outside Mrs May’s window at night, according to the narrator, like “some patient god come down to woo her” (*Stories*: 311) or like an “uncouth country suitor” (312). Vegetation becomes caught in his horns like “a menacing prickly crown” (312), attributing to the animal’s rather comical presence a specific sacral significance. At this early stage of the narrative, the bull’s allusion to Christ is abruptly clear, although the menace of the crown is suggestive of Christ’s adversary, the devil. The connection between Christ and the bull is not as complete, Steven T. Ryan points out, as that between the sun and the Son of God in this story (1979: 46). Numerous references to anthropotropic motions from *in front* and *above* heighten the narrative to an anagogical level. Fifteen years before the present action of the story, Mrs May, on hearing “Jesus”! Jesus!” issuing from Mrs Greenleaf in a “prayer healing” ritual, had felt “some violent, unleashed force... charging towards her” (*Stories*: 316).<sup>39</sup> Now visiting O. T. and E. T.’s farm to ask them to fetch their bull, Mrs May becomes conscious that the sun<sup>is</sup> directly above “like a bullet ready to drop into her brain” (*Stories*: 325). In a dream that night, she sees the sun, like a “bullet”, bursting

through the treeline and racing toward her (329). Following the lead of Melvin J. Friedman (1985: 18) and Giannone (1989: 167), I suggest that 'Greenleaf' represents a link between O'Connor's two short story collections. First published in 1956, the earliest in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the story, as I point out, incorporates the well-developed notion of violent 'horizontal' attack by a male opponent, as well as a strong sense of 'vertical' incursion from above. The unstoppable growth and interpersonal bonding epitomised by the Greenleafs anticipate what O'Connor later came to understand as a Teilhardian propulsion towards universal coalescence.

The central stage of action in the last scene is "a green arena", a pasture "encircled almost entirely by woods" (*Stories*: 321). Here, Mrs May waits on the hood of her car (a symbol of self-assertion) for Mr Greenleaf to reappear with news of the dead scrub bull: her victory over Greenleaf impetuosity. The sacred enclosure of 'A Circle of the Fire' is again invoked, but in this story attributed deeper mythological allusion. The clearing becomes an "ancient circular meadow of rape" in which Mrs May, an Europa, is attacked by a dark Zeus (Westling 1985: 165). The woman's death by penetration is also suggestive of Durer's 'Rape of Persephone' which portrays Pluto carrying off Persephone on a unicorn into the underworld (Meek 1990: 33). On another level, Mrs May's going is a gruesome inversion of the popular medieval depiction of the trusting relationship between Christ and His bride: the unicorn and the virgin (Westling 1995: 165).<sup>40</sup> Instead of laying his head on the woman's lap, the animal in 'Greenleaf' thrusts one horn through her body (Meek 1990: 33). O'Connor draws on ancient pagan myth and medieval Christian legend to increase the symbolical extensions of her story, yet these resonances inevitably complicate the anagogical import — is Mrs May penetrated by an evil or a divine incarnation? Will she see heaven or hell?

The closing scene might be said to dramatise a grotesque consummation on an exceptionally bright and lively spring day — the sun is "red-hot overhead", the birds "[scream] everywhere", the grass is "almost too bright", the sky is a "piercing blue" (*Stories*: 330-32). The scrub bull, farcically termed "a gentleman" (323) by Mr Greenleaf, gambles into the pasture as if he were "overjoyed" to see Mrs May (333). At a first glance, he presents no threat, but when she looks again, he becomes "a violent black

streak” (333). That a familiar creature should suddenly appear strange suggests “abysmal ominousness”, according to Wolfgang Kayser (1963: 182). Once laughable, the bull is now terrifying — “a wild tormented lover” (*Stories*: 333). The animal at once grotesquely manifests the brutality of the demonic and the jealousy of the divine. If he appears evil, it is to inflict judgement; if he appears incensed, it is to unite with his bride. One horn pierces Mr May’s heart: a harsh ascetic action, a form of compunction, which breaks open the seat of human sin (Jeremiah 17: 9). “There is your world within”, Gerard Manley Hopkins writes of the heart: “There rid the dragons, root out there the sin.”<sup>41</sup> The dark void of iniquity is exposed as the heart is stabbed. This action recalls Simone Weil’s metaphor of personal ascesis, which O’Connor found monstrous but compelling (*Letters*: 343): a nail is driven into the soul to produce a void which mystically (negatively) draws one closer to God.<sup>42</sup>

The bull’s second horn curves around Mrs May’s side and holds her in an “unbreakable grip”, a strong embrace, a sacramental moment of divine acceptance. The combined effect of the horns’ ferocious impact — first the puncturing, then the upholding — is that Mrs May’s perception of the world is transformed. Impaled and held high, she sees the tree line as her life in the greater scheme of the universe — as “a dark wound” (a void which God can now fill) in “a world that was nothing but sky” (*Stories*: 333). Though she appears as a blemish in the world’s scape, the bull’s horns serve as a means to redemption, as forceps for her spiritual birth into a new existence.<sup>43</sup> As the bull falls to the ground, quaking, after four shots from Mr Greenleaf, she is pulled forward and appears to Mr Greenleaf to be “whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (334). In becoming one with the scrub-bull, she seemingly realises that she has become one with the scrub-humans of the world, and thereby one with Christ who became incarnate in an ignominious form. Her end is both expiation and embrace. For Mrs May, gaining anagogical vision and salvation requires a grotesque slaying, which medievals like the anonymous poet of ‘Christ’s Love’ (ca. 1372) evidently recognised: “Love me slew/ And love me drew,/ And love laid me on bier.”

## Pushing into the Dirt: 'A View of the Woods'

How wrong Mr Fortune is in assuming that for adults, a road leads “either to heaven or hell”, but for children, there are “always stops along the way where their attention [can] be turned with a trifle” (*Stories*: 348). This seventy-year-old opportunist reduces children to the level of his own arrogant bias in a similar way to the manner in which he degrades nature for his own profit. Mary Fortune Pitts proves just the opposite of his presumption: she is unmoved by the pleas and threats of her grandfather that she agree to his plans for development. She remains set against his intentions to destroy the “view of the woods” and the cow pasture which commands it in order to make way for a new “gas station”. Like O’Connor’s roughly-hewn prophets — at two extremes, *The Misfit* and the *Displaced Person* — Mary Fortune Pitts envisages reality intuitively and, when it comes to absolutes, inflexibly. In her prophetic capacity, the nine-year old girl “shuns the middle of the road” and takes up an extreme position in defying her grandfather.<sup>44</sup> She is prepared to die to save her view: her bond with the transcendent.

‘A View of the Woods’ is Flannery O’Connor’s story most directly concerned with the conscious rejection of grace and resistance to human convergence in the divine design. To John Desmond, it is the piece that most precisely deals with the “mysterious role of evil... in the drive of history” (1987: 71). The tale is also one of two stories in the collection which juxtapose child-like and adult responses to the ineffable. The plot climaxes in the grotesque homicide of the nine-year-old Mary Fortune Pitts at the hands of her incensed grandfather: an action that seals his denial of grace. Although Mr Fortune favours his youngest granddaughter and namesake, Mary Fortune, who bears a strong resemblance to himself, he forbids any thought that she is a “Pitts” too, the youngest daughter of his “irascible”, “idiot” son-in-law. He spurns the notion that she, like any other human being (including himself), is not “good or bad”, but “good and bad”.<sup>45</sup> That a person is “a miscellany of goods and evils,/ A temper mixed with angels, beasts, and devils”<sup>46</sup> is the ultimate form of grotesquery to the haughty old man. His brand of “egoism”, defying association with common humanity, stands in opposition to the growth of the true collective “ego” or consciousness, in Teilhardian terms (1959: 263).

By the time Mr Fortune is forced to face his own human depravity, to see his own broken image, he has already repudiated another mysterious and offensive phenomenon of interpenetration: the spiritual imbuelement of nature. He cannot visually appreciate the natural splendour around him, nor penetrate its surface to recognise meaning, although he claims to be a man of “advanced vision” (*Stories*: 338). Nature becomes a means to an exploitative end, not an end in itself that testifies to Divinity. In the charged sphere of O’Connor’s world, the heedless destruction of the environment in deference to “development” signifies a desecration of what is holy. Cutting into the woods, notably, is the repugnant establishment belonging to the “snake”-like Tilman, the developer interested in Mr Fortune’s cow pasture. Tilman indiscriminately sells everything that people will buy and buys everything that people will sell. Both men of ‘progress’ show themselves guilty of “error in the matter of the universe”, which according to St. Thomas Aquinas, “means false opinion about God”.<sup>47</sup>

Once it becomes clear that little will stop Mr Fortune’s deal with Tilman, Mary Fortune Pitts mourns the loss of her play area, the pasture for her father’s cows and, most importantly, her panorama: her connection to a world beyond her own domestic entrapment in physical abuse from her father, and indeed, mental abuse from her grandfather. Recognising that the natural world has anagogical value because it reveals Christ, she looks at the scene “as if it were a person” (*Stories*: 347). To the literally-minded, narrow-visioned Mr Fortune, the view holds nothing much but a “profusion” of “weeds”, “a sullen line of black pine woods” and “one or two threadbare clouds” (347). Dorothy McFarland remarks that the natural scene has much the same sacramental function as the bull in ‘Greenleaf’: it embodies something “non-utilitarian” and “gratuitous” (1976: 51), the immeasurable mysterious presence of the Creator-Saviour. John Roos elucidates that Mary Fortune Pitts and her family, however flawed, rudimentarily display a Thomistic outlook which holds that nature, including the relationship to family, community and the world, is “the analogue to the divine life and the way [people] are imperfectly drawn to grace” (1992: 161). Mr Fortune, in sharp contrast, could be said to roughly espouse a Lockean worldview, which proposes that “individualism and the pursuit of ‘life, liberty, and estate’ serve as an alternative to

salvation” (Roos 1992: 161). The clash of these two worldviews leads inevitably to violence.

Mr Fortune’s opportunity to respond to the sacramentality of nature, and to receive saving grace, comes some time before the end of the story, allowing the reader to evaluate the consequences of his actions. The same afternoon that he watches his granddaughter commune with the natural scene, he gets up several times to look again at “the view”. Through the lens of his materialism, he looks for a spectacular feature, “a mountain” or “a waterfall” (which could be exploited for cash), but sees only Georgia “woods” (*Stories*: 348). The message of creation, however, is to suggest true advancement in the spirit, as R. S. Thomas intimates: “Progress/ is not with the machine;/ it is a turning aside,/ a bending over a still pool,/ where bubbles arise/ from unseen depths, as from truth/ breathing, showing us by their roundness/ the roundness of our world.”<sup>48</sup> The third time that Mr Fortune stares at the woods is, however, different: he seemingly enters *kairos*, divine time, as he witnesses “gaunt trunks... raised in a pool of red light” (348). He senses an “uncomfortable mystery” as if “someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood” (348). Despite himself, he views the scene anagogically: moving back in time to the Crucifixion where Christ’s blood was spilt, and forward in time to the ghastly murder he will perform in the “ugly red bald spot”, in the same clearing behind the trees where Mary Fortune’s father habitually beats her (*Stories*: 353). Pitts’ pick-up truck, which signifies the arrival of coarse humanity, breaks the “unpleasant vision” (348). Because Mr Fortune cannot reconcile “mystery” with “Pitts” (the ineffable with the carnal), nor himself with “Pitts” (the ‘advanced’ with the ‘primitive’), he shuts his eyes to the world. In the ensuing darkness of sleep, he views the apocalyptic consequence of his decision: “hellish red trunks [rise] up in a black wood” (348). What could have been heavenly, if accepted, now becomes infernal.

