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Region, Idolatry, and Catholic Irony: Flannery O’Connor’s Modest Literary Vision

Introduction: On Adolescence and Authority, Region, and Religion

Writing to his lifelong friend Walker Percy in 1969, the Mississippi novelist and historian Shelby Foote assessed the life and career of their contemporary and fellow Southerner Flannery O’Connor:

She had the real clew, the solid gen, on what it’s about; I just wish she’d had time to demonstrate it fully instead of in fragments. She’s a minor-minor writer, not because she lacked the talent to be a major one, but simply because she died before her development had time to evolve out of the friction of just living enough years to soak up the basic joys and sorrows. That, and I think because she also didn’t have time to turn her back on Christ, which is something every great Catholic writer (that I know of, I mean) has done. Joyce, Proust—and, I think, Dostoevsky, who was just about the least Christian man I ever encountered except maybe Hemingway. . . . I always had the feeling that O’Connor was going to be one of our big talents; I didn’t know she was dying—which of course
means I misunderstood her. She was a slow developer, like most good writers, and just plain didn’t have the time she needed to get around to the ordinary world, which would have been her true subject after she emerged from the “grotesque” one she explored throughout the little time she had.¹

Foote’s image of O’Connor is striking not only for what it expresses about her life and writings, but perhaps even more so for its imaginative portrait of the person who might have evolved into a very different writer with age and maturity. Foote reads O’Connor not simply on the basis of her work—two novels, two collections of short stories, and a handful of nonfiction essays—but considers her work in the larger context of her life and early death (at thirty-nine, from complications of lupus). O’Connor’s portrait here takes on a very particular qualification, that of genius whose full realization and expression did not receive time enough for fulfillment. Foote’s description of the life O’Connor did experience, characterized by “the friction of just living enough years to soak up the basic joys and sorrows,” implies the opportunity, if one survives long enough, to emerge into a more fully mature and complete sense of personal and authorial identity. It is an identity, Foote seems to suggest, that enables a writer to confront more sweeping subjects, to address a more universal, cosmic range of human experience, and, eventually, to have some claim to being a major literary figure.

Along with Percy, Foote himself provides an excellent lens through which to view O’Connor’s standing in American literature and especially in the Southern literature of their time. Both Percy and Foote might be classified as minor writers whose fiction struggles to attain major status without ever quite doing so. In relation to canonical issues, Foote is perhaps the more interesting of the two because of his decision to abandon fiction in order to complete his epic, three-volume nonfiction work, The Civil War: A Narrative. The work took twenty years to write and essentially prevented him from continuing his own career development from young novelist to, per-
haps, the kind of major figure he envisions in the O’Connor who might have been. That the subject of his greatest work is the American Civil War serves as a most appropriate central presence in Foote’s career, and in many ways in the overall body of great twentieth-century Southern writing. The Civil War, whose final volume was published in 1974, serves as a monumental testament to that event whose influence on the maturation of the United States as a nation remains its most important episode since the Revolution itself. Foote speaks elsewhere of the war’s psychological role in the life of the nation, its occurrence during the nation’s crisis of adolescence, and its shaping force on the nation’s identity throughout the following periods.2

Foote’s models of maturation, of O’Connor’s aborted growth, of the adolescence of the nation as a whole, of the Civil War’s defining influence in the forced development of the United States (as much as ever a nation of regions, but united now by the traumatic experience of the war itself), also resonate with the presence of William Faulkner, the literary artist whose literature and persona relegated writers like O’Connor, Foote, and Percy to beginner, or at least minor, status. Foote’s lifelong admiration of and friendship with Faulkner has the unmistakable character of a master/apprentice relationship. Living in Greenville, Mississippi, during his youth, Foote first sought out Faulkner, his idol, as a teenager. Foote’s regard for Faulkner’s work, and especially his identification with Faulkner as a great writer who was also Southern and Mississippian, would remain one of the crucial and defining values throughout his life.

So Foote’s description of O’Connor as “a minor-minor writer” who never reached maturity may be read with Faulkner, the one undisputed major writer who towered over their region, in mind. O’Connor herself wrote of Faulkner’s looming shadow over the South’s literary landscape:

When there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the indi-
vidual writer will have to be more careful that he isn’t just doing badly what has already been done to completion. The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.3

That trains and railroads are haunting and haunted symbols in O’Connor’s own fiction should not be ignored here. The train, with its steel rails cutting through virgin Southern timber forests, with its piercing whistle and earthshaking rumbling cars, rudely confronts the pastoral, rural South with that most contentious figure, the big city. It is an invasive presence, a kind of authority that has insidious, vaguely Northern connotations. Even here, in O’Connor’s nonfiction essay “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” the inexorable Dixie Limited roars menacingly toward a violent collision with a similarly iconic American figure, the lowly mule and wagon. With her usual fondness for the violent, “grotesque” marriage of such opposed forces, O’Connor points out the inadvisability of her own, or, for that matter, any Southern writer’s attempt to compete with Faulkner on his own terms.

