

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

(1925-1964)

"Miss O'Connor's style is tight to choking and as direct and uncompounded as the order to a firing squad to shoot a man against a wall."

William Goyen
New York Times (18 May 1952) 4

"O'Connor exhibits what Henry James...called 'the artful beauty of a master'....Miss O'Connor's works, like Maupassant's, are characterized by precision, density and an almost alarming circumspection."

Caroline Gordon (1955)
quoted by Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction (1988)

"Her instruments are a brutal irony, a slam-bam humor and a style of writing as balefully direct as a death sentence."

Review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*
(*Time* 1955)

"If she omits all the trivial acts of her main characters to concentrate on their important decisions and actions, it is because she wants to make her readers see to the essence of things, not stop at the outside....It is the typical and essential which interest her, not the unique of abnormal psychology nor the encyclopedic detail of photographic realism."

P. Albert Duhamel
"Flannery O'Connor's Violent View of Reality"
The Catholic World CXC (1960)

"Extremely incongruous images, oxymorons, and synesthesia convince us that here indeed is a strange new world. Objects are like humans and animals, human beings are like animals and insects...But the unconventional rhetoric is not an embellishment pasted upon a basically conventional view of the world. It is indeed a warped world, one which has been likened to a Chagall painting, and the comparison of the novel to the modern painting seems especially apt for Miss O'Connor often appears to share modern [Expressionist] painting preoccupations...Surrealistically, soda fountain chairs are 'brown toad stools,' trees look 'as if they had on ankle-socks,' and a cloud has 'curls and a beard' before it becomes a bird. The physical world partakes of the strangeness which colors characters and action: the sky leaks and growls, the wind slashes around the house, 'making a sound like sharp knives swirling in the air,' and 'the sky was like a piece of thin polished silver with a dark sour-looking sun in one corner of it'."

Lewis A. Lawson
"The Perfect Deformity: *Wise Blood*"
Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature 17.2 (Spring 1965)

"O'Connor was a verbal magician whose phrases flamed like matches in the dark revealing a face in a flash (a child's features contorted with grief into 'a puzzle of small red lumps'), a life in a single insight (a sniveler after the ineffable)."

Review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*
(*Time* 1965)

"O'Connor...had...a quick, deft, animating touch that brought her characters and milieu to life by means of a few details and the flick of a metaphor."

Theodore Solotaroff
The Red Hot Vacuum and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties

(1965; Atheneum 1970) 171-77

“The most obvious qualities of an O’Connor tale—qualities which account for its immediate appeal—are its striking plot and the lucid, alive prose...used to metamorphose reality....It is deceptive prose, this; seemingly artless, it conceals a precise modulation of rhythms and periods, a concretely evocative vocabulary, a use of sound patterns to reinforce imagery, and a precise notation of speech....The range of her style, which has been little appreciated, is quite wide, and wholly adequate to the range of her vision.... Her prose is always alive with surprising images and innuendoes, capable of spanning the ludicrously broken and the triumphantly exultant...Stylistic extremes accord with the extremes of the profane and the sacred, nature and grace. And when that style is ‘flat,’ it is often in the middle ground where the extremes meet, in the act of violence...No emphasis is needed; our attention is riveted....What remains characteristic is a certain incongruity between style and subject, a kind of impassivity in the face of the extraordinary.... O’Connor wrote at her best with power and unsentimental clarity.”

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor
(Temple U 1972) 58, 61-65

“The best of [her] tropes are superbly witty...with brilliant use of the comic simile...[and] stunning grasp of the possibilities of paradox.”

Frederick Asals

Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982)

“Her mixture of wit, irony, paradox, and traditional belief in the devil and God gave her prose a maturity that belied the age at which most of her fiction was written.”