The denouement of the story traces Mr Fortune’s return to “the rattle of everything that [leads] to the future” (*Stories*: 348) — that is, in mechanical, one-dimensional “progress”, not in the ongoing redemptive process of history which incorporates the multi-dimensionality of existence. When he realises that his traditional ally in the family, Mary Fortune, refuses to co-operate with plans to ‘civilise’ the district and to frustrate her

cruel father, he tries to coax her back into his fold. She only reacts more viciously, however, which seemingly leaves him no choice but to whip her like Pitts, for whom she has a despicable respect. To his surprise, she retaliates viciously, kicking him in the crotch, biting him on the jaw, and sending him into the dirt. Mr Fortune was appalled at her earlier declaration of her ‘mixed’ blood — “I’m Mary-Fortune-Pitts” (351)<sup>49</sup> — but he now becomes enraged at her final proclamation on the matter: “I’m PURE Pitts” (355). It is so abhorrent to Mr Fortune that his look-alike denounces her higher self that he dashes her head on the ground, against a rock protruding from the clay. His abuse of his granddaughter reveals, of course, that he is exactly like “Pitts”, the reality of which he literally tries to exorcise from the child. In murdering the little girl, his scapegoat, he, in effect, repudiates Christ, the supreme admixture of human and divine.

Judgement is not long in coming. His own heart attacks him and, in falling to the ground, he has a hallucination of the sort he experienced earlier. He is pulled along into a trance-like confrontation with the woods, the man-made lake he once celebrated, and the illusion of escape. In his vision, the “gaunt trees” thicken into “mysterious dark files” and “[march] across the water and away into the distance” (356). The “hellish” pines come back to haunt him by leaving him helpless and drowning in the lake of his own making. Unlike the partially blind man in the gospels who sees people like trees moving forward in God’s providence, Mr Fortune treads water — stationary. The man of “progress” is left behind with the only other spiritless and immobile entity close by: the “huge yellow monster” of a machine that gorges itself on clay (356). It is too late for him to see that whether “life is in men, in animals, or in plants, it is always Life... it is always Jesus”.<sup>50</sup>

‘A View of the Woods’ provides a counter to the critical opinion that O’Connor’s characters are elected to, or exempted from, salvation, with little opportunity to exercise free will. Mr Fortune is privileged with a disturbing anagogical vision depicting the ultimate sacrifice made for him on the Tree. In rejecting it and the grotesqueness of Fortune-Pitts, he invites his own damnation. More so than in any other story, O’Connor shows that a “man is so free that with his last breath he can say *No*” (*Prose*: 182). If Julian, Asbury and Mrs May remain somewhat insensible to the surrounding world, they do not like Mark Fortune outrightly cut themselves off from grace which, as O’Connor

says, is a “very decided matter” (*Letters*: 389). Mary Fortune Pitts could in contrast to her resistant grandfather, be termed, by Teilhard, a “developed human being” who, in dying, achieves “conscious integration of the self with the outer world of men and nature, integration of the separate elements of the self with each other” (1959: 19).<sup>51</sup>

## **Summoning to the Extremity: ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’**

Flannery O’Connor’s second child story in the collection, ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’, might be considered a composite, ‘milestone’ piece in that it encompasses diverse aspects of her mature works. It hearkens back to the thematic elements of grotesque intrusion and child intuition in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. It refashions the core plot of *The Violent Bear It Away* (the problem child of a humanist father is pushed towards salvation and death). It shows the action being pushed to an extreme, followed by intrusive insight into a character’s changing, as occurs in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* to a greater extent than previously. Like the young hooligan “prophets” of ‘A Circle in the Fire’ and young Tarwater, Rufus Johnson illustrates Aquinas’ belief that spiritual vision is a gift which ‘sinners’ often evidence, rather than ‘good’ people who are inevitably caught up in themselves. The fourteen-year-old reprobate from the reformatory where Sheppard works part-time, intrudes into the social worker’s domestic haven to upset the status quo and to impose a new beginning. Having the appearance of an “irate drenched crow”, wearing his hair “Hitler fashion”, and boasting a shod clubfoot that shines “hideously”, Johnson functions as a grotesque seer (*Stories*: 453, 455, 470). The narrator accentuates his eerie, devilish qualities, while showing him to herald a message of truth (from God and the narrative voice itself). Johnson names Sheppard’s do-gooding delusions dead accurately: “I don’t care if he’s good or not... He ain’t *right!*” (454). In Rufus Johnson, the grotesque and anagogical merge. He admits to being in “[Satan’s] power” (450), but he utters the divinely inspired words that bring ten-year-old Norton spiritual hope and vision. He informs the ten-year-old that if his deceased mother believed in Jesus, she is “saved” and “on high” (462). The devious prophet wickedly emphasises, however, that “you have to be dead to get there”; moreover, “if you live long enough, you’ll go to hell” (462).

Like the majority of O'Connor stories, 'The Lame Shall Enter First' has attracted diverse critical views. At one extreme, Joyce Carol Oates claims that this story offers the "least ambiguous [way]" into O'Connor's vision in the collection (1973: 152). At the other extreme, Martha Stephens contends that the story's action is a "thin pretext for the stubborn projection of some entirely resistible Christian idea" (1973: 184). Robert Brinkmeyer argues that in the story O'Connor is so intent on showing up Sheppard that she yields her Christian vision to the "demonism" of "fundamentalism" (1989: 91). An O'Connor letter to John Hawkes, who teasingly accused her of using the diabolical as a mouthpiece, seems to bear this out: "In this one, I'll admit, the Devil's voice is my own" (*Letters*: 464). In evoking the voice of the malignant spirit, Flannery O'Connor aims to convey the gospel message negatively. She relies heavily, in this story, on a comically hideous agent to instigate an appalling but liberating suicide, a grotesque but anagogical death. The challenge for the reader is to negotiate the notion that the diabolical and divine can work so well in unison.

After Johnson comes to stay with the hardened widower and his impressionable son, Sheppard becoming steadily more annoyed by "intelligent" Johnson's obsessive claims about religion and his unwillingness to receive counsel. Yet, for the most part, the secular saint maintains an unflinching expression. However, in the end, when Sheppard realises the great extent to which he has been deceived by the teenage criminal, the boy's accusation engulfs him: "Satan has you in his power" (*Stories*: 481). Johnson is duly arrested for housebreaking and Sheppard is left alone to make sense of the endeavour to help an unfortunate. The proud social worker is suddenly struck by the horrifying, self-incriminating truth of the words he has just uttered to the police. His self-justifying words in the end turn against him: "I did more for him than I did for my own child" (481). Sheppard has indeed only given place to the "sentimental face of love", as Teilhard would say (1959: 290). In failing to embrace his "dull" son, whose often tearful face is "a mass of lumps with slits for eyes" (*Stories*: 447), Sheppard has not shown costly "charity". He has failed to embrace the ugly, disappointing and weak of the world (Teilhard 1960: 125). Moreover, he has even whipped Norton for protesting against Johnson's occupation of his mother's bed. Instead of identifying with his son's natural grief over his recently

deceased mother, Sheppard has distanced himself from emotional and personal contact, thus resisting the evolutionary movement, propelled by “charity”, towards convergence. Sheppard has in essence countered the Teilhardian exhortation: “Do not brace yourself against suffering”, but “surrender yourself,/ As if to a great loving energy”.<sup>52</sup>

In this place of conviction, “everything” becomes “black” before Sheppard (481). He no longer seems to exist as a substantiated being: the darkness of his sin clouds his vision. In this negative space, the image of his child’s face then appears. He recalls that Norton’s countenance had earlier shone with an “unnatural brightness” as he gazed into the telescope. The little boy had been waving to his “Mamma” in the stars: “I’ve found her”, he cried (478). In Sheppard’s imagination, the child’s radiance now transfuses life into his wracked being, giving him hope of reconciliation and reparation. Positive closure seems likely; the die-hard humanist has acknowledged his sin. The tragedy is that the child is no longer alive to accept his repentance or ensure his absolution. The comedy, in the Dantean sense, is that Norton apparently progresses to a better life by virtue of his childlike faith. Through the telescope he has seen the “undimmed air” of “the true earth above”, while all along he has been shut in a “sea-like atmosphere” groping “like [a] muddled fish”.<sup>53</sup> Norton departs from the world too soon to accept his father’s atonement, yet he arguably transcends this need in entering into a higher existence of at-one-ment with God and with his mother. The horror associated with Norton’s death does not dissipate, however, in the light of a conceived salvation. His corpse hangs in the “jungle of shadows” cast by the exposed roof beams of the attic, in the intermingled arena between the world and eternity. The body is suspended in airy freedom but weighed down by earthly gravity. Norton’s soul may be released to the transcendent, but his frame hangs as appalling evidence of the cost he pays to escape lovelessness. The greatest grotesquery is that his corpse hangs as a ghastly victory to Rufus Johnson’s powers of deceit and, ultimately, to the conniving skilfulness of the devil.

‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ is one of O’Connor’s most extreme, intense and bewildering of stories, offering little breathing space for light relief in the fairly long narrative. According to reason, the story’s culmination fulfils the Devil’s plans. Yet, in the scope of the unreasonable, the action also, and more importantly, satisfies God’s

intentions. In O'Connor's world of shadows, neither interpretation can be totally discounted. This 1962 story is more unnerving than 'The River' (1953) because the child-protagonist is twice the age of Harry/Bevel and coaxed by *adversarial* counsel, not merely his own faith-fuelled misapplication, to instigate his death. It seems, on reflection, that in 'The Lame Shall Enter First', O'Connor reaches a level — in effect, a limit — in reconstituting what she attempted before. To a greater extent than in many earlier stories, she implies the anagogical effect that the grotesque intruder has — but how many more times could she use a freakish prophet without becoming predictable or suggesting other loyalties? It is clear from O'Connor's correspondence that she wrestled with this piece and desired a new vitality in her fiction. In March 1962 she wrote to Father James McGown that she was "in need of the kind of grace that deepens perception, a new shot of life or something" (*Letters*: 468). A year later, she shared with Sister Mariella Gable her sense of reaching "a point where I can't do again what I know I can do well" (*Letters*: 518). Concluding her letter to Sister Gable, well aware of the need to complete the collection and of her failing health, O'Connor reflected: "the larger things I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing" (518). It could be that O'Connor's self-doubt grew out of a year of relative unproductivity in fiction.<sup>54</sup> In the last year of her life, however, she created pieces that live on as some of her most intriguing, scandalous, colourful and profound. The ebb she experienced after 'The Lame Shall Enter First' strongly brought in the flow.

### **Bruising to Open: 'Revelation'**

Flannery O'Connor's final three stories: 'Revelation', 'Parker's Back' and 'Judgement Day' unfold like a memorable, vivid "triptych."<sup>55</sup> All written within the last year of her life, after at least eighteen months without having published a short story, except an experimental fragment,<sup>56</sup> the trio present thematically unrelated cameos, yet all explicitly concern themselves with religious questions. As such, they differ somewhat to the first four discussed. Taking their lead from Irving Howe, an early reviewer, critics down the years, including Napier (1982), Coultard (1983) and Wood (1988), have hailed

'Revelation' as O'Connor's masterpiece.<sup>57</sup> Reasons tendered include the story's display of a canvas more majestic, a scenario more hilarious, a tone more affirming, and a closing vision more revealing of the spirit realm, than her others. It can be argued that these critics implicitly recognise a strong authorial reliance on the mode of anagogy. A number of commentators are careful, however, in considering the modal texture of the story, not to pass too easily over aspects of the comically disturbing, the grotesque (Gentry 1987, Di Renzo 1993). Certain questions have to be answered: how can Mrs Turpin be a "hog and [a woman] both?" How can she be "saved and from hell too?" (*Stories*: 506).

