

ANALYSIS

“Parker’s Back” (1964)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“The custom of tattooing passed even into Christianity. In early centuries, baptism was known as ‘sealing,’ and this was also the ancient name for the rite of Confirmation, which originally followed immediately. Nor did the custom survive only in a figurative sense. To this day the Catholics of Central Bosnia tattoo themselves with religious symbols; while in the neighborhood of Loreto (Italy) it is common to do likewise in honor of the celebrated local Madonna...and it is recorded of the German mystic, Heinrich Seuse, that he impressed the name of Jesus over his heart.”

Theodore Gaster
Customs and Folkways of Jewish Life
(Apollo Editions, 1955) 51-52

“I had the privilege of visiting Flannery O’Connor in a hospital a few weeks before her death [1964]. She told me that the doctor had forbidden her to do any work. He said that it was all right to write a little fiction, though, she added with a grin and drew a notebook out from under her pillow. She kept it there, she told me, and was trying to finish a story which she hoped to include in the volume which we both knew would be published posthumously. The story [was] ‘Parker’s Back’...”

Parker, a Georgia hillbilly, becomes a collector of tattoos during his service in the Navy. Only his back is unornamented. Finally, in an effort to impress his wife, a religious fanatic, who tells him that the tiger and panther which adorn his shoulders, the cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, the hawks on his thighs are all ‘Vanity of vanities.’ He approaches an unusually high-priced ‘artist’ and tells him that he wants a picture of God tattooed on his back.... ‘She can’t say she don’t like the looks of God.’ Parker’s wife wastes no words, however, when she sees the image of Christ tattooed on his back. She seizes a broom and belabors him until he is nearly senseless and the face of the Christ is covered with bleeding welts.... In this story in which there are no theological references other than those which might be found on the lips of ‘good country people,’ the author has embodied that particular heresy which denies Our Lord corporeal substance.”

Caroline Gordon
“An American Girl”
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor
eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 135-36

“‘Parker’s Back,’ her last story to appear during her lifetime in magazine form, may prove in time her very greatest. O. E. Parker, upon fiery cross-examination by the woman he is courting, turns out to be Obadiah Elihu: Obadiah, after the sixth-century B.C. minor prophet, and Elihu after Elihu, a visitor to Job in the thirty-second chapter of that account. As is not unusual in this writer, O. E. fails to convert the heathen but himself undergoes an everlasting metamorphosis.”

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
“Flannery O’Connor, a Realist of Distances”
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 165

“In *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), the finest of the stories, to my taste, and the one least like anything Miss O’Connor (or anyone else) has done before, is ‘Parker’s Back,’ the last story she wrote before her death. It tells of a young man named O. E. Parker whose only distinction is a passion for having himself elaborately tattooed. In what he believes is an accommodation to his wife’s Fundamentalist piety, Parker has a Byzantine mosaic of a staring Christ reproduced on his back. He is then literally...Christ-bearing, ‘witnessing for Jesus’ on his hide. Under this coloration Parker is transformed and reborn,

resuming the Old Testament prophet names, Obadiah Elihue, that he has always concealed behind his initials, and suffering a Punch and Judy martyrdom as he passively allows his wife to punish his 'idolatry' by beating him with a broom until 'large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ.' The story is simultaneously uproarious and deeply moving, and the metaphor of tattooing—bloody, painful, indelible; garish, out of fashion, ludicrous—for the burden of Redemption is uncanny and perfect—a truly metaphysical conceit.”

Stanley Edgar Hyman
Flannery O'Connor
(U Minnesota 1966) 25-26

“Whenever he ‘couldn’t stand the way he felt,’ Parker would get himself tattooed. Finally he has little unembellished surface left. So far *that* has been his only ‘savior.’ But he goes one step too far in trying to please his God-obsessed wife and has ‘the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes’ tattooed on his back. It doesn’t particularly please *her*, but it makes a changed man out of *him*: ‘The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed.’”

Robert Drake
Flannery O'Connor
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 21

“Following a religious experience in which God comes to him in a burning tree ignited by the fuel from his overturned tractor, he feels mysteriously compelled to have the face of God tattooed on his back... Parker defends it with his fists against the derision of his former friends in the pool parlor, and he later realizes that ‘The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed.’”

The irony of Parker’s obvious spiritual conversion is that Sarah Ruth, his wife, has motivated him yet viciously rejects the symbol of his new life when he shows it to her; she considers the tattoo idolatry and beats Parker’s back... ‘He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face’.... [She] becomes a harpy for God to her husband.... Sarah Ruth’s Bible Belt Protestantism....directs her religious attention against the outward forms of religion at the expense of its moral and spiritual significance.... Her religion emphasizes prohibitions.... Her procedure in saving O. E. would be to prevent him from doing things he liked most, not to inspire him with the Holy Spirit.... She does not realize that the image, the idol as she refers to it, on her husband’s back represents to him a moral imperative, the inescapable, all-demanding eyes of Christ....

