
TAYLOR BLACK

“Useful Idiots: Flannery O’Connor and the Curse of Superiority”

SOUTHERN CARICATURES

FLANNERY O’CONNOR WAS INTIMATELY FAMILIAR WITH THE cultural gap between the demographic of her general audience (Northern, urban, secular, white) and the figures depicted in her stories (Southern, thoroughly religious, agrarian, mostly white and tangentially Black). Her essays and letters offer ample evidence that she wrote her fiction with this tension in mind, actively using her stories to elicit the fantasies of moral, cultural, and intellectually superiority through which she believed her audience read her work.

The fact that O’Connor’s life as a publicly-read and sometimes interviewed Southern author occurred during the Civil Rights Movement—or the South’s Second (failed attempt at) Reconstruction—meant that topical issues having to do with cultural and political battles over segregation and integration weigh on how and why O’Connor’s stories were read as allegories for what she terms “Southern degeneracy.” The historical context surrounding O’Connor’s work is important for her as just that: context. Desegregation was—and remains—a process that brought to the fore all of the white South’s ugliest fantasies regarding racial purity, superiority, and inferiority. Because O’Connor worked within the limitations of a certain kind of grotesque realism, she represents this political and social context in her stories, but in her characteristically distorted fashion. O’Connor was a realist of a type, and her aim was always to dwell on its surfaces, resisting the temptation of complexity—that is, to give her characters recognizable inner lives—in order to evoke an estranging effect on her readers.

O’Connor supposed that her average reader looked down upon the types of poor, white, almost cartoonish characters she portrayed in her stories—and indeed, she sketched caricatures in her preparation for writing.¹ She anticipated that her caricatures would engage her readers’

biases about the culture of the South they ostensibly embody, and that the—again—cartoonishly blunt conversion or revelation experiences of those characters would evoke an alienating effect. But this evoked estrangement is a mere means to her desired effect. Writing to her friend Maryat Lee in 1959, O'Connor compares her work to a slow acting medicine:

The thing to do is write something with a delayed reaction like those capsules that take an hour to melt in your stomach. In this way, it could be . . . [read] on Monday and not make them vomit until Wednesday, by which time they would not be sure who was to blame. This is the principle I operate under and I find it works well (*The Habit of Being* 349).

While her stories tend more to the margins of prominent social issues, O'Connor engages “the topical” in her story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” which features a struggle between two cartoonish representations: a mother who is afraid of integration (representing the old white South) and her son who cannot wait for the old guard to be torn down (embodying the new progressive white South) (*HB* 537). Despite what appear to be discordant worldviews, the mother and son appear, by the end of the story, to be more similar than not. They cling to their sentimentalized worldviews to cover over the emptiness characterizing them both. They simply play off one other, and in doing so, reveal their shared depravity.

O'CONNOR'S DOUBLE-SIDED VIEW OF THE WORLD

In a letter written to her friend Betty Hester in late summer 1963, O'Connor updated reaction to a story written by Eudora Welty for *The New Yorker* magazine entitled “Where Is The Voice Coming From?” A month before revising her opinion, O'Connor is straightforward in her praise for the piece, telling another correspondent: “Nobody else could have got away with it or made it work but her. . . . I want to read it again” (*HB* 533). Written from the perspective of a racist, socially downtrodden, and ignorant young white man, Welty's short story was a timely re-telling of the story of Medgar Evers's murder from the perspective of his imagined next-door neighbor. The story is concise, and its protagonist lacks complexity. His motive is without nuance. As he

confesses: "I done what I done for my own pure-D satisfaction." Writing at a time when racist murderers were more often treated as complex, fascinating, nuanced characters, Welty's stark and reductive representation of Evers's assassin seems significant. She humanizes him, but only to the extent that readers can see what happens to a human when he or she internalizes insane fantasies of racial superiority.