It appears that this 1964 story ushers in a new phase of O'Connor's crafting abilities which contribute to the "variety" she felt was needed to complete the collection.<sup>58</sup> Rob Johnson (1992: 14) suggests that in her last two years of reassessment (during which time she battled with 'Why Do the Heathen Rage') she turned again to ordinary life, to actual occurrences and oddities, for inspiration, as she had for brilliant and disruptive stories like 'The Temple of the Holy Ghost' and 'The Artificial Nigger'.<sup>59</sup> O'Connor created her pungent story, 'Revelation', out of a concrete experience, a remembered visit to the doctor.<sup>60</sup> Beginning with the literal level, she constructed her configurations of the grotesque and the proportions of the anagogical to expand the scope and deepen the impact of the fiction.

In 'Revelation', the physical and psychic blow strikes almost at the centre of the story. This factor distinguishes it, and O'Connor's subsequent two stories, from her earlier pieces. In encountering the blow at the story's centre, the reader is compelled to read on and to judge the effects of the affliction from the ensuing drama (Tolomeo 1980). In this story, the ludicrous instrument of punishment — and divine marking — is a textbook entitled *Human Development*. The peculiar agent of the incursion is a fat, raw-complexioned Wellesley student called Mary Grace. Her target is the enormous, garrulous Mrs Turpin, sitting on the opposite side of the crowded doctor's waiting room, thanking Jesus, in the company of people from all walks of life, for her privileged lot in life. The impact that the book makes when it hits Mrs Turpin's forehead, and Mary Grace's ensuing attempts to throttle the woman, signal the instigation of divine discipline through comic-grotesque action. The effect of this humiliating action is to leave Mrs

Turpin feeling “entirely hollow except for her heart which swing[s] side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh” (*Stories*: 500). After the violent strike, the woman can no longer be full of herself. Her laughable, but heinous, bravado encapsulated in the following reflection, “[God] had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly!” (497), is all but exorcised. She returns home, in a new state of inner vacuity. The only thought that seems able to enter that space is that of being a “hog”. Neither her husband, Claud, who also tasted Mary Grace’s fury, nor the compliant black workers on their farm can placate her unease. The Negro women who sympathise, no doubt, practise a form of “signifying” (Wood 1993-4: 105). “You the sweetest lady [we] know”, they insisted (*Stories*: 504). But the student’s gruff words ring louder and more accurately in her ears. Like Job, having listened to his reasonable-sounding, but errant, “comforters”, Mrs Turpin with a bruise over her eye like a “miniature tornado cloud” (505), sets out to confront the One who appears in the whirlwind (Schroeder 1992: 81). The modern, sterile pig pen on their farm is her destination — there she will shout and fume: “Who do you think you are?” (507). “How am I a hog?” (507). “How am I saved and from hell too?” (506).

When Ruby Turpin reaches the crescendo of her Job-like defiance, she notices Claud’s truck speeding down the highway like a little toy that might at any moment be crushed. Pausing, as if realising her smallness in the scheme of things, she bends her head. No voice sounds, but Ruby receives the substance of her answers first down in the pig pen and, then after timeless moments, up in the sky. In the pen, a “red glow suffuse[s]” the bristly, slit-eyed shoats and the old sow who is “grunting softly” (*Stories*: 508). The scene is vividly reminiscent of Richard Wilbur’s vision of sacramental life in the barn: “Lampshine blurred in the steam of beasts, the spirit’s right/ Oasis, light incarnate”.<sup>61</sup> By the intensity of her gaze, one can ascertain that Ruby deeply contemplates the significance of the pigs. She evidently comes to recognise that sacredness presides in the swine, while she sees clearly that the animals are messy and basely instinctual, not sanitised and controllable as she would like to imagine. The hog is known to present a powerful and often paradoxical metaphor; it is unclean to many, sacred to some.<sup>62</sup> The pig archetype, according to Paula Smith-Marder, “carries our opposites and in so doing can connect us to the Self, our own wholeness” (1996: 14-15).<sup>63</sup>

By 'communing' with the pigs, Ruby is forced to reconfigure her vision of self, as well as her clinical, separatist paradigm of life, to a grotesque (realistic) mix of desirable and undesirable. In gazing at the pigs, she learns something of "the animal way of seeing" which includes "bringing our superior postures to the level of the creature". To see "with the creaturely eye", says James Hillman, "is an act of imagining the world so that it appears in continuing animation, in continuing play of creation" (1983: 325-6).<sup>64</sup> In recognising the sacramentality of the hogs, then, Mrs Turpin sees a picture of her grotesque nature, and yet at the same time, beholds the creative activity of nature, the anagogical.

Lifting her head after some time, Ruby sees a purple streak in the sky which, as "visionary light" settles in her eyes, becomes "a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire". On the bridge "a vast horde of souls", reminiscent of the hodge-podge of people in the waiting room, not a neatly segregated and compartmentalised regiment, is "rumbling toward heaven" (508). The visionary scene illustrates the Teilhardian conception that the "acme" of humanity's "originality" is not "individuality" but in the world's "person" (our collective personality) which, according to the evolutionary structure of the world, can only be found "by uniting together" (Teilhard 1959: 263). A master of applying labels and categories, thereby guilty of "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness"<sup>65</sup>, Ruby is now brought face to face with an untidy and inverted cosmic order. On the bridge she sees a boisterous, clamorous procession of poor whites, blacks, lunatics, freaks, and right at the back, more subdued, "a tribe of people like herself" (*Stories*: 508). The vision unmistakably pictures the wry inversion that Christ promises (or threatens): the first shall be last (Matthew 20: 16). While this image suggests that she is part of the raucously triumphant company travelling heavenwards, it also obliquely recalls her recurring, troubling dream, which arises from her strained efforts to classify. Her dream ends in all classes of people "moiling" and "roiling" around on their way to the "gas oven" (*Stories*: 492). While Ruby's immense vision is narrated as being a procession to "heaven", it can also be narrated as a redeemed projection of her dream, which banishes social unworthies to hellfire.<sup>66</sup> She is "from hell" in sharing the holocaust impetus, but "saved" in slowly participating in the divine procession.

On looking intently at the last people in line, who resemble herself, Ruby sees by their “shocked” and “altered” faces that “even their virtues [are] being burned away” (*Stories*: 508). She is startled by this truth to the point of lowering her hands, which have been raised in “a gesture hieratic and profound” for the duration of the vision (508). What she had always considered her ticket to heaven, her chirpy, outward magnanimity, is here pictured as the sin which keeps her in the purging fire. Claude Tresmontant highlights the notion that fire is an “ambiguous power: both kind and awful”. Like “the love of God”, fire is “the delight of the already purified saint” but “a torment to [anyone] who experiences it without communing with it” (1960: 56-7). In first coming to identify herself with the grunting pigs, Ruby Turpin comes to acknowledge the animalistic aspects of herself. In then viewing herself in the purifying fire, she is forced to relinquish the idea that her more admirable attributes hold her in good stead. Much like her revelation of a universe in “the flickering fire of transformation”,<sup>67</sup> she too is under construction. The usually loquacious woman has nothing to say as she ponders the enlightening, demanding significance of the revelation. As Ruby moves slowly away from the pig pen, she would be able to say with e. e. cummings: “now the ears of my ears awake and/ now the eyes of my eyes are opened”.<sup>68</sup> Walking down the path, she responds on two levels, naturally and anagogically: she hears “the cricket choruses” strike up as well as the “voices of the souls... shouting hallelujah” (509). Ruby begins to see the universe as inextricably interconnected: high and low forms echo in a Teilhardian harmony.

At this point, ‘Revelation’ ends, issuing a warmer, more reassuring note than most other O’Connor story endings. The conundrums embedded in the story do not disappear, but they might be said to lose their sharp definition within the rhythm of the piece as a whole. The impact of Mary Grace’s text book — the anthropotropic blow — ushers in a process which leads to rising consciousness. To Ruby Turpin is given Flannery O’Connor’s fullest anagogical vision: a visionary panorama of the bewildering unity to come, yet a picture that does not exclude the grotesque ‘virtues’ of the present. In my view, ‘Revelation’ comes closer than any other story to depicting the new impetus O’Connor apparently sought — yet struggled — to instil: one in which grace comes more gently. In 1960, she shared with Andrew Lytle: “I keep seeing Elias in that cave, waiting

to hear the voice of the Lord in the thunder and lightning and wind, and only hearing it finally in the gentle breeze, and I feel I'll have to do that sooner or later, or anyway keep trying" (*Letters*: 373). Evidently, as O'Connor looked forward to an existence beyond all evils, and as she turned again to the concrete world, in which all diminishments, according to Teilhard, make room for God, an infusion of new inspirational energy came.

## **Searing to Seal: 'Parker's Back'**

The culminating movement in each of Flannery O'Connor's final trio of stories is, not inappropriately, that of returning home. Her second, 'Parker's Back', actually encapsulates this sense in its pun-like title. At the end, O. E. Parker 'is back' at his country home from an illegitimate excursion in the city, but is kept from reintegrating immediately by the lashes of his wife's tongue and her broom, and left outside to weep (*Stories*: 527). Mrs Turpin in 'Revelation' makes "her slow way on the darkening path to the house", absorbing the impact of her almost immobilising vision (509). Tanner in 'Judgement Day' is ultimately shipped back to his Southern home, but not after undesirable time in a New York "pigeon-hutch" apartment and city grave (550). The return home in all three stories is not a straightforward affair — it costs. For Parker, the return to tight-lipped Sarah Ruth is essentially an act of obedience, though he claims it is to bring his wife to heel. The stern eyes of the Byzantine Christ, which become tattooed on his otherwise white back, urge him: "GO BACK" (524). The message is reinforced when he is thrown out of the city bar like "Jonah" being "cast in the sea" (527). A literal return to 'rootedness' and responsibility (defying the image of the 'American Adam') and admission of his true name, leads O. E. Parker anagogically to a true home with Christ.

When O'Connor sent Caroline Gordon a copy of 'Parker's Back', written largely from her hospital bed, her literary mentor congratulated her. The Catholic writer from Georgia had "succeeded in dramatizing a heresy" (*Letters*: 593). The heresy is not in the tattooing, however, as O'Connor's friend 'A' imagined, but in the extreme reaction of Parker's wife to it (*Letters*: 594). Sarah Ruth, the daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, cannot bear to look at Parker's grotesquely patterned body, let alone even to conceive of

“the looks of God” (*Stories*: 525). A ‘Manichean’, in essence, she divorces matter and spirit and thus remains dull to anagogical reality. Parker, of course, occupies the other end of the ontological spectrum: he is all for the body, for exploiting its ingesting and sexual functions and for exploring its aesthetic possibilities. In this story, the tattooed human body is the locus where grotesquery and anagogy merge.

It is significant that, at age fourteen (and not any older),<sup>69</sup> Parker becomes conscious of something beyond the ordinary and everyday. From the time that he sees the elaborately tattooed man at the fair, his eyes open to a world beyond his experience and a “peculiar” sense of “unease” settles in him (*Stories*: 513). He can no longer just be content with who he is — O. E. Parker “as ordinary as a loaf of bread” (513). In a sacramental universe, however, even ordinary bread can be transformed into sacred substance (Ragen 1989: 27). For the next fourteen years, Parker makes every endeavour to transform himself into an “intricate arabesque of colors”, into a living fetish, by narcissistically adding tattoo after tattoo to his front (*Stories*: 514). He runs from school to work in a garage, to the navy, to jail, and, eventually, to the country, where he unexpectedly meets Sarah Ruth. The effect that he creates, however, is far from harmonious. The overall look of the tattoos is “haphazard” and “botched” and the animals on his skin seem to penetrate his being in “warfare” (514). Parker fears that he is going insane: he feels his tattoos pressing in on him and constantly senses that someone is trailing him. It is in this state of raging dissatisfaction that he is inexplicably drawn to Sarah Ruth despite — or because of — her “icepick eyes” (424). As Richard Giannone attests, he unconsciously seeks to submit to the rigour of the tattooist’s needle and the Law which his wife’s sharp eyes represent (1989: 222). He reasons that the only way to allay his dissatisfaction is to gain another tattoo. He seems to sense that fulfilment will only come by being pierced, and, in another sense, by being pinned at home.