But O’Connor’s view of Faulkner, which seems a mischievous mixture of satiric rebellion and respectful, even reverent, awe, expresses something of the central aesthetic program of her work as a whole. Even as she notes Faulkner’s tremendous, inescapable influence on herself and the rest of the South, O’Connor constructs a metaphor that registers its hazardous potential. And she seems to perceive something alien: the Dixie Limited may be Southern in name, but its force is certainly allied with outside—that is, Yankee—interests. To borrow the language of the Nashville Agrarians, a group of 1930s Southern critics with whom O’Connor was quite familiar, the train represents an “industrial” rather than “agrarian” regime.4 Even as she holds up Faulkner as the definitive and representative Southern literary figure, as a synecdoche for modern Southern
literature as a whole, and does so with complete earnestness and ingenuousness, O’Connor instinctively reacts against this same figure with a subtle but determined gesture of iconoclasm. This simultaneous and opposing combination of meanings in O’Connor’s loaded language reveals a deeply American and Southern trait in its own right, set in motion by an individualistic, romantic, perhaps ill-advised, perhaps adolescent desire for some kind of independence from authoritative tradition; and in the case of O’Connor, as I will suggest at greater length in what follows, it characterizes the tension and explosiveness of her work and encapsulates her overall literary identity, that of “a minor-minor writer” whose modest body of work and, especially in her self-conscious relation to Faulkner, modest literary goals nevertheless demand serious consideration in larger Southern and American contexts.

Another major concern for any study of O’Connor’s work is, of course, her religious identity. O’Connor’s Catholic faith, or more specifically, her Catholic faith in an overwhelmingly Protestant and widely fundamentalist rural South, has been and remains one of the central problematics in criticism of her work. Perhaps due, at least in part, to the dearth of Catholic literary figures of the first rank in the United States, O’Connor’s fiction has attracted a great deal of consideration on explicitly religious grounds; much of this scholarship attempts to mine her stories and novels for the ways that they engage the primary Christian mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption, and portray the doctrine of felix culpa in a modern and familiar context. Catholic critics in particular have shown a great deal of interest in O’Connor’s work, and have generated a formidable body of writing dedicated to establishing her reputation on this aspect of her background; Kathleen Feeley, Richard Giannone, Carter W. Martin, and others exemplify this critical trend. Also common in O’Connor scholarship are critical methods, like that employed by John F. Desmond in *Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of History*, in which an ever-present awareness of O’Connor’s
faith serves to frame the otherwise secular or nonreligious aspects of her work.\(^7\)

At the other extreme from this religious criticism is the body of O’Connor scholarship that may be termed, simply enough, secular. Dissatisfied with what they consider a kind of derivative and self-fulfilling Christian reading of O’Connor’s work, secular critics proceed with minimal attention on the religious influences and characteristics of the literature, focusing instead on more mainstream critical methods. Formalist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytic, and feminist studies of O’Connor are among these works.\(^8\) Emblematic of these critical efforts is the work of Josephine Hendin, whose 1970 study *The World of Flannery O’Connor* quite consciously downplays the Catholic aspect of O’Connor’s life and writing in order to view her as the product of much wider cultural forces and as the author of a body of work whose concern reaches deeply into personal and social worlds with perhaps less overtly Catholic significance than the religious critics have suggested. A summary passage expresses Hendin’s sentiments, and echoes the approaches of other secular critics:

> The impulse to write or to pray grows from some more complex force, a necessity that must be rooted in the concrete, the particular experience. For Flannery O’Connor, I suspect that necessity had more to do with being Irish-American, a Southern woman, the offspring of an old Georgia family, and a victim of lupus, the wasting, degenerative disease that struck her at twenty-five and eventually killed her, than with being part of the Roman Catholic Church.\(^9\)

Perhaps it is not surprising, given her often contentious style, that O’Connor generally scorned most critics of her work, both religious and secular, even as she herself contributed to the great confusion surrounding her work. On the one hand, she made many bald statements that located her Catholic identity at the precise center of every authorial choice she made. In one essay on Catholicism and lit-
erature, she wrote: “When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic I cannot afford to be less than an artist” (*Collected Works* (*CW*), 808–9). Such generalizing remarks naturally do little to settle specific questions about literature; they more quickly and effectively engender a sense of distrust toward O’Connor’s own claims about her work. And certainly the omnipresence of religious themes in the stories and novels themselves, from invocations of forces of divine grace and “the terrible speed of mercy,” to restagings of Biblical tableau scenes, to the vast chorus of bizarre preachers and prophets wandering the narrative landscape, begs many of the questions that religious criticism of O’Connor’s work has tried to answer (*CW*, 478). O’Connor’s impatience with many religious readings of her work seems, in this light, somewhat undeserved.

On the other hand, however, her steadfast opposition to purely secular interpretations of her work is equally well known. What might be summarized as the prevailing modern culture of scientific humanism fares quite poorly in O’Connor’s work. Given body and voice by an army of ineffectual intellectuals, sniveling social workers, and generally flat, fleshless hypocrites, the secular perspective seems to be holding sway in O’Connor’s fictional milieu even as its disciples suffer countless acts of violence, degradation, and dehumanization. Psychoanalysis in particular receives a great deal of caustic satire. With machinelike regularity, O’Connor’s narratives exact a kind of ritualistic vengeance upon such quintessentially modern discourses, at the same time that the wider culture is defined and transformed by the collision between religious and secular forces.