Frederick R. Karl

American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 229

"There is a medieval quality about the centrality of death in O'Connor's fiction. There are, however, other dimensions to the irony of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' specifically, that the automobile accident and the swift deaths following it constitute an opening up, a movement of this fiction to a moment when Flannery O'Connor shows us, as she so often does, the landscape of eternity. Rather than showing us, as Eliot does, 'Fear in a handful of dust,' she shows us *beauty* in the most horrible of human experiences. This journey of the imagination from the horrible to the truth of God's grace has been an important response often noted by O'Connor's readers....O'Connor presented the beauty of this world as vividly as sunlight through the stained-glass window of a Gothic cathedral or the brilliant icons of the churches of Byzantium. It is this beauty I want to show in its importance in the total perception of O'Connor's fiction. It is one reason for her popularity--not just among academics but among readers everywhere of every persuasion and personal circumstance....

Too little has been written about the very real beauty to be found in O'Connor's fiction....When reviewers failed to see that there was (according to her) no bitterness in her stories but a cherishing of the world, she took their failure to be a moral one and tantamount to 'what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead.' She admits that her stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* contain 'many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born,' but contends that reviewers have 'hold of the wrong horror.' She insists that 'you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it'....O'Connor was herself a visual artist as well as a literary one....Her literary work is also highly visual, and when this visualization is specifically beautiful it often constitutes a special form of punctuation that gives rhythm and shape to structure of the narrative. One must look carefully to appreciate this aesthetic...

The beauty in O'Connor's stories...occurs casually, is understated, characterized by the sparseness of *asceticism*, and is usually surrounded by ugliness, banality, or violence. The result, however, is not necessarily an impression that beauty is chimerical or accidental but instead that it is the reality that informs the entire structure of the effective world she portrays. 'For the almost blind,' she wrote, 'you draw large and startling figures.' (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 34). Which is to say that she, like Dickinson, doubted the capacity of her

audience to look directly and consistently upon the beauty that she herself perceived in the universe.... When a reader enters an O'Connor story by looking through such windows that open onto beauty--particularly when he feels that the narrative house from which he looks is filled with darkness and terror and malignity--he is experiencing what Martin Heidegger refers to as 'coming into the open.' Heidegger asserts that 'Meaning is...not a property attaching to entities, lying 'behind' them, or floating somewhere as an 'intermediate domain.' It is the field upon which 'something becomes intelligible as something.' Heidegger contends that the poet experiences the abyss (the 'default of God,' he calls it) and causes readers to reach into the abyss to discover divine radiance shining 'in everything that is' and also to realize that absence is presence....

A reader's experience of coming into the open by way of O'Connor's punctuation of beauty is more elaborately realized in one of her most violent and disturbing stories, 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find.' The pattern of this story is a series of scenes in confined space which are seen in the context of unbounded space--light, sky, clouds, and woods seen from above so that they stretch out as the blue tops of trees. The story moves from the unpleasant circumstances of three-generational family life to the awesome absence of the lives so recently present. Yet this movement is one that leads us from the beauty of the world to the beauty of death or perhaps to the beauty of grace attendant upon death. The key lines form an image cluster that controls this meaning. Significantly, the perception originates with the grandmother, just as the presence of grace is understood only with reference to her at the time of the mass murder. When the family is setting out on their Florida trip, the grandmother tries to share the beauty she sees with the ill-tempered children, John Wesley and June Star: 'She pointed out interesting details of the scenery'...

All of these images are patently beautiful: the mountain, the granite, the red clay, the crops, the trees, the sunlight, and in the combination that O'Connor places them, they are poetic and constitute a potential vortex, a radiant node or cluster into which the meaning of the story eventually enters. Only five of the twenty-one pages of the story do not contain cognate imagery. Even though we do not perceive it as beauty as it casually occurs, this imagery represents the macrocosm of the story and permits the reader to come into the open thematically on what O'Connor calls elsewhere 'the true country.' The fleeting signs of the reality of that country are in this story the woods filled with light, beginning with the grandmother's paean and moving through the chinaberry tree at Red Sammy Butts's, the 'blue tops of trees for miles around,' trees that look down on the family car, 'woods, tall and dark and deep,' 'woods [that] gaped like a dark open mouth,' and the woods that relentlessly devour the family before the awestruck grandmother....