In a state of preoccupation about what to tattoo onto his back, Parker experiences a collision with destiny. He circles around a field of hay in an old tractor while the sun moves from in front of him to behind him. He somehow appears to see “both places” at once as if he has “eyes in the back of his head” (*Stories*: 520). Despite himself, he can already mystically see the “all-demanding” eyes of the Byzantine Pantocrator (The One

Who Holds All Things) that he will soon have grotesquely incised onto his back (522). He becomes so mesmerised by the sun that he fails to see the old tree in the centre of his employer's field. All of a sudden, he experiences its branches reaching out to "grasp" him and finds himself thrown barefoot out of the tractor where <sup>he</sup> watches the tree burst into flame. One of his shoes lies under the vehicle, the other burns to one side (520). Like Moses, he fearfully encounters God's holy tree and experiences its "hot breath" on his face (520). His eyes become "cavernous" as he senses the visitation of a presence he wishes to avoid (520). Deeply affected by the experience, he wastes no time in gaining his next tattoo.

By the time Parker reaches the tattooist in town, his eyes become even more "hollow" (*Stories*: 521). The kenotic effect of the physical blow shows in his physical body. He is now ready for a searing that will seal his resignation to the force greater than himself. Rather than the milder "up-t-date" pictures in the book, he chooses the "haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ" to be incised on his back — an image in keeping with his wife's impervious appearance and harsh faith. The tattoo artist's studio takes on the dimensions of a monk's chamber as the pigments are mixed and applied with creative invocation; the icon becomes sacrament.<sup>70</sup> After two days' work, the artist forces frightened Parker to *look* at the image, at the face "still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence" (526). In the freshly incised tattoo, Parker's flesh and Christ's face become one. The application of this divine image onto the profane backdrop marks a grotesque blend, but its effect is profoundly anagogical, as Parker will in due course discover.

The notion of the tattoo is, of course, fraught with controversy. In Judaeo-Christian canon, tattoos are notoriously taboo, envisaged as desecrating the body, a temple of God. The book of Leviticus clearly states: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you" (19: 28). Yet, in this story, O'Connor outrageously attributes anagogical significance to a proscribed practice and again suggests that God calls people to Himself through the most unexpected and offensive of ways. She dares to convey that there is "nothing in life too grotesque, or too 'un-Catholic', to supply the materials" of her work (*Prose*: 209). Anthony Di Renzo designates 'Parker's Back' as "probably the most sacrilegious" of O'Connor short stories,

yet he also stresses that it is one of her most redemptive (1993: 42). When Parker cries in blasphemy: “Jesus Christ in hell!” (*Stories*: 511), it becomes the reader’s task to recognise the affirmation of divine reality by means of its shocking contrary.

The climax of the story, an end both funny and poignant, occurs on Parker’s return one morning at sunrise to furious Sarah Ruth. He expects to win his wife over with one exposure of his new tattoo, but it is he who will undergo radical change. When Sarah Ruth does not let him in, he <sup>is</sup> compelled to surrender totally to the force at work within. She forces him to utter his baptismal names through the keyhole, names that he would normally repeat only under threat of death — Obadiah (“servant of the Lord”) Elihue (“my God is he”).<sup>71</sup> At that point, Parker is “pinned” against the door of his house by a “lance” of light and comes into the *pleroma* of anagogy. He feels “light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (*Stories*: 528). Parker’s act of naming is anagogical: it validates his ‘createdness’ and launches him into a new place of union with God. His inner disorder now takes form, the design he longs for physically becomes invisibly spread throughout his soul — but at a high price. His iconoclastic wife does not appreciate his efforts at “getting religion” (526), but beats the very image he gained to tame her. As she lashes him relentlessly on the back, on the face of the stern Christ, Parker literally receives *stigmata*; he becomes a laughably hideous *povorello*. In turn, the Byzantine image, which accentuates Christ’s divinity not His humanity, now receives the fleshiness it has lacked (Di Renzo 1993: 56). There is a sacramental exchange; transubstantiation happens, but grotesquely through force. It is no longer Parker that lives, but Christ that lives in him (Galatians 2: 20).

Yet, it is not on this violent note that the story ends, but on a gentler turn. Banished outside, Obadiah Elihue Parker leans against the lone pecan tree and cries “like a baby” (*Stories*: 530). His tears flow both from his rejection as the Christ-figure and his acceptance as a newborn man.<sup>72</sup> In suffering and mourning, he becomes the subject of Teilhard de Chardin’s prayerful counsel: “the most direct way of using our lives is to allow God, when it pleases him so to do, to grow within us”.<sup>73</sup> In the incongruous figure of the bruiser weeping against the tree, we see Good Friday and the promise of the

Resurrection. The man who had always been depressed by “long views” now stands in the open overlooking “the vast vista of hills” (516), on the threshold of espousing a universe to which he can “unhesitatingly entrust” himself” (Teilhard 1959: 256). Because Parker has been emptied and transfigured by divine energy, the ultimate promise is held out that he will emerge and rise from the suffering into a greater universal interplay of themes and colours.

## **Dispatching with a Vengeance: ‘Judgement Day’**

The last story Flannery O’Connor ever wrote reached her publisher just a month before she lost consciousness. The story was, in fact, a metamorphosed version, a final reworking, of her first-ever-published piece of fiction. In Teilhardian fashion, O’Connor revisited the past, her own, in order to re-orient herself for the future. Indeed, throughout her writing career, she returned to older stories, to search out the origins of her vision and to explore more deeply the possibilities of her art. She had learnt from Teilhard that one must “penetrate matter until the spirit is revealed in it” (*Reviews*: 130). She perceived the value of re-examining her material to find the glint of truth, to find the “spirit that makes it itself” (*Prose*: 82). Consequently, she allowed for doing things “the wrong way over and over until they come out right”.<sup>74</sup> However, it is clear that O’Connor also adopted a contrary position. She also believed that it is possible to “exhaust” one’s material, if one succeeds in the first place to evoke what is intended (*Conversations*: 107). Her 1961 story, ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’, is a pertinent example of this second position. She considered it to “express” all there is to “say” on “The Issue”, namely race (*Letters*: 468). It is my opinion that her final story offers something else. I argue that she had not, in 1961, reached her limits in dramatising the grotesque and anagogical dimensions of racial conflict.

In the last months of her life, between her home, Andalusia, and Baldwin County Hospital, O’Connor again tackled the story she would eventually call ‘Judgement Day’. She had struggled with the basic story for almost twenty years, apparently believing that it had a greater destiny, a higher evolutionary form, if you will, than its small beginning as

her first published story, and MFA title piece, 'The Geranium' (1946/47). Even her two subsequent versions written at various stages of her career, but not published during her lifetime, 'An Exile in the East' and 'Getting Home', did not yield desired satisfaction. In 1955, she expressed the need to give the basic story "a shot of ACTH and put it back in circulation" (*Letters*: 88). A charge akin to a life-giving dose of steroids is what she felt it needed. Then, in 1964, in the wake of her buoyant new stories, 'Revelation' and 'Parker's Back', the impetus seemed to come. With her attention focused on "the larger things" (*Letters*: 518), she forged the story into a new piece which she dramatically entitled 'Judgement Day'. It stands out against the other three earlier versions; its highly charged ending incorporates the bewildering violence of the grotesque and the propelling spiritual reach of the anagogical in a way that the other do not. By the time O'Connor died on 3 August 1964, she had come full circle: her first things had become substance for her very last.

The four versions of the story centre on the experience of an old displaced Southerner who is taken in by his New York daughter. As partially suggested by the individual titles, the stories' emphases all differ slightly: 'The Geranium' pictures the pathetic isolation of the 'gerontion';<sup>75</sup> 'An Exile in the East' evokes the experience of the old man's personal banishment; 'Getting Home' accentuates his hope of returning South; and finally, 'Judgement Day' provokes an awareness of the man's encroaching death and the possibility of life beyond. Critics invariably recognise the notable distance O'Connor travelled from her 1946 story to her final piece, although they do not share a consensual opinion of her somewhat confounding closing story. Some interpret the story as nothing short of redemptive (Giannone 1989, Wood 1996-7, Whitt 1997), while others see it as a dark comedy ushering in Tanner's retribution, not his salvation (Darretta 1987, Baumgaertner 1988). After the comically challenging 'Revelation' and 'Parker's Back', 'Judgement Day' reads more seriously. It is a more demanding story in structure and mode, requiring the reader to navigate rapidly between many seamless flashbacks, and between reality and dream, as well as to negotiate the noticeably dialogized nature of the discourse.<sup>76</sup> 'Judgement Day' further requires the reader to consider internal, spiritual change with little narrative prompting and to broach a grotesque murder as anagogical.

Jill Baumgaertner goes as far as to call it O'Connor's "postmodern story" (1988: 157). O'Connor's last story could be said to show a greater complexity and severity of modal handling and technique than her earlier versions; her vision, however, remained open to the simple, more tender moments.

'Judgement Day' is as complicated in plot, character, mode, theological underscore and treatment of race as 'The Geranium' is simple. The central crisis of O'Connor's first published story is fairly easily summarised: "Old Dudley" is heartbroken on discovering that the geranium he spends his days watching has plummeted to the ground, but he is too proud to risk being helped by his genial black neighbour on a perilous journey down the stairs to rescue it. If any grotesquery resides in this story, it is in the final image which graphically conveys the old man's terrible physical and spiritual dislocation: "[The geranium] was in the bottom of the alley with its roots in the air" (*Stories*: 14). No analogical signals or insights, however peculiar, are given Old Dudley: he left harshly exposed to a new infertile world and to the haunting arena of his own intangible memories.

W. T. Tanner of 'Judgement Day' is a far more intriguing and infuriating character than Old Dudley. While he is as parochial and prejudiced, he is far more scheming and intrusive. Even so, he is able to elicit some sympathy from the reader: a feat that not many of O'Connor adults achieve. Frederick Asals actually suggests that O'Connor's adept characterisation of Tanner, a more fully human character than many others, suggests where her work might have moved — to "a mellower phase" (1982: 141). Her last story as a whole, however, remains beyond the scope of mellowness — violent action strikes twice in 'Judgement Day'. Some way into the story, the protagonist is confronted with a truth-laden insult strong enough to induce a stroke: "[you] wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard" (*Stories*: 545). And at the end, he is brutally dispatched into the arms of death, and to what lies beyond, in the wake of these words: "Maybe this here judgement day for you" (549). It is O'Connor's challenge to show the grotesque confrontations as being analogical. First, truth is conveyed through explosive verbal abuse; then justice and valediction <sup>are</sup> hailed through a form of torture: slamming an old man's head through metal railings.

The agent of violence, of retribution, is the professional, city-born black actor living in the next-door apartment with his chic female partner. As Tanner discovers, the unnamed actor refuses to be called by common Southern terms for a Negro — “John” or “Preacher” — and renounces all presumptions of his belief in the Gospel. To the old man’s horror, he is the antithesis of his long-time black lackey and companion, Parrum Coleman. The actor, who will wear no other masks than on the stage, functions as a representative of the oppressed, but resurgent black race. Embodying “some unfathomable dead-cold rage” (*Stories*: 544), the black man interprets Tanner’s attempts at conversation as highly intrusive and racist. The old man’s manners stem from a jaundiced old South whose conventions are alien and intolerable to a Northern progressive.