Parker’s tattoos symbolize not only his vanity but his lifelong commitment to secular experiences which have no sustaining significance; he becomes quickly dissatisfied with each tattoo and perceives that their total effect is ‘haphazard and botched.’ He wishes to emulate the tattooed man who had inspired him as a youth, filling him with an admiration and reverence typical of religious experiences.... Parker’s destiny is manifest when he submits himself to carrying the image of Christ on his back, realizing finally that, like the other tattooed man, his existence might thus inspire others.... God’s truth has come to Parker from the burning tree in the field where he plowed and he obeys the mandate given to him in that epiphany.... The fire ignited by O. E.’s tractor is purgatorial too, for it symbolically consumes O. E.’s former identity when it burns his shoes, causing him to go barefoot into town to have Christ tattooed on his back.”

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 42-44, 133, 140-41

“‘Parker’s Back’ dramatizes one man’s discovery of his Christian identity through experiences parallel to those of Old Testament prophets.... He becomes Obadiah Elihu as a result of two ‘miracles’ drawn directly from the Old Testament sources of his name.... Parker, a fruit and vegetable peddler, finds himself joylessly married to a plain and repressive religious fanatic. She objects to the idolatry of churches and to the tattoos which cover the front of Parker’s body....

After a near escape from death in a tractor accident which ignites a tree and his shoes...he rushes to town to have a ‘picture of God’ tattooed on his back.... When he returns home to show it to his wife, she denies that anyone knows what God looks like and condemns the picture as idolatrous. The conventional

image of Jesus does not represent God for her....Teilhard's 'grafting of the Person of a Deity on to the Human Cosmos' almost certainly became O. E. Parker's acquisition of a tattoo of Christ on his back, totally alienating him from his world and serving as the beginning of a transcendent order for him....

At first O. E. Parker is ashamed of his Christian name... Returning home after the tattooing...Parker finds the door locked. Sarah refuses to open it when he identifies himself as O. E. 'I don't know no O. E.,' she says. Finally Parker bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole. "'Obadiah'" he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts. "Obadiah Elihu!" he whispered. The door opened and he stumbled in'.... His use of the full name marks his rebirth... Only after Parker was reborn as the man with Christ on his back, fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy, did he feel 'the light pouring through him'....

The intuitive and compulsive selection of the 'picture of God' to be put on his back and the identification of himself as Obadiah Elihu indicate that he has accepted his role as prophet of the destruction of the Edomites, as recorded in the vision of Obadiah in the Old Testament.... Elihu remonstrated with Job for attempting to justify himself rather than admitting his deficiencies and accepting God's will.... In *Job* 33 there are direct analogues to Parker's life... O. E.'s occupation and his apparent thirst for the word of God, despite his denials, allude to...passages in *Amos*.... The story is not so much concerned with providing exact biblical parallels as it is with dramatization of spiritual truth.... The destruction of Edom is the destruction of the sons of Esau, son of Isaac and older brother of Jacob.... Esau the hunter is apparently more concerned with his physical than with his spiritual needs... Esau's sin is secularism, or materialism—the elevation of the physical over the spiritual....

Although Parker, like Jonah, does not fully realize it, he has already begun his vocation.... The pride of Parker's heart has deceived him, for his desire to be like the small sturdy man he had seen in the circus is not fulfilled until after he has been brought to the ground, crawling on his knees away from the flaming tree.... Parker's tattoo is permanent, and in a sense it supersedes Sarah Ruth.... He is left with 'nothing on earth' to comfort him. But the central hope of 'Parker's Back,' the vision, recurs late in the story as a prelude to Parker's temporary rapture of discovering his 'spider web soul,' a perfect image for the spiritual transfiguration of his once external aspiration.... Man does not deserve grace; it merely comes.... In the concluding sentence of the story Sarah Ruth sees the man 'who called himself Obadiah Elihu—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby'... The New Testament analogue is the well-known command beginning 'Unless you be as a little child'... The chastised, weeping Parker is the reborn Obadiah Elihu.... Parker has been incorporated in Christ—or in God."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 111, 115-23, 145

"Parker is obsessed with the desire to be tattooed. Until he saw a tattooed man at a fair when he was fourteen, he had never felt wonder or thought that 'there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed.' However, with that exotic and superstitious experience, he vaguely became aware of a capacity to respond and desire. Although not strictly religious, the experience was a movement of the spirit; it was one of the 'gracious' moments that seem to be given and which other cultures have attributed to muses or ghosts. So he begins to be tattooed, starts getting into fights (the awakening spirit is not always as well-mannered as the sleeping one), joins the navy (partly in fear of his mother's Baptist religion), and almost succeeds in blending into the mechanical ship ('except for his eyes, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea.' He continues to be tattooed, choosing figures that are more animated, but he becomes increasingly dissatisfied...

For one thing, the overall effect of the tattoos is haphazard and botched, because it does not come from a unifying center; it comes from random, compulsive, and unexamined attempts to quiet his vague longings. For another, each tattoo gives him satisfaction only until the novelty wears off, and O. E. is running out of skin. Most importantly, the tattoos cannot fulfill the undefined demands of his spirit, since they are only substitutes for the spiritual consummation he desires. His tattoos are a form of idolatry, but that makes them a form of worship and a sign of the spirit, however misdirected and frustrating. The panther, lion, serpents,

eagles, and hawks that inhabit his skin and seem to rage inside him in his dissatisfaction are symbols of his demonic possession, but they also have an oblique relation to the apocalyptic animals of the prophet, which they parody. To feel such despair is a great suffering, but never to have felt it is a greater misfortune.