My own approach to questions of O’Connor’s religious faith and its influence on her writing attempts a kind of mediation between the bodies of religious and secular criticism that have accumulated in response to her work. The danger of any straightforward religious reading lies in its tendency to reduce O’Connor’s literature to a mere
cipher for Christian dogma, at the expense of any other pertinent insight. Secular criticism likewise flirts with the danger of cutting itself off from the religious presence that clearly must be kept in mind when considering a writer with O’Connor’s background. In what follows I will engage both bodies of O’Connor criticism and attempt to reach a kind of balance between them. In order to do so, my approach seeks to place O’Connor’s Catholic identity in the context of her Southern heritage, and to examine the religious concerns alongside the constructions of place and region in her fiction. Most specifically, I want to explore questions of minor and minority status by moving along several parallel lines: the South’s self-conscious identity as a dissident and minority culture in the United States, O’Connor’s status as a minor writer in the larger context of Southern and American fiction, and her Catholic faith in its minority status in the South, a heavily Protestant region with its own fiercely individualistic and often “grotesque” expressions of faith. My own contribution to the overall body of O’Connor scholarship lies in my formulation, in each of these areas, of the figure of the region as the crucial link between such disparate terms. The region, I will argue, provides a kind of shared ground for many of these seemingly opposed forces to work themselves out dramatically in O’Connor’s fiction.

Shelby Foote’s remark to Walker Percy that he “always had the feeling that O’Connor was going to be one of our big talents,” reveals a strong sense of Southern rather than merely American pride, a kind of cultural possessiveness that bespeaks the key regional role in each of these concerns. It is a pride that sharply qualifies Foote’s comment on the relationship between O’Connor’s faith and writing, that “she also didn’t have time to turn her back on Christ, which is something every great Catholic writer . . . has done.” In what follows I will consider the ways that these figures of region and religion simultaneously come to bear in O’Connor’s fiction. The concept of idolatry will be useful here, clearing some inroads into the central cultural concerns of O’Connor’s work.
O'Connor’s understanding of idolatry often leads to quite explicit pronouncements on the subject. And the often disturbingly violent culmination of her narratives may be read on one level as a desperate gesture of iconoclasm, a kind of righteous attempt to bring down the idols of a sinful people.\textsuperscript{10} Not only does idolatry come to bear here in unique and revealing ways, but O’Connor’s utilization of it also exposes, as I will discuss near the end of this essay, some of the important distinctions between her own literary vision and that of Faulkner, that anxiety-inducing figure who looms, perhaps himself not unlike an idol, over the South of O’Connor’s imagination.

Considering O’Connor’s abiding concern with the originality of her literary identity as a Southerner, one might look closely at her short stories in search of ways that she tried to appropriate, in her own personal way, the same materials that had already been confronted by Faulkner. But the most striking revelation of such a comparison between the two writers is not a greater awareness of O’Connor’s distinct religious impulse in her work. Rather surprisingly, it is Faulkner himself, a man who distanced himself from any formal religious affiliation and avoided discussion of religious issues in any but the most general terms, who emerges from the comparison with a more visible and central religious voice, and whose own work reveals many of the same spiritual concerns that are explored in O’Connor’s fiction. The term “religious” deserves clarification in this context: it includes the most general Southern sense of a shared, relatively homogeneous Christian culture, complete with an almost visceral intimacy with a decidedly Old Testament model of society, the world, and the cosmos, as well as a more pointed sense of the urgent spiritual crisis facing man in his modern, industrial, technological society. Faulkner’s writings, when considered alongside those of O’Connor with this expanded understanding of religious context in mind, share a remarkable consistency of purpose.

The influence of the Old Testament on O’Connor’s work is comparable in importance to its influence on Faulkner. O’Connor’s sto-
ries are littered with Biblical references and themes; her protagonists are often bizarre Southern incarnations of Old Testament prophets. And in her essays and letters, her own sense of her Biblical influences merges in a very concrete way with her region. Thus it seems appropriate, in light of the history, traditions, and culture of her South, that O’Connor’s most comprehensive explanation for the influence of her native region upon her writing conceives the geography not in artistic, ideal, formal, or literary terms, but in unequivocally theological ones. O’Connor’s fiction fleshes out this vision in its most complete form, providing insight into its peculiar, often paradoxical nature. The distinctive Southern genesis of O’Connor’s fiction does not hinder or narrow its scope, but on the contrary, the fiction itself amplifies and clarifies the resonance, power, and humanity of the Southern culture from which it emerges.