After rereading the story, revised her assessment. While nothing in her letter to Hester suggests she has amended or taken back her praise for Welty's skills as a writer, there is something about the story, and particularly O'Connor's sense of its reception by readers of *The New Yorker*, that strikes a nerve: "It's the kind of story that the more you think about it the less satisfactory it gets. What I hate most is its being in the *New Yorker* and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland" (HB 537). O'Connor was sensitive to these kinds of projections of inferiority by Northern readers, whether by virtue of their disdain or political interest in the region and its inhabitants. By the time Welty publishes "Where Is The Voice Coming From?" O'Connor is only a year away from her untimely death from Lupus, but also already established in her literary career. While everything she wrote was set in the South, her critical success was enabled by Northern publishers, magazines, and their readers. Though written about and perhaps in some grand way for her neighbors, O'Connor's audience was always the same "stupid Yankee liberals" she imagined reading and smacking their lips at Welty's story.

O'Connor's double-sided reaction to Welty's story is itself an indication of her own relationship to "the race question," which, as Angela Alaimo O'Donnell argues is one of many examples of O'Connor's characteristic "radical ambivalence." According to O'Donnell, in her stories and especially letters, "O'Connor acknowledges her deep ambivalence (a word whose root, 'ambi,' meaning 'both,' suggests double-mindedness) with regard to racial justice and the supposedly dangerous and disruptive efforts to achieve it" (6). O'Donnell focuses on a line in a letter to Hester in which she states, on "the issue" of race, "I hope to be of two minds about some things is not to be neutral" (HB 218; qtd. by O'Donnell 6). "This inner conflict," O'Donnell argues, "between aspirational hope and the reality of her own experience is the root and source of the inconsistencies of attitude evident in O'Connor's writings with regard to race, manifesting an ambivalence that marks her as flawed

and deeply human" (6). From here, O'Donnell focuses on O'Connor's peculiar ways of always seeing and dwelling in the tense, liminal space created between the many binaries (white/black, North/South, Cosmopolitan/Rural) of the American and Southern race problem.

Another source of energy (and angst) for O'Connor is her hyper-awareness of her work's reception, and more precisely who is doing the reading and in what spirit that reading is done. For O'Connor, much talk of "the race problem" gets used as a journalistic trope implying Northern moral and cultural superiority and Southern inadequacy and primitivity, both white and Black. In the same letter to Hester in which she bemoans Welty's *New Yorker* readers, O'Connor revisits her own experience with the Northern, liberal intelligentsia. Of one newspaper columnist who had mailed her a list of questions regarding "the race thing," O'Connor comments:

She asked in one of them if I thought the *race* crisis was going to bring about a renaissance . . . in Southern literature. I said I certainly did not, that I thought that was to romanticize the race business to a ridiculous degree. In the story that comes out they change the word *race* in the question to *social* so that none of it makes much sense. You can't get around newspaper people. I think they are the slobber-heartedest lily-mindedest piously conniving crowd in the modern world. (HB 537)

While O'Connor certainly had played into the Northern fetishization of the South, and her start surface treatment of Southerners and their actions helped to facilitate the condescending estrangement that attracted Northern readers, she is also taken aback by the response. She remains sensitive to the ways she is folded into others' narratives about the degeneracy of Southern life and the fantasy of Northern moral and intellectual superiority.

In her fiction, O'Connor is confident of her capacity to convey meanings despite her audience's sense of superiority over her characters. However, when it comes to being interpolated by journalists into conversations about the world outside of her fiction, O'Connor is more wary of her capacities to control the narrative, which seems, at least to her, always to point in the direction of Northern moral and intellectual superiority. If the journalistic rendition of "the race problem" is one way

of its romanticization of the South during the time of O'Connor's career as a writer, then deployments of Southern stupidity and ignorance are two ways in which this romantic picture of the South is painted by outsiders looking to improve their sense of superiority by virtue of the pity or interest they take in the South.

FREAKS, FROM THE MARGINS OF COMPASSION

O'Connor is unsentimental. Accordingly, the human beings she creates in her novels and short stories appear to her readers exactly as they are. O'Connor does not lack all sympathy for her characters, but her sense of identification with them is borne out of her sense of their—and our—common displacement from God. For O'Connor, this displacement gives life an uneven and chaotic quality, evident across her body of work. Dissonance can be registered in any number of ways—all of them suggesting disconnections, disunions, gaps between one thing or idea and another. The term has its roots in music theory and describes the presence of two competing and discordant sounds or movements at play within the same body of work—a mingling of disagreeable sounds that together compose their own incongruous harmonies.