In spite of the offensive discourse he uses, Tanner’s efforts to converse with his neighbour could suggest a new, genuine willingness to forge ties with those he had always kept at a distance. Through Tanner’s flashbacks to his younger days and to his recent past, we learn of the old man’s regret at leaving Georgia, especially at bidding farewell to Coleman and repudiating the job offer from Dr Foley, the black landowner, to be his “white nigger” (*Stories*: 540). In the light of his regret, the old man could be seen to experience a diminishing of self, a hollowing out of his old person, since arriving in New York. On the other hand, Tanner’s endeavours could well be interpreted as attempts only to re-enforce the racial politics he has always known. For example, to convey a point to the actor, the old Southerner abruptly takes recourse to a racial banality: “And you ain’t black!... And I ain’t white!” (545). Many years ago on meeting the defiant, inebriated Coleman, he had used a pair of self-carved wooden spectacles to communicate this fundamental difference between them, rather than resorting to violence. After placing the eyeglasses on Coleman, he asked him what colour the man was standing in front of him. Because Coleman had answered “white”, Tanner gained the upper hand. The hierarchy had been successfully enforced. For a passing instant, however, Tanner saw before him “a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot” (538-9). Yet, at this stage he was unwilling to “decipher” the vision: to see that they had in common the same ludicrous and flawed nature. If he had seen that they shared “the

bedrock of all human experience”, that is, of “human limitation, of poverty” (*Prose*: 132), he might have been able to recognise they could share a future and move towards a common goal of unity, as Teilhard might have expressed it. Now in New York, Tanner faces the same challenge of discovering the value of others and will come to pay for his false superiority in a way that befits the crime.

After Tanner experiences his stroke precipitated by the black man’s affront, “it come[s] to him... slowly just what his present situation [is]” (*Stories*: 546). We are given no more insight than this concerning his inner condition — no radical epiphany apparently occurs. Yet, the verbal and physical attack appears to turn him more fully towards death and what comes thereafter. In coming to understanding his present situation, he sees the need for reconciliation with his daughter, even if for selfish reasons, and for burial in the South, the home of his Christian roots. Tanner’s slow, precarious struggle down the stairs, the start of his journey back to Corinth, Georgia, is propelled by his rather comical, though seriously intended, invocation of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd...” (548). His collapse on the stairs and ensuing death at the hands of the black actor <sup>we</sup> is narrated in a restrained manner, discouraging a final statement on the event. The bizarre comedy of the closing scene lies in Tanner’s detachment from what is happening. He lands upside down, thinking he has arrived alive in his coffin in Corinth on “Judgement Day” to surprise Coleman and his friend, Hooten. The disturbing tragedy of the scene lies in the gruesome means of Tanner’s murder. His murder is at once a ghastly, over-compensatory retribution for his racist sin and a strangely just propitiation he will pay for the heinous racism of all whites. Tanner’s daughter finds his limbs and hat-smothered head thrust through the spokes of the stairwell “like those of a man in stocks” (549), like a cursed one, the figure of a timeless scapegoat. The humiliating death, says Richard Giannone (1989: 244), “serves a higher purpose” that has been identified with “the consecrated ground of Corinth: to bear the sin of many” (Isaiah 53:12). Tanner’s last words obliquely recall those of Julian’s mother in O’Connor’s title story — “I’m on my way home!” (*Stories*: 549). They may be read as anagogical, as heaven-seeing, yet also as grotesque, as cruelly ironic and hell-anticipating. The old man will not go “home”

immediately to the soil of Georgia, to the haven of his faith, but will be interred in New York ground, like its “air”, fit only for “cats and garbage” (541).

In ‘Judgement Day’, Flannery O’Connor not only creates one of her most challenging and difficult stories about “a character’s changing” (*Letters*: 184), but also constructs one of her most explicitly racial of scenarios. It seems that her last story conveys something more about the issue she claimed to have already addressed. ‘Judgement Day’ differs from ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’ in that the offending racist proves the primary target of discipline, not the reformer. The stories which frame *Everything That Rises Must Converge* both focus on the vehement clash between black and white,<sup>77</sup> a development beyond *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* which only pictures strained racial relations in a comedy of manners (in scenes of ‘The Displaced Person’) or intimates the tension in the context of epiphany (‘The Artificial Nigger’). In O’Connor’s second collection, the acts of aggression in her two framing stories, the first humorous, the second chilling, depict the assertion of black characters and show the drive towards restoration of rightful universal unity in accordance with the Teilhardian impetus. “The peoples of the earth, the natural units of humanity”, says the Jesuit-scientist, “must achieve racial harmony through the very variety of their racial characteristics — characteristics which reciprocally enrich each other” (1965: 15).

In her final story, O’Connor, in effect, turns the Southern hierarchy on its head and demonstrates old Tanner’s becoming a “nigger”. Quentin Compson in Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury* informs us that “a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the [other racial group] he lives among”.<sup>78</sup> Through the black professional’s “horn-rimmed spectacles” (*Stories*: 543), the old white man who has landed upside-down on the stairs, becomes the clown, the object of derision, he had always made the Negro out to be. It seems appropriate, if not comforting, that O’Connor should draw heavily on the grotesque to depict the death of a pitiful old man ready for heaven, and on another level, to register the close of one historical chapter in readiness for the next. The poetics of the grotesque, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, embrace a “crisis of change”: a struggle between an old way of life “stubbornly resisting” the new way “about to be born” (1968: 50). In Tanner’s death, we witness a deforming and a becoming, suggestive of the

fraught process of change in the real world of the sixties. In an ameliorated sense, Tanner's plight was also the author's own. Equivocal towards the rising black consciousness movement, Flannery O'Connor too experienced a struggle and an undoing. In this story, however, she allows a black character to have the last word. Ralph Wood would say that, in the end, she lets her "thoughtful convictions" triumph over her "doubtful opinions".<sup>79</sup> In addition to letting the black actor utter the last resounding words — "Maybe this here judgement day for you" (*Stories*: 549) — O'Connor importantly includes in her last story the suave Dr Foley, the entrepreneur of mixed race who is closely associated with natural rhythms. When offering Tanner the job of maintaining his still, Foley, the "porpoise-shaped" figure (535), "looked at his watch and at his hands" and "appeared to have measured and to know secretly the time it would take everything to change finally upside down" (540). The new black man of the South is O'Connor's only character who seems fully aware of both the present and the future, of the grotesque reordering which is being set in motion and of the anagogical implications of a Teilhardian integration of all peoples.

## Driven Beyond

God strikes down sinners to propel them into eternity: this is the driving impetus of Flannery O'Connor's second collection. Each story moves towards an apocalyptic moment that presages the possibility of ultimate integration into the divine life. To catalyse, and then sustain, the process which potentially leads to salvation and ultimate participation in eschatological convergence, the divine presence visits the adult characters in ways often both severe and bizarre. A spiritual tide of purgatorial action keeps Julian in the awful present of his mother's stroke. The horns of a bull both impale and lift Mrs May to a new level of perception. The rock-like fists of a child pound Mr Fortune into the dirt to taste his own depraved humanity. Self-incriminating words strike Sheppard in the gut on discovering his lifeless son. A violent tirade forces truth on old Tanner while an ensuing assault brings both judgement and a dispatch towards a transcendent destination. In certain stories the divine visitation comes less brutally. The Holy Ghost, appearing as a

fierce bird, freezes and pins Asbury in a state of purifying terror. A weighty textbook crashes into Ruby Turpin's forehead, smashing open a new ability to see and hear. A fiery collision with a tree and an emblazonment of Christ on the flesh leave Parker defenceless before the demanding eyes of God. The children suffer just as much, if not more, than the most severely battered adults in the collection. Nine-year-old Mary Fortune Pitts is beaten to death; ten-year-old Norton is pushed emotionally to the point of hanging himself. The child deaths differ, however, from the fatalities of the adults in that they carry a redemptive weight. The pain that the spiritually aware children suffer is not for their own sake, it seems, but for the purpose of exposing and expiating the sins of others.

The great number of mortalities and murders in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* presents something of an interpretative challenge, as my analyses have attempted to show. The reader will be provoked to offer some diagnosis of the characters' deaths and to consider the implications of those last moments. As more blood is spilt in the fictional world of O'Connor's later collection, one could superficially argue that a more severe vision than her first collection results. Yet, on attentive examination of the stories, it becomes clear that an assessment of this sort is not justifiable. The circumstances surrounding the deaths in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* are more fully realised, often more revealing, and in some cases more affirming than ever before. There is a greater reliance on employing the grotesque anagogically, or in other words, on magnifying the comic, promise-filled face of the grotesque. Narrative insights into the condition of the human soul, and the nature of the after-life, aid interpretation, although equivocation cannot usually be eradicated. For example, in Mrs May's dying moments, we gain some understanding of how she sees the surrounding world ("the treeline was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky"), knowledge of the look on her face (she was like a person "whose sight has suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable"), and a last reflection from another character's perspective on her death ("she seemed...to be bent over whispering some last discovery" [*Stories*: 334-5]). The narrator's intrusive and observational strategies, as well as use of another character's vantage point, render a complex and thought-provoking reading of the woman's death. In contrast, the characters of O'Connor's earlier fiction are, in most cases, propelled only to

the edge of known life, or to the perimeter of an old mode of seeing, with little elaboration being afforded the readers of those closing moments.

Explicit, unambiguous rendering of an individual's passage towards heaven is nowhere to be found in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Of the stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 'The Artificial Nigger' signals the strongest attempt to depict redemption, in that it evokes the paradisiacal garden scene and introduces narrative explanation of what occurs within the protagonists. It can be said, however, that *Everything That Rises Must Converge* moves deeper than her earlier work to intimate, and not explain, anagogical existence beyond discipline and death, to imply promise beyond suffering, light beyond darkness. It was O'Connor's intention in this collection, it seems, to indicate that heavenward movement is possible, but not, of course, without the divine initiative. This movement towards integration and union would address the despairs of one such as Simone Weil who considered it all but impossible to commune with the divine. "Even if we were to walk for hundred of years, we should not do more than go round and round the world", Weil wrote in *Waiting on God*, "We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step towards the heavens" (1979: 75).

O'Connor's sustained interest in Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary thought during her latter five or six years no doubt deeply influenced the development of her second collection. Indeed, Teilhard's prayer in *The Divine Milieu* suggests the reasoning behind O'Connor's grotesque incursions: "In all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is You... who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within Yourself" (1960: 69-70). The many deaths in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* would seem to allow God to penetrate the lives of the characters and to "replace" the deficiency with "himself."<sup>80</sup> These fatalities are only tragic if seen from a short-term perspective. If viewed in the long term with a broad compass of vision, adopting an almost medieval outlook, these deaths take on a comic dimension, an anagogical reality. It is no wonder O'Connor was drawn to Dr Zhivago's assertion: "Art has two constants, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus creates life" (*Letters*: 305). The

grotesque casts its dark shadows in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, but stronger shafts of light shine through.

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## Chapter Four Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1962, 'The Partridge Festival' was one of the stories destined for the collection, although it was later dropped at O'Connor's discretion (*Letters*: 580).

<sup>2</sup> She wrote to her publisher, Robert Giroux, in June 1964 that she had nine or ten stories in mind for the new volume, including 'Parker's Back' still in the conceptual stage. In addition to the new collection of short stories she worked on her Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann* and a longer piece called 'Why Do the Heathen Rage?' which was, as the evidence suggests, intended to develop into her third novel (*Letters*: 498; *Stories*: 554-55). An excerpt from the beginning sections of 'Why Do the Heathen Rage?' was published in *Esquire* vol. 60 (1963) and later in *The Complete Stories*. Virginia Wray (1994-95) discusses the reasons for the apparent failure of the story.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Fitzgerald first used the image of 'deepening' in his Introduction to the collection. The image of vertical penetration seems apt to describe O'Connor's insistence on remaining true to her vision while still exploring the bounds of her talent (Desmond 1987: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Notable critics who adopt this stance are Desmond (1987), Wood (1988), Giannone (1989), Di Renzo (1993).