Consider the following statement from an essay titled “The Catholic Novel in the Protestant South,” which O’Connor read at Georgetown University in 1963. Here O’Connor parallels contemporary literature’s function with that of the Bible, that definitive sacred text that, to her mind, provides the human community with moral, ideal, and spiritual “guides,” and serves the very precise function of being “something to measure ourselves against” in everyday life:

For the purposes of fiction, these guides have to exist in the form of stories which affect our image and our judgment of ourselves. Abstractions, formulas, laws, will not do here. We have to have stories. It takes a story to make a story. It takes a story of mythic dimensions; one which belongs to everybody; one in which everybody is able to recognize the hand of God and imagine its descent upon himself. In the Protestant South the Scriptures fill this role. The ancient Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner’s way of looking at things. That is one of the big reasons why the South is a story-telling section at all. Our response to life
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is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than it is if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. (CW, 858–59)

O’Connor is not simply circumscribing her entire aesthetic vision with Biblical terms here, although she is perfectly clear about doing so; but within that space she also seems to be identifying a highly paradoxical process of creation and destruction, a kind of dialogue between artistry and violence. It is a process that brings to mind her construction of the metaphor of Faulkner as the roaring Dixie Limited in order to simultaneously honor and subvert him. On the one hand, stories are to be considered tools, very specific objects that have been designed to serve an equally specific purpose. O’Connor’s desire for “something to measure ourselves against” makes a case for her literary art in only the most self-effacing, utilitarian terms. And yet such workmanlike concreteness is precisely the necessary quality for this most urgent of all spiritual tasks that the Bible itself also completes; anything less real or physical in its dimensions, however ideally conceived, “will not do.” O’Connor’s sense of irony is fully engaged here, cutting down her literary form in an almost comic gesture of understatement even as she suggests its high purpose.

The aptness of O’Connor’s allusion is also noteworthy. Taken from Genesis, the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac in order to prove his obedience to God illustrates the kind of Scriptural guidance of the concrete spiritual narrative that O’Connor finds so compelling. The implicit connection between faith and violence also satisfies O’Connor’s own general narrative pattern. Simultaneous creation and destruction could scarcely demand a more suitable dramatic illustration than the one she provides here to characterize the South’s “response to life.” Abraham’s lifting of the knife over his beloved son Isaac, his willingness to carry out this monumental act of self-denial and sacrifice in order to prove his faith in God, does indeed reveal effectively, as O’Connor says, “the ancient Hebrew
genius for making the absolute concrete.” But it should be emphasized again that there is a kind of supreme irony at work here, since this literal reality, this concreteness, takes the shape of a violent act of destruction, a negation that is simultaneous with the creative, affirming gesture of faith itself. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son also serves O’Connor in another sense: the tableau is a dramatic analogue to the New Testament’s central, and even more violent act, in which God offers His only son, Jesus Christ, in order to reconcile a fallen human community, and creation as a whole, to Himself. O’Connor’s strong identification with Scriptural tradition, especially the intricate dialogue between the Old and New Testaments, invites a reading of her work along similar lines, such that the Hebrew tradition and, of course, the Christian mystery of the incarnation, become tools, in all their paradoxical tension, for critique itself.

In another essay dealing with region as an influential element in her fiction, O’Connor qualifies her fiction’s violence with the comparison to another dramatically iconoclastic scene. “In the South,” she writes, “we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses’ face as he pulverized our idols” (CW, 847). As she goes on to suggest that the South deserves credit for grounding this vision in a familiar landscape, it becomes even more obvious that O’Connor’s complex theological, cultural, and literary identity is shaped by a vivid conception of specific idols and acts of idolatry. As divine agency works through the concrete dimensions of real time and space, the destruction of these idols and the interruption of these idolatrous acts become a kind of grotesque, often violent testament to the equally efficacious process of grace, God’s active agency in the world, that burns away the sin of humanity and creation.
Prophecy and Fulfillment: Moses, Aquinas, Teilhard, and O. E. Parker’s Obedience

Completed only shortly before O’Connor’s death in August 1964, “Parker’s Back” unites O’Connor’s concern with idolatry with careful attention to the heresy of Manichaeanism. The latter occupied a great deal of O’Connor’s thought and meditation in the last decade of her life, which may explain its more detailed articulation in her second collection of stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge, than in her earlier work. The concern with a Manichaean worldview is present, however, in most of her fiction to some degree, and thus it reveals something of the consistency of O’Connor’s work as a whole.

Characterized rather broadly, the Manichaean doctrine maintains the belief in a syncretistic religious dualism defined by a complete separation of spirit and matter: while God exists in a state of pure spirituality—as a kind of detached, absolute good—creation, earth, and nature are marked by their inherent corruption and sinfulness. Originally founded as a Christian sect in the third century, Manichaeanism would find its most vigorous opponent in St. Thomas Aquinas, whose thirteenth-century writings represent the Catholic Church’s most articulate rejection of Manichaean dualism. Aquinas served to reaffirm the Church’s emphasis on the actuality of divine presence and participation in the matter of creation itself. It is not difficult to understand how O’Connor’s Catholic identity (and great admiration for the Summa Theologica of Aquinas) would provide her with a particularly unique perspective in the South of her time, where the prevailing, intense Protestantism was essentially Manichaean in its strong sense of the fall of man, of the unmitigated tragedy of Southern history and human history in general, and in its sense of man’s need to be “saved” in order to prepare himself for death and, presumably, a wholly spiritual meeting with God.