At this point the story has moved from the circumstantial beauty of the affective world to the ideal and permanent beauty of the action of grace that paradoxically informs the irrational gesture in which the grandmother reaches out to touch The Misfit, anagogically accepting him as her own, as Christ accepted sinners. This remarkable conclusion to the story has been explained by O'Connor herself in terms of grace and its focus on the grandmother, but her explanation is not easy for many readers who see in the foreground a homicidal maniac carrying out a mass murder. However, if the reader examines the structure of the story, the affirmation of this reading is more available, even to the reader who may be unfamiliar with O'Connor's explanation. The pattern already described is enhanced by its contrapuntal movement with reference to the imagery of enclosure. The grim, threatening quality of the story begins before the appearance of The Misfit and is associated with the microcosm of the family, specifically as they are presented enclosed and entrapped, so confined and relentlessly bound to each other's presence that, except for the grandmother, they are unable to look out to the larger world or to conceive of the possibility that they may come into the open, enter a larger, freer, more beautiful world.

The first of these enclosures is the home itself. Only one and one-half pages long, it is a tightly blocked stage setting which conveys the maddening intimacy of family life....This first instance of enclosure is brief and quite intense. The enclosure in the automobile is similarly cloying because of the quite raw conflicts between the generations: a lonely and silly old woman trying to be cheerful and agreeable, children who are by turns ill-mannered or sullenly oblivious, and parents who are almost stupefied and overtaxed by their role as the responsible adults. They are caged and baffled in a rolling domestic zoo, objectified with satire and irony by the grandmother's stories, the children's cloud game, the baby being passed to the back seat, and occasional glimpses of the quickly passing stable world outside the car, one of which, the Negro child, the grandmother would like to bring into stasis....The overwhelming irony of the boredom and tension is

that the end of it in the affective world is not reconciliation or a coming into love and harmony but sudden death.

The same ironic pathos informs the details of the third objectification of the existential enclosure of life in the countryside or the fallen world. Red Sammy Butts's restaurant...The conversation is premonitory and pessimistic in its concern with The Misfit and the degeneration of mankind in general. It is a relief when 'the children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree.' The next narrative block returns to the enclosure of the automobile....With the grandmother, the reader is awed by the ten-page conclusion to the story, more than one-third of its length. O'Connor protracts this event. She has prepared us for it carefully, so that when we see the hearselike car on the hill and look down upon the family spilled out from their banal entrapment into the big world, we know the terrible outcome at once. Thus we must participate in the moment of dying, with horror, outrage, and finally with wonder. This narration is somewhat like the medieval drama *Everyman* in which the protagonist's moment of death is expanded artistically and dramatically to include his realization, his pleading, his acceptance, and his receiving the sacraments and God's grace. A similar effect is achieved by Tolstoy in 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' and by Faulkner in *Light in August*....

That the grandmother's action of reaching out to The Misfit signifies the moment when grace is manifest is a received truth about the story. It is not, however, a surprise ending. Her identity with grace occurs early and at several points before this conclusion. Coming into the open is clearly part of the story's structure and imagery, and part of the grandmother's character. We see this, for example, after the others have been taken away; she is alone with The Misfit and O'Connor confirms in this penultimate moment her having come into the open... Again the imagery of clouds, sky, sun, and trees objectifies beauty, spare and stark though it be; the end thus returns to the beginning image of the meanest trees filled with light."

Carter Martin

"The Meanest of Them Sparkled': Beauty and Landscape in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction"
Realist of Distances: Flannery O'Connor Revisited
eds. Karl-Heinz Westarp and Jan Nordby Gretlund
(Denmark: Aarhus U 1987)147-59

The first sentence of O'Connor's first published story contains 5 concrete images. "The Geranium" is a model of Realism. She is most a traditional Realist in (1) concreteness; (2) trying above all to portray the truth; (3) opposing romanticism and sentimentality; (4) creating the illusion of real life; (5) dramatizing significant problems of common people; (6) rendering of authentic details and accurate dialogue, including black dialects; and (7) deep characterization.