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor reviewed Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959), *The Divine Milieu* (1960) and *Letters from a Traveler* (1962) in *Reviews*: 86; 107; 160. She also examined studies on the Jesuit-scientist by Claude Tresmontant (1959), Nicolas Corte (1960) and Oliver Rabut (1961) in *Reviews*: 86-8; 99; 126-7. In addition, she read and made substantial markings in Charles E. Raven's *Teilhard de Chardin: Scientist and Seer* (1962).

<sup>6</sup> Conrad writes in his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: "My task which I am trying to achieve is... to make you hear, to make you feel — it is above all to make you see. That and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there, according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm, all you demand — and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask" (in *Prose*: 80).

<sup>7</sup> From William Butler Yeats' 'Second Coming' in *The Penguin Book of English Verse* (1956: 407).

<sup>8</sup> John Desmond (1987: 118) refers to Wicker's statement.

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<sup>9</sup> John Roos (1992: 165) draws attention to Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* in relation to Teilhard. The citation from Aquinas, also used as an epigraph, is found in Anton C. Pegis (Ed.) *Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas* (1945: 2.114).

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Montgomery (1969: 37).

<sup>11</sup> See Rabut (1961) to follow the argument that Teilhard does not adequately distinguish between "the supernatural action of Christ and the purely natural ascent of evolution" (*Reviews*: 127).

<sup>12</sup> See the 'The Artificial Nigger'.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Montgomery (1969: 38).

<sup>14</sup> Originally from a 1941 essay, 'On the Basis of a Common Credo'.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Montgomery (1969: 41-2).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Victor White's *Soul and Psyche* (1960: 154) and marked by O'Connor in her copy (*Library*: 29).

<sup>17</sup> Max H. Bégouën of the Association of Friends of Teilhard de Chardin, writes in exhortation: "Despite the crushing burdens which selfish revolutions place on mankind today, the substance of a new world is being born in the very flesh of peoples all over the earth... it is our task... to help the world concentrate all energies in the quest for peace" (1965: 17-8).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Giannone draws attention to this point and cites the following portions of the novel (1996: 336-7).

<sup>19</sup> These instances are found in 'A Circle in the Fire', 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', 'The Artificial Nigger' and 'The River' respectively.

<sup>20</sup> See 'Everything That Rises Must Converge', 'The Enduring Chill', 'The Lame Shall Enter First' and 'Parker's Back'.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Whitt points out that all reviews "come out, in part, in high praise for an author that has died too soon" (1995: 112). Jon Bacon reflects that the "completeness" of O'Connor's fictive world had become a critical truism by the mid-sixties (1993: 139). He cites one admirer of her "imagined world" as insisting: "There is no need, no temptation, to look outside that world for explanation or completion" (Cruttwell 1965: 444).

<sup>22</sup> I essentially agree with Harbour Winn (1990: 191) who argues for the integrity of O'Connor's individual stories, yet who acknowledges the value of the collection's themes. This view counters the over-bold and rather unjustified accusation set forth by Martha Stephens. She considers O'Connor's stories to blend rather too well into each other, allowing the endings, "charming surprises", in due course to become "O'Connor cliché's" (1973: 145).

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<sup>23</sup> It can be argued that this story is not O'Connor's most representative or powerful. Critics who adopt this stance are David Eggenschwiler (1972: 83), Frederick Asals (1982: 110) and Anthony Di Renzo (1993: 101). See Marshall Bruce Gentry (1991) for a more positive reading of the story.

<sup>24</sup> Although other stories include treatment of black-white relations in the South, in particular 'The Artificial Nigger', these fictions do not allude to an immediate historical happening as occurs in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'. 'The Partridge Festival', composed shortly before the title story but omitted from the collection, also centres around an historical event (the 1953 festival-day massacre in Milledgeville), but deals with race by virtue of its absence. See Johnson (1992) for further discussion on O'Connor's use of the "topical".

<sup>25</sup> In March 1960, Maryat Lee, living in New York as a playwright, wrote to O'Connor of her experience of sitting next to three smartly dressed black men in the subway, one of whom was reading a popular social treatise of the time, *The Status Seekers*. Anticipating O'Connor's incorporation of the "well dressed" Negro in her story whom Julian tries to befriend, these men obviously defied the stereotypical image of blacks as illiterate, impoverished and passive. An April 1960 letter of Lee's records her ineffectual attempts to engage in conversation with a black woman wearing her "Easter hat" on a bus in South Carolina. See Gordon (1992: 27, 32). For further discussion on the "antithetical friendship" of O'Connor and Lee see Jean W. Cash (1990). Like Julian and Asbury of 'The Enduring Chill', Lee found the South to be a "very tightly fashioned world" (1990: 70).

<sup>26</sup> Welty's story is a first-person narrative from the imagined perspective of the murderer of the civil rights leader, Medgar Evers.

<sup>27</sup> Kurt R. Niland and Robert C. Evans (1993-4: 53) nominate the story, however, as "one of her most representative works", without recognising the story's relative de-emphasis on negotiating a central anagogical/grotesque dynamic.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Ebrecht (1987: 208) draws attention to this passage in Teilhard's *The Divine Milieu* and its pertinence to Julian.

<sup>29</sup> David Jauss (1988) suggests that O'Connor may have encountered this thirteenth-century legend in one of her works of hagiography or in Gustave Flaubert's work which she much admired (*Letters*: 99, *Prose*: 69). Jauss cites from Flaubert's *Three Tales*. Penguin (1961): 11-12.

<sup>30</sup> Kay Kinsella Rout (1978: 422) cites from Nicolas Corte's *Who Is the Devil?* (1958: 96).

<sup>31</sup> Teilhard de Chardin from 'Meditation', trans. Blanche Gallagher in *The Element Book of Mystical Verse* (1997: 474).

<sup>32</sup> O'Connor originally speaks of Elizabeth Vandon's *Late Dawn* in these terms.

<sup>33</sup> The trouble with this position, Wood argues (1993-4: 103), is that O'Connor usually conveys more clearly what she is against than what she is for.

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<sup>34</sup> While O'Connor never claims to be able to enter the minds of her black characters (*Conversations*: 59), she shows an ability to capture what often appears as "Tomming", according to Wood, "an abject acquiescence to the white man" which "can be used to get revenge by indirection, to save oneself from returning evil for evil, and thus to preserve one's own dignity" (1993-4: 105). O'Connor says of the "uneducated Southern Negro": "he is a man of very elaborate manners and great formality which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy" (*Conversations*: 104).

<sup>35</sup> The tradition of compunction, practised by devout individuals in the patristic and medieval periods particularly, involved invoking God's power to wound the heart in order that a deeper knowledge of the divine might be gained (Ward 1990: 106).

<sup>36</sup> Eliot, like O'Connor, recognises that redemption from eternal death requires a death to the self:

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre —  
To be redeemed from fire by fire. ('Little Gidding', IV)

<sup>37</sup> From Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, IV.iii.173.

<sup>38</sup> The following poetic extracts illustrate this tradition:

The dart wherewith he wounded me  
Was all embarbed round with love,  
And thus my spirit came to be  
One with its Maker, God above.  
(St. Teresa of Avila [1515-1582] 'My Beloved is Mine')

Can this poor soul the object be  
Of these love-glances, those life-kindling eyes?  
What? I the centre of thy arms' embraces?  
(Phineas Fletcher [1582-1650] 'The Divine Lover')

<sup>39</sup> Mrs Greenleaf's intercessory cry — "Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (317) — is ultimately concretised in the body of Mrs May.

<sup>40</sup> See also Rudiger Robert Beer's *Unicorn: Myth and Reality* (1972) to which Kristen Meek refers.

<sup>41</sup> A fragment of an unfinished poem.

<sup>42</sup> See Lee Sturma's article on Weil (1987).

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<sup>43</sup> D. G. Kehl (1995: 268) recalls the buffalo horns on which Ernest Hemingway's Francis McComber is birthed into a new understanding.

<sup>44</sup> Abraham J. Heschel proposes that the "prophet hates the approximate, he shuns the middle of the road. A man must live on the summit to avoid the abyss... Compromise is an attitude the prophet abhors" (in Asals 1982: 218-9).

<sup>45</sup> From an observation made by George Sand to Flaubert concerning human nature: "[Man] is not good or bad: he is good and bad. But he is something else besides: being good and bad, he has an inner force which leads him to be very bad and a little good, or very good and a little bad" (in Babbitt 1955: 259; *Library*: 112).

<sup>46</sup> From 'The Habitation' by Ralph Knevet in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995:161).

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Lawler (1955: 38). See *Library*: 74-5.

<sup>48</sup> The extract is from R. S. Thomas' 'Aside'.

<sup>49</sup> As Mary Blasingham notes, she is both "the holy child Mary and the unholy demonic", in other words, "a child-god archetype driven into this dual condition" (1987: 107).

<sup>50</sup> From Léon Bloy's *Le Mendiant Ingrat*.

<sup>51</sup> In O'Connor's copy of *The Phenomenon of Man*, she marked the cited section (*Library*: 17).

<sup>52</sup> An extract from 'Meditation', trans. Blanche Gallagher in *The Element Book of Mystical Verse* (1997: 473)

<sup>53</sup> From Richard Wilbur's 'Icarium Mare'.

<sup>54</sup> In 1963, she worked on 'Why Do the Heathen Rage?' and she wrote many of her insightful essays and lectures.

<sup>55</sup> See *Sessions* (1997: 195). I use the term "trptych" to allude to the last three stories as being both distinct and joined in the expanse of a composite vision.

<sup>56</sup> From 'Why do the Heathen Rage' published in *Esquire* vol. 60 (1963).

<sup>57</sup> See Napier (1982), Coultard (1983), Wood (1988).

<sup>58</sup> In late 1962, she asked to her publisher to wait for further stories before publication (*Letters*: 498).

<sup>59</sup> 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' was inspired by a conversation O'Connor had with the dairy helper who had visited the local fair (*Letters*). 'The Artificial Nigger' grew from an anecdote Regina O'Connor related to her daughter. On getting lost one day, Mrs O'Connor stopped for directions and was advised to look out for the landmark of the

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“artificial nigger” (in Muller 1969: 206). ‘Parker’s Back’ arose from O’Connor’s late reading of *Memoirs of a Tattooist* (*Letters*: 593). ‘Judgement Day’, of course, developed from her early story, ‘The Geranium’. Both her first and last stories no doubt were originally inspired from O’Connor’s own experience of living for a short period in New York.

<sup>60</sup> O’Connor writes: “‘Revelation’ was my reward for sitting in the doctor’s office. Mrs Turpin was there all fall. Mary Grace was in my head, doubtless as a result of reading too much theology” (*Letters*: 579).

<sup>61</sup> An extract from Wilbur’s ‘A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness’.

<sup>62</sup> In Sir James Frazer’s study of world mythologies, *The Golden Bough*, he indicates that the pig in many societies is considered both unclean and sacred — to touch a pig can mean to be “tainted by a sacred object” (in Slattery 1996-7: 142). However, as I noted with respect to ‘The River’, the pig is predominantly associated with profanity in Judaeo-Christian thought.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Dennis P. Slattery’s thought-provoking article on the animal imagination in ‘Revelation’ (1996-7: 147).

<sup>64</sup> See Slattery (1996-7: 142).

<sup>65</sup> Walker Percy refers to this concept which he describes as “the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real” (1975: 58). Emily Archer elaborates on this point by suggesting that “individuals lose their induplicable being when they are packaged as specimens of something, when they become derivatives not specimens” (1987: 104).

<sup>66</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman (1966) actually sees Ruby Turpin on the way to Hades while Josephine Hendin argues that the destination is indeterminate because in O’Connor “damnation and redemption are so alike” (1970: 130).