Parker's religious drives are also betrayed through his attitudes toward the woman he marries. He does not know why he courts this ugly, poor farm girl, and he develops a nervous tic wondering why he stays with her after they are married and she has become pregnant. Sarah Ruth is a skinny, nasty, self-righteous daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, and she scorns his tattoos as vanity. But he cannot run away from her absoluteness, her judgments, her demands upon him. Although she, too, is somewhat demonic in the arrogance and animosity of her Manichean religion, she suggests something that he needs and has not been able to achieve through his botched assortment of tattoos.

Since she has little meat on her, he can feel her muscles and bones (unlike the 'hefty young blonde' he fabricates to try to make her jealous); there is a sense of something unyielding and basic that cannot appeal to his sexual imagination, something far different from the girls who have been attracted by his tattoos. Above all, her eyes are 'grey and sharp like the points of two ice-picks,' an image that not only recalls his own gray microcosmic eyes but also the tattoo needle, which causes just enough pain to make the tattooing seem worthwhile. She complements his obsession with tattoos; whereas they suggest an egoistic but spiritual potency, she reveals his need for something firm outside himself, even something to which he may sacrifice himself in opposition to his common sense....

He decides to have a religious picture put on his back, the only spot remaining and, significantly, a spot where only she could see it, for it is really an offering to please his judge. The decision, almost the command, to have God's image placed there comes to him in an accident, when he runs a tractor into a tree, which bursts into flames like a fiery cross and burns up his shoes. His experience is described as a 'leap forward into a worse unknown'... Parker continues to deny his motives and weakly to repudiate religion. The Byzantine Christ he chooses for his back has 'all-demanding eyes' that make Sarah Ruth's seem soft and dilatory by comparison, since even her austerity is a comforting substitute for the absoluteness Parker desires and fears. When he returns home and reluctantly identifies himself through his barricaded door as 'Obadiah,' admitting to his given biblical name, he feels the light of the dawn 'pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' His wife, however, repudiates the tattoo as idolatry and, having beaten the face of Christ, she drives Parker from the house to weep.

The ending of the story is complex in its possible implications. Sarah Ruth seems wrong in her rejection of incarnated God. Throughout, her disgust toward the body is as wrong as Parker's exaltation of it into an object of worship. Furthermore, Parker's religious experiences are intense, and they lead to that spiritual illumination in which his soul achieves the colorful harmony that his body had never achieved. There is still, however, some justice to Sarah Ruth's charge; it not only emphasizes the idolatrous nature of Parker's feelings about his images all along, but it also emphasizes that even when he is drawn close to God he still tries to evade the terrifying encounter by interposing his images, his pride, and his rationalizations. Even when he confronts the all-demanding eyes of Christ, he tries to hide behind his old idolatry and his wife, pretending that he is having this tattoo entirely to please her. Consequently, although his obsessions with tattoos and with his demanding wife both indicate capacity for faith and salvation, they also become convenient obstacles to faith when the part is mistaken for the whole, the symbols for the ultimate reality which they suggest.

In the main, however, Parker has begun to accept grace, which both elevates and humbles him. And in Miss O'Connor's fiction only grace can finally still the anxiety and longing that torment man. According to this Christian belief, only when man renounces his boast that he can save himself (a favorite boast of her characters), when he posits a power infinitely greater than, but not alien to, himself, when he can believe that he is accepted and can say... 'I am loved, therefore I am,' only then can he achieve peace. Miss O'Connor's stories usually reach their climaxes and end with the violent beginnings of this new birth, or at least with the traumatic shock to the 'old man' that makes the birth of the 'new man' possible."

David Eggenschwiler

“Still another Christ figure, O. E. Parker, the protagonist in the superlative story ‘Parker’s Back’ (1965), is the most engaging of Flannery O’Connor’s grotesques, perhaps because he is one of the few who are not harmful or seriously harmed. When Parker has a Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back, he undergoes a remarkable transformation in which he literally becomes identified with the numerous bearers of religious mystery who serve to rejuvenate society and to form its consciousness. The Christ on Parker’s back is a genuine presence: Parker himself is altered by its mystical power—a power which loses its force only when *there is a shift to a rational point of view, where the mystical symbol becomes a mere sign*, quite conventional and ridiculous, as it is to Parker’s wife. [Italics added]

The reaction of Parker’s wife to his tattoo is a carefully executed stroke of irony. This reception by Sarah Ruth is delightfully comic, but on a more serious level it is a prefiguration of the Crucifixion: as Parker stands before the barred door, he is shocked by the revelation of a tree of fire, and he falls backward against the door ‘as if he had been pinned there by a lance.’ It is at this moment that Parker’s transformation is complete: previously possessed by Christ, he now becomes identified with Him. The story then ends in an absurd imitation of the death of Christ. Parker’s ‘death’ comes at the hands of his incensed wife, who is outraged by his latest tattoo. Any picture of God is merely an indication of idolatry to her, and she thus subjects her husband to yet another purgation, this time with a broom. She beats him until large welts appear on the face of the tattooed Christ. Parker comically emulates the passion of Christ. He does not die, however, and he remains in the world. He becomes a child of Christ and, we may assume, attains a higher reality and a higher consciousness, for by taking up the Cross, he finally loses his ego.