O'Connor enhances Realism with Impressionism and after her M.A. transcends Realism altogether by focusing on extremes rather than the commonplace--especially in the Expressionist form of grotesques. "I approve of distortion [Expressionism] but not of abstraction." The old protagonist in "The Geranium" resembles an Impressionist painter when he tries to visualize a river back home in Georgia: "He added green blotches for trees on either side of it and a brown spot for trash somewhere upstream." Expressionism appears when "People boiled out of trains and up steps and into the streets...black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup...He felt like his tongue had slipped down in his stomach." Throughout her career O'Connor used the common Modernist method of sliding from omniscient narration into the consciousness and speech of a character and back again, into memories and back to the present, with more fluid subtlety than time shifts in Faulkner.

Near the end of her life O'Connor revised "The Geranium," turning it into a very different story called "Judgment Day"--more complex, bold, religious, powerful and violent. Her first published story was transformed into the last story in her last collection. "The Geranium" ends with a potted geranium fallen into an alley, uprooted and broken. "Judgment Day" ends with the old man uprooted and broken, his fallen dead body grotesque on a stairway. The later story is Modernist in being less linear, with 5 flashbacks. Some of her similes have become more extreme, as in "His eyes were trained on her like the eyes of an angry corpse." By now she often interprets situations by inserting "as if" constructions: "as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot"; "as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it"; "as if his spirit had been sucked out of him into the woods and nothing was left on the chair

but a shell”; “stepped wide of him as if she were skirting an open garbage can”; “as if a swarm of bees had suddenly come down on him out of nowhere”; “twisted as if she had just stepped in a pile of dung.” Her mentor, the scrupulous Caroline Gordon, pointed out to O’Connor the increasing frequency of “seems” and “as ifs” in her writing. Many of O’Connor’s most witty and comic effects come through her prolific “as if” constructions, but she was not aware of their frequency. Gordon also told her that her draft of “The Lame Shall Enter First” was undramatic. “Caroline says I have been writing too many essays and it is affecting my style. Well I ain’t going to write no more essays.”

Her short stories are consistently in the mode of Realism enhanced, most notably in “The Artificial Nigger,” by poetic Expressionism. Her two novels are masterpieces of Expressionism, like Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Their styles express the consciousness of the protagonists and her own Christian vision. The novels are “weird” because the world is full of spiritual grotesques. The commonplace is largely excluded, reducing attention to essentials, as Hawthorne does in his allegories. Some academics object to O’Connor’s “insufficient” realism because they cannot understand allegory and are missing the essential meanings. To make an allegory perceptible, a writer must dispense with details that are not part of the symbolic design and distract attention from it.

One of the most pervasive examples of Expressionism in O’Connor is her depiction of a character’s spiritual nature or mood in the eyes: There are “bright flea eyes,” “two bright eyes like a tree toad that has sighted its prey,” eyes that glitter “like two chips of green bottle glass,” and eyes “like two steel spikes.” In *Wise Blood* Hazel Motes has mysterious eyes: “Their settings were so deep that they seemed...almost like passages leading somewhere.” Blindness is a motif in the novel. Old Tarwater the prophet in *The Violent Bear It Away* has “silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads.” The fish is a traditional Christian recognition symbol. Young Tarwater resists his calling and “his eyes glittered with a peculiar hollow depth.” He closes his mind: “The steely gleam in his eye was like the glint of a metal door sealed against an intruder.” Rayber the politically correct liberal schoolteacher has eyes “like something human trapped in a switch box.”