<sup>67</sup> See Di Renzo (1993: 216).

<sup>68</sup> From ‘i thank You God for this amazing’ in *The Element Book of Mystical Verse* (1997: 474).

<sup>69</sup> See note 40 of Chapter Three.

<sup>70</sup> George Kilcourse indicates that in Eastern orthodox traditions when natural pigments and egg were mixed in the atmosphere of prayer, the icon was thought to take on the mystery of Christ (1997: 45).

<sup>71</sup> See Giannone (1989: 229).

<sup>72</sup> See Giannone (1989: 225-6).

<sup>73</sup> From ‘Le Prêtre’ (8 July 1918) in the Teilhard de Chardin *Album* (1966: 44).

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<sup>74</sup> Unpublished manuscript cited in Darretta (1987: 24).

<sup>75</sup> See Sally Fitzgerald (1984) for further discussion on O'Connor's allusion to T. S. Eliot's 'Gerontion'.

<sup>76</sup> See Westarp (1987), 'Flannery O'Connor's Development: An Analysis of the 'Judgement Day' Material'.

<sup>77</sup> She no doubt assumed that 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' would open the collection bearing its name and might easily have foreseen that 'Judgement Day', her last story intended for the collection with an appropriately apocalyptic title, would close it.

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Di Renzo (1993: 203).

<sup>79</sup> Wood distinguishes between *opinions*, which are often quickly formed and quickly abandoned, and kept to oneself lest they should cause offence, and *convictions*, which are gradually acquired and strongly maintained, neither readily surrendered, nor kept private (1993-4: 97).

<sup>80</sup> From 'Le Prêtre' (8 July 1918) in the Teilhard de Chardin *Album* (1966: 44).



3

# Conclusion

## Creation through Struggle

At the close of this dissertation, a study self-consciously concerned with beginnings and endings, the alpha and omega, it does not seem inappropriate for me to recall my opening epigraph. The epistolary extract I chose for this purpose highlights Flannery O'Connor's concurrent reading of *St. John of the Cross* and *Doctor Rabelais*.<sup>1</sup> Stark and humorous is the difference, indeed the disjunction, between the subject of each biography. The ascetic sixteenth-century Spanish mystic known for his alarming visions of the crucified Christ is the focus of one volume; the renegade French Franciscan of the same century infamous for his carnal literary fabulations is the topic of the other. O'Connor read and reviewed the biographies of the "saint" and the "scoundrel" concurrently in 1957, at the mid-point of her publishing career, by which time she was certainly very familiar with, and strongly influenced by, dialectical relationships and apparent opposites, such as the conceived antitheses between comic and terrible, sacred and profane, and on a modal level, anagogical and grotesque.

The effect of this incongruous reading mix was, to O'Connor's mind, an "edifying contrast" (*Letters*: 241). Though no doubt penned in good humour, this reflection suggests an almost Blakean belief in progression through contraries, a type of dialogical interaction furthering development.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, O'Connor deemed assimilation and intermingling of such unlikely voices to have a constructive effect ("edifying" from Latin *aedificare* = dwelling + make). We might then take this small example of interpenetration at the level of reading to be symptomatic of the greater creative interaction of contraries within her imagination. "[W]restling with what is higher than itself and outside it" is what makes the Catholic writer's sensibility "good", she argued (*Conversations*: 105). She would not have disagreed with Mikhail Bakhtin's basic supposition that "to live means to participate in dialogue"<sup>3</sup> — although she presupposed dialogic interplay to extend the boundaries of her belief system, not to threaten the substance of her faith. If the outcome of

O'Connor's struggle did not yield what many would call "Catholic" fiction, the epithet "good" — not conventional but exceptional — cannot easily be denied her. The majority of commentators who are somewhat disapproving of aspects of O'Connor — her anagogical ideals, her strategies involving the grotesque, or her ideological engagement with her outer world, acknowledge the peculiar achievement of her craftsmanship. Although sceptical of the acclaimed religious import of her art, André Bleikasten praises O'Connor as occupying "a parish" of her own (1978: 197). Despite being censorious of O'Connor's ponderous and morbid use of the grotesque, Martha Stephens admits that the author's narrow depiction of life often produced "enormously skillful" art (1973: 146). Even if critical of O'Connor's racial and social positioning, Alice Walker regards her as incapable of writing "dogmatic or formulaic stories" (1975: 78). Perhaps a remark O'Connor made about writers she considered notable could be applied to herself: "If they are good, they are dangerous" (*Letters*: 571). "Good" writers are inevitably disruptive; they cut across aesthetic and ideological norms in presenting a unique vision.

The attempt of this study has been to provide some understanding of Flannery O'Connor's mutual and controversial attraction to the modes with which St. John of the Cross and Rabelais might respectively be associated, the anagogical and grotesque, as well as to explore the adoption, adaptation and intermingling of these modes to create her two collected volumes of short fiction. In Chapter One, I endeavoured to provide a broad account of what might be termed *anagogical*, to reflect on O'Connor's belief in a level of meaning and experience which participates in the divine, and to offer some insight into the challenge of applying this originally medieval concept to her twentieth-century art. In Chapter Two, I attempted to give an overarching perspective on what can be thought to constitute the *grotesque*, taking into account different theoretical standpoints, and to consider O'Connor's attraction to its provocative, even revolutionary, reordering of conventionality. I further sought to investigate the grotesque's unexpected intersection with the anagogical at various points, particularly the propensity of both modes to yoke opposites, to straddle two worlds, to register potential, to embody the sacred, to effect the apocalyptic. My aim in Chapters Three and Four was to analyse how both the anagogical and grotesque inform O'Connor's two short story collections, *A Good Man Is Hard to*

*Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and to consider the resulting moods and effects of each collection. One could say that as Flannery O'Connor strove to negotiate and interfuse the modes of anagogy and grotesquery in her mature period, she produced her best work. She would relinquish neither grotesque actuality ("an accurate description of the human condition, even at its best"),<sup>4</sup> nor anagogical reality ("the added dimension").<sup>5</sup> In that O'Connor's short fiction incorporates both modes, it dares to defy the diabolic declaration voiced in *The Violent Bear It Away*: "You can do one thing or you can do the opposite... Nobody can do both of two things" (*Violent*: 39).

## Consciousness at Cost

In closing, I should again note that Flannery O'Connor made a modal shift after *Wise Blood* (1952) to include and accent in her grotesque fiction the anagogical significance of creation and the potential sacramentality of all forms of existence. A way of providing a counter-impetus to the negating or disorienting effects of the grotesque, which had so overwhelmed *Wise Blood*, was to present a world of plenitude and presence in her mature fiction. By the time of *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), the divine presence pervaded the landscape — "the insistent silent force inside [Tarwater]" is reflected in the "silence outside" (*Violent*: 162). In her collected short stories, O'Connor assumed a spiritual dullness on the part of her protagonists (and readers) and thus gained incentive to develop an anthropotropic thrust. The God-initiating impetus of the two collections begins with the visible fact of existence: the initial evidence of His reality according to Thomistic thought. "Earth's crammed with heaven/ And every common bush afire with God", writes Elizabeth Barrett Browning, adding: "But only he who sees, takes off his shoes".<sup>6</sup> Of course, as we have seen, removing footwear or performing any other gesture of reverence, is all but absent in O'Connor's world of the short stories. Although the natural world opens and explodes upwards, to gloss Teilhard's words, no one, save some of O'Connor's perspicacious, strong-willed child characters, read the sunbursts, the tall trees, the shiny waters as creation, as incarnation, and follow their upward-leading trajectories.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, more drastic anthropotropic measures become necessary to secure the adults' attention.

Flannery O'Connor turns to subject matter and to a mode more obtrusive than the traditional means to reveal the anagogical; she draws on the grotesque which inevitably brings into play barbarous, comic, wild elements. The characters are hence drawn into the realm of the ridiculous and haunting, into the domain of violence and to all that seems absurdly contrary to the divine. Indeed, what is perplexing is that the holy and satanic almost become interchangeable in administering supernatural grace "negatively". The agent evidently seemed of less consequence to O'Connor than the action performed. In statements like that of Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, and Catholic philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier, O'Connor finds apparent endorsement for her authorial strategies. Buber proposes that meaning has to be "experienced in living action and suffering itself, in the unreduced immediacy of the moment" (1957: 35). Similarly, Mounier asserts that the "force of mortal combat", not "some ecstasy", is needed to attain awareness (1952: 49). O'Connor's God issues grace with a vengeance — he blasts narcissistic men like O. E. Parker right out of their shoes. Consciousness of the self, of the other, and of God comes at great cost. The adult protagonists lose their children, their mobility, their health, their sanity, their land, their cultivated self-image, their very lives, to gain anagogical vision. Indeed, Flannery O'Connor's characters, insensible to, or dimly aware of, the sacramental world, must pass by the dragon, even enter his jaws, in order to reach the divine.

## **Progression via Penetration**

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) reveal a marked difference from Flannery O'Connor's early work, yet these collected volumes are sufficiently distinct from one another to suggest a progression in the author's vision and technique from the first volume to the second. As I discussed in Chapter Three, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* reflects to a noticeable, though not exclusive, extent the grotesque, deficient dimension of reality, while it relies on the power of inversion to

suggest its opposite: the anagogical. Evil is depicted as “a defective use of good”, a “wound” in the greater scheme of reality.<sup>7</sup> Yet as story after story shows, it is towards this wound of sin that God the Redeemer is drawn. By way of its phraseology, even the title of the collection suggests what is not explicitly present: good is not easy to find. The child stories of the collection, which more expressly show the encounter between human and divine, anticipate the more obvious affirmative thrust of O’Connor’s subsequent volume. Indeed, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, as I suggested in Chapter Four, conveys a conception of the grotesque and anagogical as extreme positions at opposite ends of an evolutionary scale. The grotesque image could be viewed as a rudimentary, unrecognisable form of the anagogical ideal. The grotesque assumes an anagogical role in that it affirms potential; it is good “under construction” (*Prose*: 226). Even the title of O’Connor’s posthumous collection points to what is possible: every being that is responsive will participate in the divine design.

It can be argued that Flannery O’Connor’s fiction developed as a result of her focused penetration of vision and augmentation of representational strategies. In her 1955 volume, she often took the action further than that of *Wise Blood* — further than a diminishing “pin point of light” at the story’s end (226) — to a place of human-divine encounter at the climax. Moreover, in her volume published posthumously, she propelled the action in its most advanced expression beyond confrontation and conviction to a place of communion. The means, therefore, by which apocalypse is approached in her two collections is significant. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the image of a pursuit or hunt is sustained subliminally and at times consciously alluded to. The Misfit protests resentfully: “someone is always after you” (*Stories*: 129). Mrs Pritchard warns about calamity arriving all “at oncet” (178). The peacock in ‘The Displaced Person’ has its eyes “fixed in the distance on something no one else could see” (194). The hunt for the lost, the action of the ‘hound of heaven’, runs through all the stories. One cannot help but recall Francis Thompson’s renowned lines: “From those strong feet that followed after, followed after./ But with hurrying chase,/ And unperturbed pace,/ Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,/ They beat.”<sup>8</sup> With a view to O’Connor’s second collection, one could say that the most severe consequences of the ‘chase’ — the massacre in the woods, the

destruction of a farm by fire, the murder of an innocent man — take on even more peculiar forms in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. In this collection, the image of penetrating descent, of a swoop or a stab, seems to describe the initial thrust of the divine impetus, as a number of the stories quite self-consciously and often grotesquely show. Many protagonists receive a hierophantic penetration or blow — at most extreme, the horns of a bull, a brutal shove through metal railings — which hollows out their beings to reveal the doomed emptiness of their souls and to make space for God. An extract from Emily Dickinson’s ‘Divine Possession’ seems to capture this most extreme sense of apocalyptic visitation. God approaches “Then nearer, then so slow/ Your breath has time to straighten,/ Your brain to bubble cool,” when He “Deals one imperial thunderbolt/ That scalps your naked soul.”<sup>9</sup> If sacramental oneness is achieved in these most severe of stories, it is first by means of a grotesque Pentecost, not a gentle alighting. Even so, the sense of God’s call to unite with Him, not to sink into remorse or to flee His presence, is more fully amplified in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The characters in this collection more often than in her earlier volume, move beyond defiant stagnancy or retrogression to a state of inner diminishment. In a place of suffering surrender, a form of purgatory, many of O’Connor’s adults apparently see a future beyond themselves with God: the accomplishment of the second movement of the divine impetus.