This notion of two competing and dissonant forces coming to together to compose something resonates with the Grotesque tradition in art. For O'Connor, the grotesque in literary practice employs dissonance as a way of making the absolute fact of human displacement concrete. The grotesque writer is, for her, a kind of prophet who is also a “realist of distances” who cultivates a world in which readers are invited to see dissonance materialized, to witness “near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (*Mystery* 44). O'Connor's characters are testaments to the incongruities of being human, which is defined by the properly grotesque double reality of God's love and our shared displacement from that love. Her character depictions reveal a sharp and exacting view of human behavior, the opposite of the “hazy compassion” that, for O'Connor, has become ubiquitous and redundant: “Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. . . . Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human” (*MM* 43). An author's compassion for his or her characters is, in this light, tautological and self-effacing: a use of literature to escape a dramatic confrontation with

oneself rather than, as O'Connor would have it, a stark plunge into the nature of reality.

While O'Connor may lack "compassion" as such for her characters, she is not entirely without an apparent concern or sympathy for the plight of her characters. Her "cartoon saints," for Anthony Di Renzo, are "products of an honest and humble aesthetic" and that their "very grotesqueness expresses a respect, not a disdain, for human complexity" (162). O'Connor's fiction dwells in and makes meaningful use of limitations of many kinds, and she sketches characters who are perfectly oblivious to the fact that they are all limited to and by the circumstances and the involuntary idiosyncrasies of their personalities. For Di Renzo, O'Connor's resistance to sentimentality is both a formal and ethical recognition of the limitations of her art. She cannot convey something as dramatic and complete as revelation in words and she resists the urge to preach or moralize directly. O'Connor resists this urge to appeal to her readers' base compassion by eschewing verisimilitude in favor of opaque and asymbolic moral allegory. Rather than identify with the so-called average person, O'Connor tends toward the most extreme and unusual. She uses these "freaks" counterintuitively, as a unifying symbol, "a figure for our essential displacement" (MM 45). In O'Connor's world, everyone and everything is displaced from God's love. The freak is not the exception, but rather the common denominator, a point of unification in a universe overflowing with conflict and unrest. For O'Connor, everyone is a freak, and almost no one is cognizant of this fact. These freaks carry what O'Connor describes as "an invisible burden," which stems from the experience of life as and through disconnection (MM 44-45). Because she understands this condition to be felt through humankind's displacement from God, her dissonant representations reveal the true implications of her stories, which are bound up in the theatrics of human salvation.

Talk of freaks is impolite and untimely. When O'Connor delivered her lectures on the grotesque tradition in Southern fiction, she knew this to be the case. "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks," she says, "I say it is because we are still able to recognize one" (MM 44). To be a freak in O'Connor's universe is to be blind to oneself, to misunderstand the nature of one's own built-in limitations. Freaks are not only the blatantly nontypical characters such as Lucynell Crater in "The Life You

Save May Be Your Own,” but rather they are also and more so the more typical ones who think they know better, who are inoculated by their own limitations. These characters are unfailingly undone by others who can sense this lack of self-awareness and take advantage by appealing to them sentimentally. Lucynell Jr.’s mother, Lucynell Crater Sr., for example, is thoroughly done in by a man she felt to be her natural inferior, Tom T. Shiftlet. O’Connor establishes Lucynell Sr.’s complacency and sense of intellectual, social, and familial superiority, and also how unaware she is of her limitations. Lucynell Sr. sits on her front porch with her daughter, “a big rosy-faced girl” who “was completely deaf and had never said a word in her life” (*Collected Stories* 150). Lucynell Jr., who despite her childlike state, is thirty years old, cannot speak for herself when her mother describes her to a potential suitor as a girl of fifteen or sixteen.