In “Parker’s Back,” O’Connor expresses the limitations of a Manichaean perspective through her portrayal of Sarah Ruth Cates. Sarah Ruth is, in her husband Parker’s estimation, “plain, plain” (CW,
Indeed, it is virtually impossible to characterize her in any positive terms; her entire persona is shaped by her relentless disapproval of her husband and her overriding lack of human warmth:

In addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face, and God knew some paint would have improved it, Parker thought. Her being against color, it was the more remarkable she had married him. Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn’t. He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand. (CW, 655)

Parker’s wife is literally as well as figuratively without color, and she seems to view the entire world in comparably void terms. Her affinity for “sniffing up sin” is nothing short of a lifestyle, a vocation, a worldview. This becomes a problem for Parker not because he disagrees with her beliefs but because he instinctively longs for something more, for a closer connection with her and a more fulfilling experience of life with her. Throughout the story, his frustration in this respect is matched by a sense of bewilderment at the fact that he is unable to simply leave her once and for all, but returns to her time after time with the hope that she will appreciate him and affirm him on the most basic level. It is a hope that goes unfulfilled.

Sarah Ruth expresses her Manichaean sentiments about God most succinctly when she declares late in the story, “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face” (CW, 674). In the overall pattern of the story, O’Connor parallels Sarah Ruth’s failure to acknowledge the divine presence in creation with her failure to observe her own husband in any kind of human terms. In other words, O’Connor implies, a primary, inherent flaw in a Manichaean reading of creation lies in its underestimation, its lack of recognition, of human dignity. And this
comes, of course, at the expense of human love. Sarah Ruth’s blind-
ness, it seems, is the blindness of her culture as a whole.

Parker himself is at a far remove from Sarah Ruth’s colorlessness. Encrusted with bizarre, colorful tattoos from head to foot, he is devoted to a very different view of the world. In an important sense, and as many of O’Connor’s “grotesque” characters do, Parker speaks and acts as a kind of prophet, bringing to light the sins of the culture even at his own expense. This role is a reluctant one in a certain sense; Parker despises his first name—Obadiah, after the Old Testament prophet—and keeps it a secret as much as possible. And in telling Sarah Ruth his name, he shows her his vulnerability, his humanity, in the hope that she will embrace his identity; true to form, however, she recognizes and reveres its Biblical origins but fails to acknowledge its present owner. Later, in what causes “a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown,” Parker crashes a tractor into a large tree and it bursts into flame; he finds himself shoeless and terrified to look upon the face of God, like Moses before the burning bush, with “the hot breath of the burning tree on his face” (CW, 665, 666).

But in another and more important sense, Parker is quite an obedient prophet, accepting whatever divine presence and instruction he comes across. After a barroom brawl caused by different interpretations of his most recent tattoo (an image of “the haloed head of a flat, stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes,” branded across his back), he reflects on this aspect of his life:

Parker sat for a long time on the ground in the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything. Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had
come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth.

(O'Connor, CW, 667, 672)

O'Connor provides a variety of emotional and psychological states to accompany Parker’s “instincts” in order to show that his obedience serves a purpose not his own. Like Abraham, he does not have power over his own fate, and his choices are not dictated solely on the basis of his own self-interest. As with many of the Old Testament prophets, including Jonah, to whom he is compared in the passage preceding this one, Parker’s call to prophecy is not convenient and does not merely respond to his or his culture’s values. There is something more universal, and, O’Connor suggests, more imminently present, at work. In this respect it is not just the South that O’Connor is addressing. Parker’s grotesqueness in appearance and behavior marks off his milieu like a peacock’s magnificent feathers redefine its drab surroundings, and O’Connor’s placement of him in a universe marked by its lack of color and general disobedience to human nature speaks to a quintessentially modern condition. The threat to humanity comes not so much from some abstract conception of “sin,” but from anonymity, lack of identity, lack of self. Parker’s unconditional obedience to his “instincts,” even to those that frighten him, seems every bit as anachronistic and out of place in modernity as his tattoo-covered body in Sarah Ruth’s nuptial bed.

Perhaps it would be appropriate here, with this portrait of Parker in mind, to note the influence of the twentieth-century religious writer who commanded O’Connor’s attention and respect more than any other. In the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, O’Connor found a Catholic thinker and writer who shared the dogmatic foundations of St. Thomas Aquinas, yet who lived and wrote in a modern era in which the sciences were “endlessly extending the abysses of time and space, and endlessly discerning new relationships between the elements of the universe.” Teilhard
had a primary existential concern with modernity, with the enormous challenges posed to man by the reorganization of the universe through modern, scientific categories of knowledge. O’Connor’s appreciation of Teilhard enabled her to extend her own Catholic vision, already based on Thomistic theology, into the modern context of her lifetime with greater confidence. And Teilhard’s articulation of the action of divine grace, with its immanent agency in and through creation and individual human beings, provided O’Connor with an insightful contemporary model that paralleled and affirmed her own vision. Consider the following passage from his short preface to *The Divine Milieu*, a work whose title alone reveals something of Teilhard’s vision:

> Not only as a theoretically admitted entity, but rather as a living reality, the notion of grace impregnates the whole atmosphere of my book. And in fact the divine milieu would lose all its grandeur and all its savour for the “mystic” if he did not feel—with his whole “participated” being, with his whole soul made receptive of the divine favour freely poured out upon it, with his whole will strengthened and encouraged—if he did not feel so completely swept away in the divine ocean that no initial point of support would be left him in the end, of his own, within himself, from which he could act. (44)

In consideration of such a “divine ocean” sweeping human experience along in creation, Sarah Ruth’s clipped remark that “no man shall see his face” seems, in its brutal, flippant disavowal, little short of violent. It is hardly surprising, then, that Parker finds himself unable to defend his prophetic perspective at this point, after struggling to bring his experience of the truth to his wife’s eyes.