O. E. Parker might well be the author’s greatest comic grotesque. The story itself certainly is a masterpiece, tightly organized and remarkable in its pictorial quality. Miss O’Connor’s regard for figure and perspective creates a memorable figure and an extraordinary situation. The story’s insistence upon the ambiguities of existence, and upon the pain and suffering of life are skillfully evoked. And in its imaginative use of materials, the story is as picaresque as anything Flannery O’Connor wrote. Parker’s complaint arises not only from his own obsessions, but also from a dialectical opposition to the religious groundings of his culture.

In a sense all the author’s misbelievers, who range from the falsely pious to the thoroughly damned, are cultural grotesques: the enduring values of their society throw their miscreant behavior into stark focus. In her fictive world common existence is seemingly limited and provincial; but a single religion, the old backwoods Fundamentalism, still dominates, and this makes for piety and awe, as well as for madness and violence. The squalid cities and towns, the piedmont farms, the sinister topography of pine tree and sand flat, of shabby movie marquees and Jesus Saves signs, impress themselves upon the protagonists’ sensibilities until the very physical and spiritual qualities of the landscape are linked with their destinies. The result of this amalgamation is almost always disorder, a chaotic mental state in the characters which is balanced only by the ordering power of Miss O’Connor’s fiction....

The spiritual nature of purification by fire is evident in several of Flannery O’Connor’s stories. Both ‘A Circle of Fire’ and ‘Parker’s Back’ utilize the fire motif to suggest a purgative force. The episode where Parker drives a tractor into a tree is especially reminiscent of the kind of effect one encounters in *The Violent Bear It Away*.... Contact with the flaming tree is more than a mere shock to Parker. Like the book hurled at Ruby Turpin [“Revelation”], it induces a revelation, reminiscent of the burning bush which appeared before Moses. Conscious now of a new relationship to the world about him, Parker knows that he is predestined to be victimized, yet paradoxically saved, by the revelation that has been manifested to him.”

Gilbert H. Muller
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 37-38, 95-96

“This story tells of a simple person who follows instinctively the promptings of his spirit.... One of O’Connor’s essays indicates that Parker’s mysterious movement toward an unknown goal was suggested

by her own experience. In her essay, 'The King of Birds,' she states that she has 'no short or reasonable answer to the question of why she raises peacocks.... She 'felt a lack.' She was finally led 'by instinct, not knowledge,' to raising peacocks.... 'My quest, whatever it was actually for, ended with peacocks'....

God leads Parker to understand his destiny through a strange combination of circumstances: his attraction to tattoos and his marriage to a woman who abhors them.... A 'peculiar unease' which settles in Parker when he is fourteen years old is the first indication of God's design upon him. At a fair he sees a man tattooed from head to foot... The 'unease' in him can be satisfied only by tattoos... Each tattoo dispels it for a time, but always it returns.... Parker's attention is concentrated on a design for his back. He crashes into the tree and is hurled from the tractor before it bursts into flames.... One who is familiar with biblical symbolism will recognize the signs of God's call to Moses to be his spokesman: the burning bush and the baring of the feet. Parker does not hear the voice of God as Moses did; he knows only 'that there had been a great change in his life'....

When his discontent is at its height, he meets his future wife.... He marries her; although she is 'ugly and pregnant and no cook,' he stays with her. 'He was puzzled and ashamed of himself'.... She evidently marries him to 'save' him.... Nurtured in fundamentalist doctrine, she can only cry out 'Idolatry' when Parker tells her that the face tattooed on his back is the face of God.... Just as Parker turns from the door, dawn breaks... He falls back against the door 'as if he had been pinned there by a lance.' Turning back to the door, he bends down to the keyhole and whispers, 'Obadiah,' and all at once he felt the light pouring through him... The prophet is confirmed in faith...

Parker's mind tends toward mystery. Since the time he was initially drawn to the mystery of moving color on the body of the tattooed man, he has been responsive to the inner promptings of the spirit, even if he does not understand them.... Parker, aware of mystery, is open to the power of grace. Confronted with mystery, Sarah Ruth closes her heart.... With her enraged assertion that 'God don't look like that!... He's a spirit. No man shall see his face,' she cuts herself off from grace.... O'Connor revivifies the scriptural dictum that a prophet is not accepted in his own country when she describes the reception of the Christ-bearing Parker at a favorite haunt of his, a pool hall, where he is thrown out bodily, and in his own home, where he is beaten."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 145-50

"Parker embodies in its purest shape the O'Connor paradox: his own tattooed flesh incarnates the wonder and mystery of the world and finally is engraved with the image of Jesus himself; and that same flesh suffers a mock crucifixion at the hands of Parker's harridan wife: the Word is made flesh, and the flesh is crucified. Despite the comic tone of 'Parker's Back,' one can see in it what is almost the defining emotion of O'Connor's fiction: the shock and pain that attend the birth into mystery....