The central action of the story occurs between Lucynell Sr. and an approaching tramp, Tom T. Shiftlet, adding some excitement to the desolate Crater farm but, at least on the surface of things, not causing too much of a stir for the old woman: “Although the old woman lived in this desolate spot with only her daughter and she had never seen Mr. Shiftlet before, she could tell, even from a distance, that he was a tramp and no one to be afraid of” (CS 145). Tramp or not, Shiftlet commences circumvents the old woman’s psychic and emotional defenses. Tough and impervious as she pretends to be, the old woman cannot help but opine with him on such subjects as cars that aren’t made like they used to be, how sweet and good mothers can be, how innocent girls aren’t like they used to be. Shiftlet’s mode of conversation is orchestrated to appeal to the old woman’s pride and feed the blind spots embedded in her personality. By the end of the story, Shiftlet makes off not only with the broken-down automobile that Lucynell Sr. hired him to fix, but also her idiot daughter, whom he marries and abandons in a roadside cafe fast asleep next to her bowl of ham and grits.

Lucynell Sr. lacks self-awareness, and is of the particular type that, in O’Connor, is apt to precede a forceful, often inelegant, and oftener violent intrusion of grace: for instance, when the Misfit shoots the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” “She would of been a good woman,” the Misfit observes, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (CS 133). Staring down the barrel of his gun, the Grandmother finally shuts up, stops all of her attempts at

tricking her murderer, and discovers what others have known all along: that, church-going or not, her faith was only ever in her own sense of superiority over others. Her pride was more real to her than God, who she deployed and spoke for when she needed in the same ways Lucynell Sr. does on behalf of her deaf and dumb daughter. God and Lucynell Jr. are avatars for the pride of their respective betters. It is only when the Grandmother hears her own betrayal for herself that she is able to confront the fact of what Ralph C. Wood has termed her “practical atheism” (2004).

Quivering and mumbling up at the Misfit, the old woman speaks one of her final lines of this—and her—life story: “Maybe he didn’t raise the dead” (CS 132). Having said that, something shifts in and outside of her, a veil is lifted and, even though she is seconds away from her demise, the grandmother finally does something she has not planned to do, reaching up to the Misfit and proclaiming “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (CS 132). When he recoils from her touch in a way the narrator equates to a hand pulling away from a snake that had just bitten it, it is clear that even though this last intrusion of sentimentality comes finally not from the grandmother’s overweening sense of pride but from somewhere more mysterious and divine, there is no saving her from what comes next. The three bullets he lodges into her chest come in the very moments following her final and only real moment of self-reflection.

This is a conversion experience that, as O’Connor describes, cannot occur without characters such as the grandmother “seeing themselves in a kind of blasting, annihilating light” (HB 427). For a woman who always felt like she knew how to get herself over on others, it must have felt strange indeed to finally find herself saying something she did not plan. When she reaches up to the Misfit and calls him one of her babies, the grandmother is given a momentary but also an enduring opportunity to enter the kind of annihilating state of conversion that O’Connor describes. This violent intrusion of grace occurs only after the grandmother lays down all of her emotional and psychic weapons of self-defense. Here, O’Connor’s concern for the salvation of her character’s souls explicitly appears in her careful and deliberately violent disaggregation of their forms of blindness to themselves, which are constructed and reconstructed on the level of sentimentality and apparent through the characters’ willingness to speak in platitudes and clichés in order to shore up their sense of pride and superiority.

Although the grandmother's conversion experience only lasts a moment, O'Connor does care for her. The grandmother's particular experience of the "blasting annihilating light" of conversion is the same as anyone else's. This is, O'Connor continues, "a blast that will last a lifetime" (*HB* 427). Conversion is a state of becoming that occurs only when characters witness that which estranges them from themselves—that which makes them a freak. As O'Connor says, this does not always happen so quickly and cleanly as in the case of the grandmother. Sometimes, as she explains in a letter to her friend Betty Hester, conversion comes in stages, deepening itself as it unfolds: "I don't think of the conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it" (*HB* 430). The conversion experience O'Connor discusses here is a kind of ongoing self-recognition, a nonlinear and uneven state of becoming²—the same kind of conversion that Rob Wilson describes as "the will to *conversion-as-life-becoming*" (10). This is the opposite of pride or narcissistic self-reflection. As a conversion experience that does not end, O'Connor's violent and annihilating version of self-recognition hinges upon her characters seeing themselves and their limitations in the harsh and impersonal light of reality.