Flannery O’Connor’s late refinement of her fictional strategy more fully shows both the initial penetrating action (the effect of the grotesque) and a subsequent vision or transformation, more reassuring than negating (a display of the anagogical). Ruby Turpin and O. E. Parker suffer for their sins, yet undergo profound spiritual experiences. These occurrences could further be seen as developments, deepenings, of O’Connor’s redemptive child stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Ruby and Parker apprehend to a fuller extent what “the child”, Nelson Head and Harry/Bevel Ashfield encounter in their discovery of eternity. This idea of ‘deepening’ the rendered experience can be illustrated by recalling the closing images of ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’ and ‘Revelation’. The “red clay road hanging over the trees” in her earlier story becomes the “vast swinging bridge” that Ruby Turpin sees “extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire [on which] a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven” (*Stories*: 248, 508).

The 1964 story represents the maturity of O'Connor's anthropotropic vision — pride is dealt a resounding blow and entry into a new existence opens up. 'The Artificial Nigger', an earlier attempt to picture the development from expiation to divine acceptance, is rather more weighted down by narrative elucidation than this later story. Yet, the story marks a stage in O'Connor's growth as she comes to think more about depicting "love and charity" in less devastating ways (*Letters*: 373). 'Judgement Day', the last story of her final triptych, presents something of a challenge in that it does not as reassuringly suggest redemption as the preceding two pieces. It reflects O'Connor's earlier, more severe style and yet, in a sophisticated manner, it reworks and redeems her very first story. Taken together, the stories create a perplexing tapestry which O'Connor's friend, Youree Watson, imagined to convey the "same vision which our Lord Himself expressed in the Parable of the Wheat and the Cockle",<sup>10</sup> a vision not dissimilar from the "jungle of shadows", in which the desirable and despised, light and dark, the anagogical and the grotesque interpenetrate.

A careful consideration of her second collection in relation to her first thus suggests that Flannery O'Connor made every endeavour to "deepen her penetration of things" (*Conversations*: 107), while aiming to stimulate and capture "variety" (*Letters*: 498). It could be said that she moved, in her writing of fiction, as if on waves, to explore the depths of her vision and to discover new expressive possibilities. She moved forward, yes, but not without returning to the former things. Flannery O'Connor was intent on redeeming her past, on balancing her earlier meditation on human deficiency and twentieth-century crisis against a wider view of optimistic, eschatological denouement, while she remained focused on extending the reach of her art. In matters of representation, she did not wish to remain on the edge of eternity, but sought to go beyond.

## **Art to Shock and Endure**

In my discussion of the anagogical and grotesque and the two short story collections, the intriguing question of Flannery O'Connor's relationship to her readers has recurrently

surfaced. It seems reasonable to end this study with a last consideration of the readers' role in influencing her interpenetrated art. In years to come, it will, of course, be O'Connor's readers, and an important species of this general group, her critics, who will largely decide her fate as a fiction writer of interest to the twenty-first century.

As I initially indicated in my introduction, O'Connor was well aware of her readers, in fact, she chastened herself for this heightened awareness. Her Catholicism, after all, evidently provided a means of escape from the instructional presence of the reader. According to Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, based on Thomistic theology, a work of art is "a good in itself" being "wholly concerned with that which is made" (*Prose*: 171). She thus reasoned that as long as her focus remained on producing meticulously wrought work, which never lost touch with concrete reality, she was fulfilling her aim. In an impertinent moment, O'Connor asserted: "The writer is only free when he can tell his reader to go jump in the lake" (*Conversations*: 39). She implied, in other words, that her readers could go to hell. On another occasion, she insisted that she should not let the reader "affect" her "vision" nor "gain control" over her "thinking" (in Feeley 1982: 45). In sentiment, O'Connor echoed the assertion of another formidable female writer, Dorothy Parker, who claimed: "irreverence is essential for the creation of humorous prose. There must be courage; there must be no awe... There must be a magnificent disregard of your reader".<sup>11</sup> However, despite O'Connor's strongly stated opinions, she did not seem able to rid herself of the imposing form of the reader. Her plight is ironically reminiscent of her two most haunted protagonists: Hazel Motes, who was unable to loose himself from the "wild ragged figure" (*Wise*: 16), and Tarwater, who could not escape "the stinking mad shadow", of Jesus (*Violent*: 91).

In spite O'Connor's many derogatory comments about readers, it is important to note that she also, somewhat contradictorily, acknowledged their role. "[It] takes readers as well as writers to make literature", she stated in an essay (*Prose*: 182). "[T]he act of writing is not complete in itself. It has its end in audience", she wrote to a friend (*Letters*: 458). "The novelist doesn't write to express himself", she reflected, "rather he renders his vision so it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader" (*Prose*: 162). I would like to suggest that her standpoint shifted so dramatically on this issue because

she was primarily thinking of two different audiences. When she defied the idea that readers should influence writing, she primarily aimed her indignation at Catholics who upheld the notion that art should submit to utilitarian ends.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Maritain, she stressed that the artist “does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists” (*Prose*: 171). When O’Connor did consider the role of the reader, it was essentially her secular readers who haunted her, especially the aesthetically accomplished. She seemed less plagued by the popular social demand on writers to reflect a thriving society, that is, to return the “wide, ever-ready smile” in which the abundance of America is “transubstantiated”.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in spite of her claims to be free from the evangelising spirit, O’Connor evidently had an imperative to speak to the unchurched. Her many passing comments on her relationship to her readers suggest that she considered an aggressive approach to be necessary. Writing informally to her friend ‘A’, she proposed: “You can’t clobber any reader while he is looking. You divert his attention, then you clobber him, and he never knows what hit him” (*Letters*: 202).

As Robert Brinkmeyer suggests, Flannery O’Connor adopts the stance of a fundamentalist preacher in addressing her secular readers (1989: 179). Again and again in her narratives, she builds up slowly and indirectly to an unexpected rhetorical climax designed to shatter rationalist preconceptions. In order to achieve this aim, essentially an anagogical one, she exploits the grotesque. As I discussed earlier, she considered that a radical, outrageous way of representing Christian truth is necessary in the modern era. O’Connor would surely have concurred with Walker Percy that the “old words of grace are worn smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has occurred, like a poker chip after it has been cashed in” (1975: 16). The apocalyptic possibilities of the grotesque, therefore, afforded her the means to make her vision “apparent by shock” (*Prose*: 34). As Geoffrey Harpham observes, the grotesque requires readers to engage in an interpretative process at a particularly high intensity, jarring them to a re-examination of perceived norms (1982: 187). Confronting the “interval” of the grotesque forces the reader to suffer through on the way to the discovery of “a radical new insight” (46). To catalyse revelation, O’Connor deemed offence to be necessary. A. R. Ammons conveys this principle: “Garbage has to be the poem of our time because/ garbage is spiritual,

believable enough/ to get our attention, getting in the way, piling up, stinking, turning books brownish and/ creamy white: what else deflects us from the errors of our illusionary ways".<sup>14</sup> We might conclude that O'Connor developed an almost mystical faith in the anagogical ability of her distortions to effect change. Believing in the existence of a 'metaphysical memory', she held that not only her characters, but also her readers, "even the most perverse", in Maritain's words, desire God "without knowing it".<sup>15</sup> By 'clobbering' her readers through exposure to the grotesque, O'Connor hoped to awaken them to a deep-seated awareness of the truth they had never before acknowledged.

Some would say that as a fiction writer, Flannery O'Connor was in travail with her world because a utopia of believing readers did not exist. She recognised that traditional systems of Christian symbolism were losing their currency, but, at the same time, she saw the risk involved in exploiting a new, idiosyncratic system of her own making. Writing in 1957, she alluded to the challenge she faced and to the choice she made to distort her all-important truths: "when you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it". But when you have to assume that it does not, then you may well "be forced to take ever more violent means to get your vision across" (*Prose*: 33-4). It seems to me, however, that what constituted her greatest challenge was also her greatest opportunity. It was, ironically, disturbingly, to her advantage that the world only seemed to be growing darker. Had she assumed "more normal", less extreme, means to communicate her vision it is debatable whether her work would have found its distinctive place in American literature. Had she continued to write short stories in the style of 'The Geranium', rather than the latterly reconfigured 'Judgement Day', which incorporates the grotesque to anagogical ends, it is debatable whether she would have made a mark so notable. It seems extraordinary that for a writer who published relatively little (two novels and thirty-one stories), O'Connor was the first post-World War II author to be 'canonised' by publication of her work in a Library of America edition.<sup>16</sup>

What makes Flannery O'Connor the enduring and lively subject of scholarly endeavour is surely her peculiar interplay of impulses and interpenetration of modes. There ~~are~~<sup>is</sup> no shortage of conferences and seminars on her work.<sup>17</sup> The *Flannery*

*O'Connor Bulletin*, the longest-running journal devoted to a woman writer in American literature, has no dearth of new articles. A millennial celebration is planned, an electronic 'list server' is up and running, an O'Connor society thrives. The interest in this Southern Catholic writer appears greater than ever.<sup>18</sup> It seems that, like Obadiah Eliahue Parker's cosmos of interwoven tattoos, Flannery O'Connor's hideously beautiful art, interpenetrated by the anagogical and grotesque, will always elude definitive interpretation and, indeed, remain difficult to erase from public and academic interest. There is no denying it; she has got under our skin.

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## Conclusion Notes

<sup>1</sup> The authors of the respective 1957 volumes are Bruno de Jesus Marie, O.C.D., and D. B. Wyndham Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> Blake writes in Plate 3 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without contraries, there is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence." (in *Complete Writings* 1957: 149 ).

<sup>3</sup> From Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984: 287).

<sup>4</sup> From an unpublished manuscript cited in Asals (1982: 121).

<sup>5</sup> See *Prose*: 150.

<sup>6</sup> In Zundel 1991.

<sup>7</sup> See Maritain (in *Library*: 28-9).

<sup>8</sup> From 'The Hound of Heaven' in *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 32)

<sup>9</sup> In *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (1995: 15).

<sup>10</sup> From Watson's letters published in John R. May (1979: 351).

<sup>11</sup> Regina Barreca (1996: 78) draws attention to Parker's point expressed in her introduction to *The Most of S. J. Perelman*.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor reacted against the implied imperative of statements such as: "Why not a positive novel based on the Church's fight for social justice, or the liturgical revival, or life in a seminary?" (*Prose*: 195).

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Wood (1996-7: 155) cites Philip Rieff on the social effect of civil religion.

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Kirby (1994: 872).

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Wood (1988: 95) cites from Maritain's *Integral Humanism*.

<sup>16</sup> See Crews (1990: 49) and Hilfer (1992: 70). The Library of America edition in question is *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (1988), edited by Sally Fitzgerald.

<sup>17</sup> Recent conferences on O'Connor include those, which took place in Milledgeville, Georgia (1995), in Weston, Massachusetts (1996) and Salt Lake City, Utah (1997). A forthcoming O'Connor conference is planned in Baltimore, Maryland in May 1999.

<sup>18</sup> See the editorial of the 1996-7 *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* as well as the official 'Flannery O'Connor Special Collection' web site hosted by Georgia College & State University.

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