If this parenthetical glance at O’Connor’s Catholic background provides a bit of insight into her narrative approach in “Parker’s Back,” it also, finally, provides a frame for consideration of the story’s
treatment of idolatry. The story’s long concluding passage stands as O’Connor’s most complete and explicit statement on the subject in her fiction, and unites Sarah Ruth’s Manichaeans perspective with a wider, more typically Southern and fundamentalist righteousness. Anticipating his flagging strength and imminent collapse, and once again stonewalled by his own wife’s refusal to welcome his presence with anything resembling genuine warmth or even, in this case, acknowledgment, Parker’s final gesture is to show his wife the tattoo of Christ on his back. Even now he seems to hold out hope that she will perceive some kind of truth and embrace it:

“Shut your mouth,” he said quietly. “Look at this and then I don’t want to hear no more out of you.” He removed the shirt and turned his back to her.

“Another picture,” Sarah Ruth growled. “I might have known you was off after putting some more trash on yourself.”

Parker’s knees went hollow under him. He wheeled around and cried, “Look at it! Don’t just say that! Look at it!”

“I done looked,” she said.

“Don’t you know who it is?” he cried in anguish.

“No, who is it?” Sarah Ruth said. “It ain’t anybody I know.”

“It’s him,” Parker said.

“Him who?”

“God!” Parker cried.

“God? God don’t look like that!”

“What do you know how he looks?” Parker moaned. “You ain’t seen him.”

“He don’t look,” Sarah Ruth said. “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face.”

“Aw listen,” Parker groaned, “this is just a picture of him.”

“Idolatry!” Sarah Ruth screamed. “Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolator in this house!” and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it.
Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door.

She stamped the broom two or three times on the floor and went to the window and shook it out to get the taint of him off it. Still gripping it, she looked toward the pecan tree and her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby. (CW, 674–75)

A basic distinction should be made here. Parker is able to distinguish between what he understands as “just a picture” and what his wife immediately considers an idol. Certainly the image does have a strong power over Parker, and he believes that he must obey the penetrating eyes on his back. But there is also something in his repeated “instincts” and visions, in those absorbing moments of communion with creation that he has always obeyed, which gives him the perspicuity to recognize the face of Christ on his back, even with its “all-demanding” potency, as a mere image, a representation. Sarah Ruth, on the other hand, instinctively equates any image of Christ with the worship of that picture. Lacking any kind of connection with the world except in the negative terms of her disapproval of its sinfulness, she also lacks any human understanding of the difference between a picture of God and the mystery of God’s being. When she tells Parker, “It ain’t anybody I know,” she is revealing, ironically enough, the secret of her own spiritual condition. And when she beats her husband with the broom “until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ,” Sarah Ruth’s Manichaean inability to realize the violence and inhumanity of her own acts finally reaches its ironic climax. With her “hardened” eyes blind to the all too human figure whom she is thrashing, Sarah Ruth reduces her husband to a state of infantile powerlessness, to a kind of subaltern
objectivity, a kind of idol. Thus Parker clings to the pecan tree, a curious amalgamation of the burning bush before Moses’ eyes and the wood of Christ’s cross; the tree itself, in its natural state, seems much more likely than his own wife to offer him a reciprocal gesture of affirmation. And as he cries “like a baby,” Parker’s transformation to a very human and particular Christ figure is consummated; even here, in his final collapse, Parker remains obedient and open to the action of grace that works through him. Teilhard’s depiction of the mystic, “so completely swept away in the divine ocean that no initial point of support would be left him in the end, of his own, within himself, from which he could act,” could scarcely want a more perfect embodiment.

While “Parker’s Back” puts forth O’Connor’s most detailed exploration of idolatry, it does so within a larger framework of irony. Sarah Ruth’s opposition to graven images is so fierce that she considers churches, those most concrete structures claiming earthly space itself in God’s name, to be idolatrous objects; thus it is clear that, by any material standard, let alone O’Connor’s Thomistic, anti-Manichaean one, her cries of idolatry are hardly to be taken at their word. On the contrary, O’Connor seems to be satirizing the entire concept of idolatry in order to reveal the startling blindness of a culture whose intense religiosity masks its poor spiritual formation and human identity, its inability to apprehend religion’s most immanent subject and truth. Parker experiences a very real and personal epiphany in his own visions of the tattooed man at the fair, the burning tree, and the face of Christ in the tattoo parlor. O’Connor is able to appropriate from her Southern milieu the discourse of idolatry and place it in the larger narrative frame of her own fictional vision, and she does so with such control of its effects that idolatry serves her ends without being questioned or rejected in its own right. Most accurately, irony positions this discourse within a space that becomes, through its concreteness and particularity, more universal. Parker’s transformation runs parallel to the narrow, inhuman
failure of his wife, blinded by an enflamed, Manichaean fundamentalism, to make the simple distinction between the flatness and inertness of a crude image and the native dignity and universal value of a human being.