In 'Parker's Back' the intruding figure is the image of Christ that is tattooed on the back of the hero, Parker. And what further distinguishes this tale from the others is precisely the implication that Parker has, in a sense, himself become the Christ-like intruder.... The reader's initial impression...is that a theologically 'approved' character (Sarah Ruth) has been pitted against an atheist (Parker). But as the story moves to its climax, the conflict grows into a parody of the reverse situation: Christ-changed Parker is given a mock lashing by the pretender to the Christian mystery, Sarah Ruth.... When she denies, in the end, the tattooed Christ on Parker's back, she is denying as well the doctrine of the Incarnation.... [The tattoo] is akin to the...association of the aesthetic and the spiritual in 'The Displaced Person' when the priest exclaims rapturously over the beauty of Mrs. McIntyre's passing peacock....

The reader may well perceive in [Parker's] attachment to the Bible zealot an as yet unrealized attraction to the Word.... What is so impressive in this story of course is how convincingly O'Connor manages to render the almost magical powers of this image of Christ; in a way that is more like Hawthorne than anything else she wrote... As the tattoo sinks into Parker's skin, the transformation—or second birth—begins: his heart beats slowly, 'as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power.' When the image is fully complete, Parker is shocked into silence by the powerful eyes of the Christ—'eyes to be obeyed.' He

drives back home to Sarah Ruth and, on the way, he experiences that alienation from self and surroundings that one recognizes, in O'Connor, as the sign of an impending revelation. Outside his own house at last, the image of the sun denotes a transformation in Nature that is the mirror of Parker's own metamorphosis. 'Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline. Parker fell back against the door as if he had been pinned there by a lance.' The foreshadowing crucifixion imagery is unmistakable....

Sarah won't let him into the house until he utters his full name...but when he does utter the name—Obadiah (worshiper of Jehovah) Elihue (whose God is He)—he at last fully creates for himself a new identity; and a gracious light pours through him, turning the unimportant 'spider web of facts and lies' that had earlier been his soul 'into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' The deliberate echo of Parker's initial perception of the carnival tattooed man implies the fulfillment at last of Parker's 'notion of wonder.' The fulfillment of his suffering soon follows.... Sarah Ruth does not recognize 'God' when He is pictured right before her eyes....

The ironic reenactment of Christ's ordeal becomes terrifying and credible because it is revealed as an actuality of daily life which repeats the original archetypal situation of Christ's lonely death on the Cross. Passing into fiction in this way, the scriptural event is given new and different, one might say more starkly religious, value from the one now rigidified in the dogma. [However], the narration of the tale is quite clearly designed to place Parker's 'crucifixion' in a comic context... The structure of the tale seems analogous to the traditional motif of the henpecked husband who can do nothing to please his shrewish wife. Our recollection of Parker's first meeting with Sarah Ruth (she smacks his face for cursing) casts a comic light on the repeat performance that closes the tale.... And it is simply the final irony...that our last picture of Parker, after...his second birth into grace, should be—through his wife's eyes—as a pathetic crying baby....

If we take O'Connor's attitude toward Parker as at once playfully comic and seriously ironic, one cannot but marvel at the rightness of her symbolism. For the tattooed body of O. E. Parker becomes at once a splendid and beautiful microcosm of the world, an embodiment of his 'spider web soul,' and a literal emblem of his Christlike suffering—besides being the perfect naturalistic medium for Parker's aesthetic emotions."

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Tulane U 1972) 166-71

"O. E. Parker, like Jonah, Saint Francis, and Hazel Motes, is a man who tries in vain to flee the hound of heaven. The name his mother gave to him, Obadiah Elihu, suggests his inescapable destiny as a child of God, but he steadfastly rejects the possibility of salvation and shortens his name to noncommittal initials.... Parker's wife is in every way the opposite of himself: her unpainted lips contrast with his brightly adorned body; her reverential invoking of the holy name, with his promiscuous cursing, her primly puritan views, with his 'sexy' approach to life. Parker, a wanton and an unbeliever, is nonetheless irresistibly drawn to this unlipsticked puritan, who gives him little sexual encouragement either before or after marriage. Parker's enigmatic wooing and wedding of the woman he does not really love is an expression of his inner need to find what is missing in his life: a vital religious principle....

In the tattoo, he seeks the magic formula, the transforming design, which will endow him with mystical potency, magical attraction. In other words, Parker—though he resists the church—inwardly yearns for a spiritual transfiguring to match his outward alterations. The navy, the tattoos, the wife—all are reflections of the continuing search.... Parker's conversion arises unexpectedly out of a farm 'accident.' The tractor overturns, the tree blazes forth, even Parker's own shoes (his former self) are consumed in flame. For Parker, the event is an undoubted miracle. As the tractor overturns, he yells "'GOD ABOVE!'... If he had known how to cross himself he would have done it.' From this point on, Parker is a radically changed man. He undergoes the typical convert's sense of the death of the old self. He is born anew, catapulted to a new identity and a destiny which seems directed by an outside hand. Hardly aware of what he is about, Parker seeks out the tattoo 'artist' in town; there an inner voice directs him to the appropriate design—a stern Byzantine Christ—for his as yet undecorated back.

Parker's experience of unforeseen conversion, producing consequent revision of identity and purpose, follows the lines of many an unexpected awakening to the sense of God. The sacred illumination of Saint Francis...offers an interesting parallel.... At the tattoo artist's, he announces at once that he has come in search of a picture of God. He quickly thumbs past the inane representations of an affable Christ depicted as 'The Good Shepherd, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician's Friend.' He rejects all of these for 'the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes.' Parker will have none of a soft Christianity which provides a vegetable love for all who wish to participate. He chooses rather the image of a stern and suffering God, whose promise is a hard salvation through difficult paths. Above all, he is attracted to the eyes: 'He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly.'