O'Connor's characters carry within them the beginnings of their own undoing, which can occur either via conversion or destruction. These two potentialities are unknown to these characters, who cannot see themselves or their futures because of their sense of intellectual and social superiority. That O'Connor's narrators have no sympathies or compassion for these characters is far from a sign of her own authorial forms of detachment from or projection onto these characters. In fact, O'Connor's uses of and fictional attacks on the uses of sentiment are the site of her actual concern for the plight of her characters' souls. This lack of compassion is exactly the site of O'Connor's theological concern for and awareness of the tragedy of human displacement from God.

"I'M WITH STUPID": GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

The positioning of the two old women featured in "The Life You Save" and "A Good Man" against wily, no-good men allows both the characters and the reader to witness the process by which they are undone. By the time the reader encounters Lucynell Crater Sr. and the

Grandmother, it is clear that each has a sense of purpose predicated upon their belief in themselves not only as morally and intellectually superior to their antagonists. Both, however, are carefully and expertly disabused of these notions by men who know exactly how to take advantage of their weaknesses. At the same time, Lucynell Sr. and the Grandmother depend on an absent and unspeaking other for whom they in turn speak in order to either deflect what they see as their weakness or reflect back what they hope to be their strengths of character. So, while it takes an criminal outsider strip these women of their superiority complexes, it takes this deaf and dumb third party for the whole process of self-recognition and violent conversion to take place. To make herself feel superior, Lucynell Sr. has at her disposal her loving and dauntlessly simply daughter Lucynell Jr. As for the Grandmother, she has her notion of "God," who she speaks for and whose divine supremacy she takes advantage of if and when she sees fit.

Both women are proud of themselves, in other words, and derive this sense of pride by saying, in essence, "I'm with stupid." This slogan is pure Americana: made famous by emblazoned t-shirts that one imagines can be purchased at gas stations, flea markets or county fairs. Simple, but poetic in its way, "I'm with stupid" gets to the heart of how this superiority complex operates. When one calls another "stupid," the speaker implies an intellectual superiority to the addressee. But this is the more fascinating part of the deal: presumably, the person who walks with the one wearing the t-shirt "I'm with stupid" has acquiesced to the joke. Perhaps this is because, as Avital Ronell has argued in her book *Stupidity*, stupidity is always already sure of itself or at least strangely incapable of being insulted. Occasionally, smart people have been known play dumb to get one over on another: this is the strategy taken by Shiftlet in his encounter with Lucynell Sr. But sometimes, Ronell says, "when stupidity is not being played but instead inserts itself without remorse, it paradoxically plays on the side of truth, or at least it poses itself as a replica of absolute knowledge" (43). In this light, the person who stands next to the one who truly believes "I'm with stupid" confirms the truth of that claim, but obliquely. "I'm with stupid" can also mean "I contain stupidity," that stupidity is with me and I with it. In speaking for Lucynell Jr. or God, the respective women in these stories also reveal themselves to be empty, guilty of pride that they achieve by their senses of supremacy. That they do not know how obvious all of this is makes them ignorant to what is readily evident to the reader. Their projections are also tacit

reflections of their own inferiority complexes. That they cannot see this speaks to untimely and sideways strength of the claim "I'm with stupid," which also means "stupid is with me."