In Faulkner’s Tracks: Flannery O’Connor’s Regional Vision

That this reading of “Parker’s Back” rests in the context of O’Connor’s own religious terms should be clear from my frequent use of terms like grace, sin, incarnation, redemption, and particular Biblical references in certain contexts. But now that some of the important relationships in her work—between Old and New Testament, Biblical and fictional narrative, idolatry and irony, Manichaean and Catholic theology, and so on—have been contextualized, it may be instructive to revisit the earlier questions about O’Connor’s place, including the religious label and “minor” status, in the contexts of Southern and American literature. And O’Connor’s fictional constructions of region, especially in a direct consideration and comparison with those of Faulkner, invite some more comprehensive statements about the American region in its theoretical construction and cultural identity.

The facility with which idolatry works in Faulkner and O’Connor, in both the fiction itself and, as my work has attempted to show, the criticism, draws attention to the shared idiom employed by both writers. It is, of course, a Southern idiom, with a natural, implicit sense of Southern citizenship and, given the South’s strong spiritual identity, a relationship to Southern sin. But there are also profound, if subtle, differences between the two writers.

In Faulkner’s fiction, for example, there resides a strong sense of the communal vision, an instinctive emphasis on the life of the entire community and a heavy anticipation of its collective destiny. The remarkable consistency of Faulkner’s entire canon generates a vast cosmos of interrelated characters and stories whose ultimate effect
is the portrayal of an entire world in which no single figure is able to dominate. A character like Thomas Sutpen, an empire-building Southern planter in \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} whose dream contains the seeds of its own destruction, may be as close to the limits of self-determination and a kind of pure, theoretical independence as Faulkner conceives. And Sutpen’s tragic downfall only serves to reinforce the basic interconnectedness of fate, of the human drama. Thus \textit{Absalom, Absalom!} is more than a personal or family drama, more than the story of one man’s overreaching hubris, but constitutes a kind of spiritual biography of the South, and perhaps even the United States, as a whole.

Thomas Sutpen is a particularly apt figure in this context because of the strong generational implications of his identity and demise. His sons, both Henry and the mixed-race Charles Bon, represent the dissemination of his values and ideals into a realm that extends beyond his own life, into the larger concerns of his community and the society as a whole. His flaw, an archetypally Southern vision of humanity shaped by a hierarchical model of racial inequality, is both inherited from the world into which he is born, and passed on to those who come after him.

Sutpen’s exceptional influence on Quentin Compson, who not only is not related to him but is not even alive during any part of Sutpen’s own lifetime, epitomizes once again Faulkner’s vision of the South’s shared spiritual community. Quentin’s desperate struggle to “read” both Sutpen and the South he represents is his own monumental and finally unsuccessful attempt to come to terms with the reality of this shared community. For in his inability to embrace the tragedy and chaos of his inherited South, and in his ill-fated effort to fashion an identity for himself along completely independent terms, with a bitter refusal to accept his society on its own terms, Quentin self-destructs. His quest has an unquestionably romantic idealism that might be described accurately as adolescent, perhaps even militantly adolescent in its confrontation and rejection of adulthood.
And in his self-destruction, in the fact that death itself is the end result of such a self-consciously individualistic construction of identity, Quentin expresses Faulkner’s insistent vision of the South’s collectivity and shared fate. Without question Quentin is an attractive figure in many ways, even despite, or perhaps because of, his flaws. Primarily, his hunger for some kind of purity and freedom from the corruption of the world lends his youthful and passionate flights a heroic quality. And he thinks and acts with a kind of classical lyricism matched only by several other of Faulkner’s misfit characters, including the insane Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* and perhaps the outcast Ike McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*.

Faulkner’s debt to the Old Testament lies most generally in its narrative formulation of an entire people, a group with a strong sense of communal identity and history. His own fiction constructs a distinctly Southern and American model of an entire people, in which figures like Thomas Sutpen and Quentin Compson, to name only two, are endlessly exerting their individualistic notions against the forces of history and community most comprehensively designated simply as “the South” that Quentin claims, famously and unconvincingly, not to hate. Region is both enemy and ally here; it is something to be shunned, resisted, overcome, and reinvented, even as it endows the individual with his greatest strengths and most basic values. In Faulkner, whose Southernness seems to typify Americanness in a very precise way, the ancient Hebrew communal sense gives way to a modern vision of God’s people in a place where their paradox is to live in a nation at schizophrenic cross-purposes with itself: a slave nation dedicated to freedom; a tight, repressive social order peopled with ambitious, often relentless, individualists.

Flannery O’Connor’s South is, by contrast, virtually devoid of any communal sense at all. Such a stark generalization courts suspicion, of course, but in the context of Faulkner’s exceptionally realized overall community, it becomes clear that the stories of O’Connor develop almost no corresponding vision of a larger shared
human community. Instead, they gain their consistency through a kind of ritually repetitive narrative trajectory that introduces the expansive religious and psychological concerns of characters early on, then flattens them violently. The universal presence of a larger ironic frame crushes the religiously hypocritical, highly repressive pretensions of characters even as it fulfills a spiritual law in the higher, more mysterious terms of divine grace. O’Connor’s novels Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away extend this trajectory to include more complicated events and larger movements and developments, but do not attempt to portray a social vision to a degree significantly greater than the short stories do, and certainly not to the degree that most of Faulkner’s work does. O’Connor herself understood this aspect of her own writing, remarking once that Faulkner “makes me feel that with my one-cylinder [sic] syntax I should quit writing and raise chickens altogether” (CW, 1075). Going along with her comic modesty, one might add that her raising of chickens probably would have proceeded not en masse but on a highly individual basis.