Parker, however, will not yet fully admit to himself or to the world the true nature of his experience.... In the pool hall, Parker insists that he had the likeness put on merely 'for laughs.' A brawl erupts, and the men, sensing his dishonesty, throw him out 'as if the barn-like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea.' At this stage, Parker, still denying the import of his experience, is indeed a Jonah, fleeing the god who has so unmistakably called him forth. In an effort to win his wife's forgiveness for his indiscretion, Parker returns home and whispers his full name softly into the keyhole. The moment he accepts his true identity as a son of God, he is filled with transforming grace: "'Obadiah," he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' In this final radiant moment, he is brought close to the center of a perfect creation.

Parker assumes that his wife will accept the image engraved on his back as final proof of his commitment to the Lord. Mrs. Parker, however, imbued as she is with fundamentalist doctrines of literal biblical interpretation, rejects him and his religious embellishment. ('It ain't anybody I know,' she scoffs.) She throws him from the house, screaming accusations of idolatry after him; for she follows the Puritan view to its harsh extreme of rejecting any artistic production that smacks of idolatry. Parker, without knowing it, seeks, like the Byzantine artist, to capture the spirit and express it in visible form. Thrust outside, crying like a baby, he begins his participation in the sufferings of Christ, on whose Byzantine countenance welts have already begun to form.... In O'Connor's view, modern man is still susceptible to ancient forms of revelation. The authenticity of 'miracle' is not a topic for debate but a fact evidenced repeatedly in human experience."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 112-16

"In 'Parker's Back,' the vagrant protagonist has deserted not only his home but also, tragically, himself; events conspire with prophetic insistence to drive Parker back to his true identity. As a parable about conversion—the word itself means 'a turning round'—it dramatizes the spiritual process in terms of O. E. Parker's response to the piercing eyes of the Byzantine Christ in the tattooist's book that say unequivocally, 'GO BACK.' The title's literal reference is to Parker's anatomical back that bears the stern reminder he has wandered from the source; its special meaning, though, is that 'Parker is back,' for by the end of the story he is back from his wanderings, he is back with Sarah Ruth—because he went back to the image 'with all-demanding eyes'—but on the deepest level he is back to the use of his own name. The given name that he is embarrassed by—Obadiah Elihue—is also actually his call. 'Parker's Back' is built on the assumption that the name is more than an extrinsic attachment to the person; the name is the man, it projects the destiny he is created for....

O'Connor has borrowed...freely from pertinent biblical narratives... They include the burning tree and removed shoes from the Moses story, the threefold call of the prophet Samuel, and the desolation of the pecan tree suggesting both the juniper of Elijah and the gourd plant of Jonah; in addition to the appropriated narratives, we have the names themselves, Obadiah Elihue and Sarah Ruth.... O'Connor's apparent patchwork coalesces neatly the way Parker's nondescript spider-web soul becomes a 'perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' It is only through the subtle pattern of biblical allusions that Parker's unique identity as Obadiah Elihue takes definitive shape....

Sarah and Ruth are biblical names associated with disbelief; each was instrumental in a return to origins. Sarah laughed at the promise of a son... Sarah was the ancestress of Israel, Ruth of David; both are in the genealogical line of the Messiah. And Parker's destiny implied in the name Sarah Ruth...is...decidedly redemptive. Each of the prophets referred to...received commands from the Lord to 'GO BACK'.... In response to the 'voice from inside' that has asked Parker for the third and last time 'Who's there?'—'there was a quality about it now that seemed final'—he freely uses his full Christian name and acknowledges in principle the 'servant' role that it entails.

The final image of Parker 'leaning against the [pecan] tree, crying like a baby,' could refer either to Elijah, fleeing the wrath of Jezebel and despairing under the broom tree...or to Jonah mourning the death of his gourd plant.... It is more likely...that O'Connor had the Book of Jonah in mind; not only is there a shared humor in the two works, but also a patent similarity in structure. Both are stories about vain attempts to escape the divine call. Jonah, called to preach repentance to the Ninevites, boards a ship in Joppa destined for Tarshish... Although Jonah does not literally have to 'GO BACK' to Nineveh—he never attempted to go there in the first place... Like Jonah, Parker must eventually, even if fearfully, admit the inevitability of his fate and accept the action of mercy....

O'Connor...wanted the sunset to remind Parker of his experience with the burning tree; its sudden explosion over the skyline forces him to 'GO BACK' in memory to the original stimulus toward conversion.... Conversion is a rebirth to spiritual innocence; Parker's inner transformation is appropriately experienced as an Edenic harmonization of the tattoos on his body.... The repetition of Parker's Christian name completes the baptismal symbolism of rebirth corresponding to the story's...demand that Parker 'GO BACK' to the call given him in the beginning....