Of course, Lucynell Sr. and the Grandmother are not the only two characters undone by their dependence on a useful idiot. Writing to Cecil Dawkins in 1958 of her recently finished second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor concedes that, once again, "I have an idiot in it. I wish I could do it without the idiot but the idiot is necessary" (HB 301). The idiot in this case is Bishop, who acts as a go-between for his father, Rayber, and his cousin, Francis Tarwater. Bishop has an unspecified intellectual disability and cannot speak or act on his own. The son of a schoolteacher and would-be authority in child psychology, Bishop is the perfect companion to Rayber who seems to have an endless need to express and prove his expertise. Bishop is necessary here as a source of constant revelation of Rayber's inadequacies as a man. Rayber thinks of himself as truly devoted to his son's wellbeing, although the action of the novel suggests his devotion is twisted by his need to see himself as morally superior. His was "a love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all-demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant" (*Collected Works* 401). Of this passage, Ralph C. Wood argues that despite his professed atheism, Bishop provides the otherwise cerebral Rayber with an opportunity to experience something approximating Christly, unconditional love for the other. "Like few other rationalists," Wood says, "Rayber understands the true meaning of divine love. Precisely because Bishop's 'uselessness' makes him incapable of any reciprocal exchange, any return of the love that he might receive, Rayber sees the boy as an unbidden gift" (107). Although Rayber is essentially a nihilist, Wood maintains that he has within him an unbidden and "mystical desire to love everything absolutely and without qualification" (107-8). The fact that this love and attention is focused on his relationship with his cognitively limited son, who is in essence a blank canvass for his father's projection of inferiority and superiority, adds a grotesque texture to what Wood describes as Rayber's otherwise innocent need to "love everything absolutely and without qualification." He relies on Bishop to confirm his goodness and knowhow and in doing so finds himself in a kind of trap wherein his love and his sense of pride is achieved only through a love that is on the surface sentimental and self-serving. The opposite of this kind of

gluttonous love is what Wood describes as an “authentic love,” which is “always costly, at once ‘imperious and all-demanding’” (108). In spite of himself, this kind of self-annihilating love is available to Rayber, but it takes the untimely death of his son Bishop for Rayber to realize it. By unwittingly contributing to the events surrounding Bishop’s tragic death by drowning, Wood argues, “O’Connor’s narrator sets forth the pain of absolute loss, the damnation of being unable to love” (108). In the end, Bishop is, as O’Connor describes in her letter to Dawkins, a necessary and tragic element in the dramatic undoing of Rayber, who is too smart for his or Bishop’s own good.

Just as Bishop is not the only useful idiot deployed in O’Connor’s stories, Rayber is related to a whole host of other main characters who are superficially intelligent, but also incapable of deeper forms of recognition and awareness—especially in characters who are academics, artists, or . Consider Joy-Hulga in “Good Country People,” for instance, with her PhD in philosophy and a wooden-leg to match her wooden personality; or Asbury, the phony suffering artist of “The Enduring Chill”; or, most obviously, Sheppard from “The Lame Shall Enter First,” who is an updated version of Rayber—another schoolteacher and expert in child-rearing who thinks he was born to tend to his inferiors. These characters are intelligent and have the degrees and accolades to prove it. They also all require idiots to witness and attest to their supremacy. As Sheppard’s name suggests, these self-righteous characters do not live in a vacuum; they are all drawn to and consider themselves the natural leaders of sheep, which, as Ronell reminds us, are the idiots of the animal kingdom: “Sheep have a history, indeed a historicity, and they have grown to stand for stupidity itself—or at least this would be how contemporary man inscribes the sheep” (54). Despite their worldly achievements or knowledge, these characters are attracted to stupidity. They require corresponding dull characters to prove the truth of their intellectual superiority. Again, they illustrate the same fundamental ambiguity inherent in the “I’m with stupid” shirt, in which the rhetorical arrow pointing outward from the phrase always moves in both directions.

“THE TOPICAL IS POISON”: AMERICA’S HISTORICAL CURSES

Readers of O’Connor’s fiction encounter many examples of white people deriving an undeserved and ultimately tragic sense of purpose and pride from their whiteness. Characters like Ruby Turpin,

for instance, the protagonist of “Revelation,” thinks herself superior to everyone and thanks “God” every chance she gets for making her the way that He did: “Whenever she counted her blessings she felt as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty”; Turpin is a decadent, self-indulgent and full-figured woman who, in spite of her extra baggage, considers herself to be truly blessed by God (497).