O’Connor’s ongoing development as a stylist from Realism to Modernism is evident in the first sentence of *The Violent Bear It Away*, a long sentence packed full of information, comparable to Hemingway’s vignettes between stories in *In Our Time*: “Francis Marion Tarwater’s uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Savior at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.” This one sentence contains enough exposition to establish relationships among most of the main characters, to launch the plot, and to set the ironic tone of the novel. Significantly, the protagonist remains unaware that his uncle got buried until the end of the novel, making his perspective unreliable until he answers the call of God. The return of the protagonist to this setting at the end gives the novel a significant circularity that is Modernist--comparable to circular structures by Joyce, Hemingway and Faulkner.

O’Connor did not think much about style as such, believing that “Technique works best when it is unconscious.” In fact, she seemed annoyed by John Crowe Ransom’s criticism of “The Artificial Nigger” that “it was very flat and had no beautiful sentences in it. I rewrote it but there still ain’t any beautiful sentences.” Caroline Gordon agreed with Ransom and said that, in O’Connor’s words, she needed “to gain some altitude and get a larger view.” O’Connor complied, though normally she inclined to understatement in order to increase objectivity and heighten effects, especially in rendering violence. Agreeing with the Modernist principle of Joyce that the writer should “refine himself out of existence,” she followed general principles such as “The fiction writer doesn’t state, he shows, renders.” Under pressure, O’Connor “gained some altitude” and revised “The Artificial Nigger” into one of her greatest stories, her most Expressionist and her own favorite--with many beautiful sentences.

Her “anagogical” vision necessitated allegory: She is always looking for an image “that will connect or combine or embody two points”--the concrete and the spiritual. “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.” Her fiction appeals primarily to the mind and the imagination: “The intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have

the ascendancy over feeling.” The style of Flannery O’Connor is too unique--too inspired, rich, ironic and witty--to be imitated or parodied.

PRAISE

“She has certainly an uncanny talent of a high order.” (T. S. Eliot) “*That’s good stuff.*” (William Faulkner) “The reviews of every one of her books have been overwhelmingly favorable.” (Melvin J. Friedman) “[Her] best are among the best American short stories ever written.” (*Time*) “According to critics, Flannery writes better than nearly anybody else now living.” (Margaret Turner) “Not only have half a dozen stories entered anthologies; the very titles have entered the language.” (Frederick Karl) “There are no unavoidable pressures to consider these stories in a strictly religious sense. They stand securely on their own, as renderings and criticisms of human experience.” (Irving Howe) “The theological basis of O’Connor’s fiction adds a dimension and subtracts nothing”; “Only reality could sustain such intense art.” (Kathleen Feeley). A Catholic who called herself a “Christian realist”—O’Connor transcends theology through humor, characterizations, insights into human nature, and satire of most so-called religious people as fakes, hypocrites, grotesques, and “wart-hogs from hell.” Her grotesques have often been compared to those of Nathanael West, an Atheist, whereas she is Modernist in affirming the possibility of transcendence in this life, for those with faith in God.

“When I read Flannery, I don’t think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather someone like Sophocles.” (Thomas Merton) “In her stories every incident is seen in the light of eternity, one of the marks of a creative imagination of the first rank”; “She has a firmer grasp of the architectonics of fiction than any of her contemporaries.” (Caroline Gordon) “The writing is so damned good compared to almost anything else one reads: economical, clear, horrifying, *real.*” (Elizabeth Bishop) “The best of [her] tropes are superbly witty...with brilliant use of the comic simile...[and] stunning grasp of the possibilities of paradox.” (Frederick Asals) “Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical.” (Brainard Cheney) In her two novels “the protagonist is *actively* engaged with God. He may resist his vocation, defy it even...The turning point in his struggle will involve an act (murder, in each case) that defines him in relation to another character or characters. And that act is followed, in each work, by what we may call a moment of grace, of heightened consciousness, in which the meaning of the act compels from the hero a new recognition of his identity—a moment, then, which is at once a conversion to Christ and an inversion of his former selfhood.” (Miles Orvell)

Michael Hollister (2017)