Going back to his given name implies an...acceptance of his mission as servant of the one whose image he bears. Parker's sense of wonder is linked inexorably and sanely with body; Sarah Ruth's insistence that God 'don't look' and her vehement rejection of Parker's religious confession—the implication of which he can scarcely begin to grasp even at the end of the story—epitomize the blindness of disbelief and the violence that members of the kingdom must suffer. The denial that God truly became a man is an error as old as the Christian church itself...

The vocation conferred by Parker's name is both cross and glory, for Obadiah Elihue means 'the servant of Yahweh, he is God.' To be rejected in an act of selfless love, however confused its motivation may have been—the image on his back is after all for Sarah Ruth alone—is to live unmistakably in the likeness of Yahweh's servant. Parker has indeed come back to himself."

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 116-20

'Parker's Back' is a story of a search for the roots of personal dissatisfaction. There are two epiphanies in the narrative (in Joyce's sense of moments of heightened consciousness), and along with these quiet realizations, there is a cataclysmic event that hurls the protagonist irrevocably into an altered awareness. The trauma in O. E. Parker's life is a farming accident: he absentmindedly drives a tractor into a huge tree, and his own shoes burn. O'Connor tells us that 'he could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face' as if the tree were animated with an intimate message, and that O. E. immediately careens away from the scene and heads toward the city in his truck.

'Parker did not allow himself to think on the way to the city. He only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it.' The narration of this crisis is typical of O'Connor's handling of revelation. The character is passive, the experience is both unanticipated and unwanted. Something unspecified but disturbing has happened to his mind. But however much O. E. Parker may sense his own altered circumstances, his reaction is the programmed, mechanical solution that he has had for all of his internal anguish: he will get another tattoo.

The pattern of the narrative is, then, a pattern of obsession briefly but decisively interrupted. All of O. E.'s previous anxieties have been solved, at least temporarily, by getting a new tattoo. The colored images

are each pleasing to O. E., and collectively they contribute to his goal of becoming like a tattoo artist he had seen as a boy. In flashback the reader is told that O. E. had seen the performer 'flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle emotion, lifted up.'

Of this first epiphany O'Connor tells us not only that he was moved but why. 'Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed...[It was] as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.' In this instance, O'Connor makes full use of the omniscient voice, exposing both the subjective impression of the character and more than the character could possibly have divined (that the experience was in some way definitive)....

Just as the urge to engrave his body is irrational, so is Parker's marriage to a shallow religious fundamentalist. This woman, Sarah Ruth, questions Parker's tattooing impulse. 'At the judgment seat of God, Jesus is going to say to you, 'What you been doing all your life besides have pictures drawn all over you?' She prefers him covered up or in the dark. It is a strange, strained union, initiated irrationally and continued irrationally; Parker especially is perplexed by his motivation for staying with such a woman. Thus an obsession with tattoos and a preoccupation with pleasing a sour wife precede the trauma of Parker's accident, and these things shape his response to it. He will tattoo the image of Christ on his back, resolving his own anxiety about the accident in the accustomed manner and hoping also to please Sarah Ruth. After all, he has reasons, 'She can't say she don't like the looks of God.'

To this point, this character's motivation is farfetched, improbable, but consistent. It is precisely at this point that O'Connor effects a radical change in his perception. The tattoo assumes an added significance to Parker, as if the psychic change that he had sought to effect with other pictures has finally been achieved.... The tattoo is...an image with a keenly felt moral imperative. 'Parker sat for a long time...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 forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything.'

This insight into the vanity of his previous life, the irrational identification of a tattoo with a command, is then shown to be identical to other unaccountable impulses. '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.'

The second epiphany contains, then, the key to all of Parker's previous conduct; it reveals, as it were, a theme of his life, locating his feeling about the Christ tattoo in the larger context of his vulnerability to the forces of irrationality. In the remaining narrative, Parker comes to terms with the implications of his new emotional allegiance, first by denying it in the face of his buddies' ridicule, then by identifying himself to his wife with his biblical name, Obadiah.... The tree of light completes the insight begun by the burning tree in the farm accident. Parker recognizes himself as an Obadiah and, with this, receives the assurance that his choice is correct.

At this moment, his 'spider web soul turned into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' The language echoes that used previously to describe the tattoo artist's exterior. Here, however, the condition described is an internal one; the language suggests metaphorically a lively harmony and, with it, a sense of peace, the implied end to a disgruntled quest. What had been sought as a condition of the body is received as a condition of the soul. The inversion is complete.

The story, however, is not completed with this reversal. Instead, O'Connor finishes the action in terms of Parker and Sarah Ruth's marital relationship. The wife, good fundamentalist that she has always been, rejects the 'face of God' on Parker's back. To her, as to everyone of that religious persuasion, any image of God is a metaphor to be used, if at all, to assist the imagination. For her it contains no moral imperative. She beats her husband, raising welts on his back and consequently on this image. Parker ends this episode of his life under one of the trees that has been so important to him, in tears....

Parker cries because a gesture intended to soften a brittle wife has failed, and because the image of Christ that has enlisted his moral allegiance is thought by Sarah Ruth to be blasphemous.... O'Connor illustrates a man 'getting religion' by effecting the 'getting' literally. Christ is under the skin of Parker's back by virtue of a tattooist's needles. However, the conduct that follows is more fittingly the behavior of a man who has had a spiritual encounter with Christ rather than merely a physical alteration. Beyond this behavioral clue, there have been the revelations, the author's explanations at strategic points, and the exposure of consciousness at others to tell the audience in no uncertain way that O. E. Parker has met his God."