Turpin is a nice, land-owning woman with a pleasing and dutiful husband. She is the kind of woman who can be found in the social register, who, in fact, studies it daily, pondering its layers of distinction the way a mystic might pore over an ancient text for wisdom. She is well-to-do, but not too wealthy. She thinks about where she is, socially but also racially, and is proud to be at the top of the middle. She is more than happy to brag about her status, and takes pains to distinguish herself from the lower orders: “There’s a heap of things,” she quips to herself as she patiently waits for a “white-trashy” woman to stop her racist diatribe about sending Blacks back to Africa, “worse than a . . .” (CS 495).

Turpin’s self satisfaction, however, is troubled by persistent thoughts of Mary Grace, who never reacts to Turpin’s speech. “Mrs. Turpin felt an awful pity for the girl,” the narrator reports, “though she thought it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly” (CS 492). Pimpled, awkward and ugly, Mary Grace spends most of her time not saying anything, hiding behind her “*Human Development*” schoolbook. Despite her silence, however, Mary Grace has a way of redirecting Turpin’s attention—particularly in the middle of the story, when Mary Grace hits Turpin with a thrown book. Her presence and its effect, however, are established early: “Directly across the table, the ugly girl’s eyes were fixed on Mrs. Turpin as if she had some very special reason for disliking her” (493). Later, the vision gets deeper and ruder: “There was no doubt in her [Turpin’s] mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (CS 500). Whereas other O’Connor stories depict characters like Turpin who achieve their sense of pride at the expense of others, “Revelation” forces its main character to reckon more directly with her moral other. Unlike Lucynell Jr. or Bishop or the Grandmother’s “God,” Mary Grace does not abide while Turpin expounds upon her virtues. The girl is depicted not only with having a silent and piercing way of seeing

through Turpin, O'Connor eventually endows her with the capacity to finally reply to Turpin. With her Yankee education and awkward physical appearance, it is difficult not to compare Mary Grace with (Mary Flannery) O'Connor herself, especially considering the fact that she is given the best and most direct line in this story: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (CS 500).

Although they learn their lessons the hard way, Rayber, Lucynell Sr. and the Grandmother never have to hear from the unspeaking characters upon whom they depend for a sense of moral, intellectual and/or social supremacy. Mary Grace's book-hurling is one of the few times O'Connor strikes back against her protagonist mid-story rather than at the end, just as the action of mercy is upon the poor souls who are finally forced to see themselves as themselves. Here, the reader is allowed follow Turpin home and witness, if only from her fractured and partial expression, the slow and painful beginnings of a conversion experience, an annihilating process of self-knowledge and reflection.

O'Connor anticipated mis-readings and overly literal renderings of her work. Her stories contain the seeds of revelation for her characters, but they also anticipate the kind of reader who is apt to view these characters with condescension and disbelief—even if they find them captivating regardless. Especially regarding conceptions of life in the South, O'Connor understood that she was working against and on the condescending assumptions of her audience and designs her stories that brings them to a kind of revelation. As Hilton Als has said: her "stories glisten with intelligence and with startling antisolipsism: She describes, never preaches" (129). O'Connor's readers, as she well knew, were cosmopolitan, Northern, mostly white, secular types who thought of her in much the same way as they would the characters in her stories. This "general reader," she reports, thinks of the Southern writer as engaged in the business of depicting life in the South as it generally is: "I have found that no matter for what purpose peculiar to your special dramatic needs you use the Southern scene, you are still thought by the general reader to be writing about the South and are judged by the fidelity your fiction has to Southern life" (MM 37-38). In a culture that, at least from O'Connor's perspective, has replaced God with secular belief systems, literature and its reception has lost its capacity to put us in touch with that which is essentially mysterious. In this context, she says, "the social sciences have cast a dreary blight on the public approach to fiction. . . .

Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end" (MM 38). As an author dealing in the grotesque, O'Connor trades in the most extreme forms of life and personality available to her imagination. Because, she says, "we have become so flooded with sorry fiction based on unearned liberties, or on the notion that fiction must represent the typical," we have lost access to literature's capacity to engender "deeper forms of realism," which, as a result of our ever-growing literalisms, "are less and less understandable" (MM 39). For O'Connor, this leads to a fundamental misreading of her work: "Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (MM 40).