O’Connor’s South is a region whose social function may be expressed in the dialectic between two archetypal figures: the self-satisfied, outwardly religious hypocrite and the marginalized, crazed prophet. O’Connor’s South is marked by isolation, a rural individualism, an intensified concentration on ordinary objects whose materiality often explodes with the violence of grace. While Faulkner exploits the dramatic potential of Cain and Abel, of Absalom and Amnon, their actions rippling outwards to engulf the entire community and draw its people into a collective dramatic space, O’Connor peoples her stories with the likes of Ezekiel, Job, Jonah, and John the Baptist. Her heroes are isolated souls, from the polite, murderous Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” to the homely, book-throwing Mary Grace in “Revelation.” These are people whose primary relationship, like that of the Old Testament prophets, is with God. Like Parker, and after the model of Abraham, obedience to their divine calling dictates every move they make in this life; their
contribution to the larger social order lies precisely in their marginalization from the Manichaean mainstream.

To say that O’Connor’s stories have no communal sense is not to say that they are not concerned with community, society, or culture in general, be it Southern or American or otherwise. But in order to reveal the troubling condition of an atomistic modern society, O’Connor circumscribes each of these austere men and women with a kind of bubble. Even as they hunger for the fulfillment of an earthly connection to parallel their generally inconvenient but undeniably powerful bond with God, they run up against a kind of ritual and violent resistance from a society that leads them, in the end, to respond with their own acts of violence. O’Connor’s communal role, like that of her misfit heroes, is thus that of a dissident, a self-conscious minority figure who sits apart, or carves out her own fictional space, from the prevailing culture.

As with Faulkner, O’Connor’s sense of the South as a region evokes an ambivalent overall response that is linked to the fundamental American problem of the individual’s place in society. While she is able to appropriate the material of the South for her fiction in brilliant ways—the Protestant intensity, the raw, unschooled ignorance, the racial and gender absurdity, the bizarre individualism, and so on—O’Connor’s placement of the individual human figure in Southern spaces is often defined in negative terms, in a kind of spiritual resistance to the traditional and mainstream institutions of the wider social milieu. This opposition of forces parallels the inclination of her strong Southern background to set itself in a kind of minority opposition to the drift of contemporary American culture as a whole. In stories like “The Enduring Chill” and “Judgment Day” she pits North and South against each other in a regional culture war whose sides are as clearly defined as those in the Civil War. Even as the terminally adolescent Southerner Asbury Fox collapses, not unlike Quentin Compson, under the sheer spiritual and historical weight of the Southern burden in “The Enduring Chill,” O’Connor
seems to maintain a sense of trust for her familiar rural world and a deep, typically Southern suspicion for New York City, whose brutal atomism and anonymity express a vision of individualism as death. Personifying the North in all its steel majesty and capitalist determinism, New York City offers a life without any sense of tradition or loyalty. Plainly, O’Connor’s modern South, for all its flaws, promises more.

The dissident or minority figure of the South in its regional status also matches O’Connor’s Catholic identity in the South remarkably well. With gestures like her ironic framing of Sarah Ruth’s Manichaean discourse of idolatry within a more unified and Catholic vision of creation, O’Connor’s faith functions in precisely the same way that her region does. For in addressing the largely homogeneous Protestant South from her own minority religious perspective, she provides a critique of Southern culture in explicitly spiritual terms that parallels the South’s more general regional critique of American culture.

In all this, O’Connor seems quite content to operate as what Shelby Foote called a “minor-minor” figure. Perhaps as a result of being a woman, a Southerner, a Catholic, an artist, and a victim of lupus, she reveals in her method a natural attentiveness to the vast potential that resides in responding creatively and constructively to dominant forces rather than attempting to create them or control them herself. Her mischievous label of Faulkner as the Dixie Limited again comes to mind: even in her open acknowledgment of his “major” status and her own rather modest position somewhere beneath him in the literary hierarchy, this revealing gesture articulates O’Connor’s playful instinct in confronting such forces of authority with her own strength, style, and aplomb, with a perhaps not entirely different incarnation of “grace” than that which drives her stories to their inexorable ends. And while it may be difficult to entirely resist Foote’s impulse to imagine the writer O’Connor might have become had she lived longer and had more time to
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explore her world and her craft, the steadiness and faithfulness with which she attended to her “minor” literary career, on an isolated dairy farm not far from the last Confederate capitol of the Sovereign State of Georgia, attest to a value that rests confident in its own individual designs.

Notes

2. See Tony Horwitz, Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War (New York: Pantheon, 1998). Horwitz’s interview, “At the Foot of the Master,” includes Foote’s reflections on the significance of the Civil War in American history, its occurrence during the nation’s “adolescence,” and its influence on the maturation of the South and the nation as a whole.
LOGOS