Years after Welty's story in *The New Yorker*, much of the same misreading appears in an updated form in Paul Elie's 2020 article in *The New Yorker*, entitled "How Racist was Flannery O'Connor?" Elie explains his question is given partly in response to the release of a documentary on O'Connor, and also as a way of registering his somewhat superficial review of Angela O'Donnell's book *Radical Ambivalence*, which was billed by its publishers (Fordham University Press) as the first book on O'Connor and race. In the article, Elie criticizes O'Donnell for what he sees as her apologetic reaction to expressions of O'Connor's bigotry as they are registered in her letters to her mother when she traveled to New York and Iowa for graduate school. Although Elie spent decades reading and publishing on O'Connor—his 2003 book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*—he professes shock at the tone of these letters, which were not included in O'Connor's posthumously published collected letters but made available to the public in 2014 following Emory University's acquisition of O'Connor's mother's effects. Although he concedes "it's not fair to judge a writer by her juvenilia," Elie does just that. He feels betrayed or angry at O'Connor and uses the article as a place to express his angst at his sudden realization that O'Connor was, as he puts it, "a bigoted young woman." He then turns his attention to O'Donnell, whom he caricatures as a scholar too enamored of her own subject to be able to think critically about the very subject (race) with which she is said to reckon in her book. According to Elie, although O'Donnell is "palpably anguished about O'Connor's

race problem, she winds up reprising those earlier arguments in current literary-critical argot," by which he means her serious treatment of critical race studies scholarship in her book on O'Connor and race. Elie lambasts her for her attempts at contextualizing O'Connor's engagement with racist ideologies by conflating these same critical moves with his sense of O'Donnell's romantic identification with and apologetic approach to her subject.

Elie, operating with his presumption of moral and intellectual superiority to both O'Connor and O'Donnell, inhabits the same perspective of O'Connor's victim protagonists. In this sense, Elie is simply the latest in a string of cosmopolitan journalists that depend on a romanticized notion of Southern decrepitude, which can be imagined in either Black or white. Imagining himself playing the part of Mary Grace, Elie tries to throw O'Donnell's book at her. Unfortunately, his role is more akin to Ruby Turpin's, opining from a moralistic high ground to his own milieu on the fascinating but revolting products of the degenerate South. But as a lifetime reader of O'Connor, he should know he cannot control where it lands. Of this kind of performance of moralism and superiority that Elie offers in his article, O'Connor has already registered her own response, which we can find in that very same letter to Hester from which we have been deriving so much meaning already: "The topical is poison" (*HB* 537).

For O'Connor, to see every problem presented in literature in terms of how it reflects the real world it is part of a larger personality flaw that is characteristic of the American condition, and is part of the reason that for her "the topical is poison" (*HG* 537). Imposing topical discussions on O'Connor's works is antithetical to her literary project. For her, the problem was not so much race relations per se, but rather a broader conception of evil in which any given topical instance is subsumed. O'Connor sees social problems as signs of spiritual corruption and takes them more seriously than her readers might often assume. As for "the South," or the issues of "race" in America, O'Connor has already issued a warning: "evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured" (*MM* 209).

Duke University

NOTES

1. See Gerald.

WORKS CITED

- Als, Hilton. *White Girls*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2014.
- Di Renzo, Anthony. *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.
- Ealy, Paul. "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?" *The New Yorker*. 15 June 2020. Web. 22 Sept. 2021. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/how-racist-was-flannery-oconnor>>
- Faithful, Marianne. *Negative Capability*. Panta Rei Records, 2018.
- Gerald, Kelly, ed. *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012.
- Keats, John. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats, Cambridge Edition*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971.
- . *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Works*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988.
- . *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: FSG, 197.
- . *Mystery & Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: FSG, 1970.
- . *The Violent Bear It Away*. New York: FSG, 1960.
- . *Wise Blood*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1952.
- O'Donnell, Angela Alaimo. *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Fordham UP, 2020.
- Ronell, Avital. *Stupidity*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Wood, Ralph C. "Climbing into the Starry Field and Shouting Halleluiaah: O'Connor's Vision of the World to Come," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009. 103–18.
- . *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ Haunted South*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. 8–14.
- Wilson, Rob. *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted: An American Poetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2008.