Carol Shloss
"Epiphany"

Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference
(Louisiana State U 1980)

"The act of 'facing oneself' is the recurrent action of O'Connor's stories... Perhaps the most striking example of this is...O. E. Parker in 'Parker's Back,' who literally 'faces' his own back with a giant tattoo of Jesus, the eyes of which 'continued to look at him—still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence.' The face on Parker's back—its 'all-demanding' eyes—made Parker feel 'that his dissatisfaction was gone, but he felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him'.... O'Connor's backwoods' characters...often use country cliches in their speech: Her art is to make us see the familiar as strange, to make us see...what we usually don't see at all because it is so familiar. 'Christ!' someone says in the pool hall when Parker reveals his tattoo, and suddenly—almost supernaturally—O'Connor creates Christ's presence, as literal as it is for Parker, by means of the cliché of astonishment."

Ronald Schleifer
"Rural Gothic"

Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

"The hero...is violently ejected from his house by his pious wife when he assumes the Byzantine tattoo which...makes him 'literally...Christ-bearing'.... When at the age of fourteen he sees the tattooed man whose body seems 'a single intricate design of brilliant color,' the 'motion of wonder' he feels sets him off immediately from the cerebral protagonists of so many other O'Connor stories.... What Parker wants, in short, is not to control the world but quite literally to em-body it, to incarnate the image of that design of things that exists beyond him. His impulse is thus aesthetic, not intellectual: his desire is to turn himself into a living work of art. But the tattoos of the created world with which he covers his front bring only chaos, a result 'haphazard and botched.'

Not until he has the face of Christ etched on the obverse of that body and acknowledges for the first time the true identity of...Obadiah Elihue (names meaning 'servant of Yahweh' and 'God is he') does he achieve the effect he has groped after for so long. As Parker whispers the suppressed name, 'all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.' Driven blindly by an instinct he does not comprehend, Parker discovers that if the dream of perfect beauty is unrealizable in this world one may nevertheless recover—at great cost—the vision of Eden within.... His imagination works to create in him his most deeply authentic self, even if that self is not one that Parker...would have chosen.... The imagination, for O'Connor, is not simply a vaguely creative faculty: in a fallen world, it is the power within us that apprehends, however dimly, the numinous dimension of the creation, that in Parker brings about the vision of paradise regained.... It is the lumpish Parker, with no pretensions to 'creativity,' who comes closer to being a genuine artist than any of O'Connor's fashionably self-conscious young men."

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 77, 126-27, 129

"'Parker's Back' was the last story she wrote... O. E. Parker, the baffled ex-sailor, whose unrecognized spiritual urge for beauty and order is expressed by the tattoos he compulsively acquires... When he learns that he can in no way please his shrewish wife, he decides to get one more picture punctured into his skin, this time a religious subject that he feels cannot fail to win her over, even though she has let him know that

she dislikes his tattoos... The work is undertaken by an 'artist,' who is himself decorated with a miniature but perfect owl (symbolizing wisdom) on the top of his bald head.... Here indeed is an image of the artist in general, who imprints with a careful structure important designs upon our minds (even if only on the backs of our minds), which will ultimately have their effect on us and our understanding, if we take the trouble to look at them. Even if we don't, they are still there, affecting us unconsciously. In particular, it is an image of Flannery O'Connor as the artist she was, for the image she imprinted on us all by her work is that of Christ, All-Mighty and Judge, with all-demanding eyes which 'will be obeyed'."

Sally Fitzgerald

Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xxxi-xxxii

"O'Connor will often use biblical allusion to place the events of her story into an explicitly religious context, thereby inviting readers to see more there than they otherwise might. In 'Parker's Back,' for instance, OE's exploded tractor affords a vision of a 'tree of fire and his empty shoe burning beneath it'—not very veiled reference to the theophany of Exodus 3, where Moses stands barefoot to receive Yahweh's call before the burning bush. More explicit still is the comparison of the pool hall from which OE is ejected to 'the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea.' In both of the above instances O'Connor is relating the more or less comic experience of a backwoods tattoo fetishist to that same biblical typology exploited by Bede in his account of Caedmon: the reluctant prophet who is called not only against his wishes, but in this case totally beyond his comprehension.

The tawdriness of the story's setting, and the low humor of OE and his wife Sarah Ruth, seem to pull against this traditional thematic substructure. And yet the tension between the ridiculous and the sublime is itself part of the biblical tradition, with its preference for the tent and stable, the family squabbles and criminal's death as the chosen meeting place of the human and the divine. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn that O'Connor delighted in one critic's view that the best of her work 'sounded like the Old Testament would if it were being written today.' For in O'Connor's fiction, as in the Scriptures, we find ourselves in a narrative world where the lowest experience bears the most exalted burden and our view of human action is projected against the obscure background of God's will."

Peter S. Hawkins

The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch
(Cowley 1983) 34-35

"The tattooed man himself is described reverently...and the designs upon his body seem to express the ability of signs of Nature to represent a radiance and wholeness which is almost religious in character.... He finds his door locked, and his wife refusing to open it until her utters his true name, Obadiah Elihue. At that instant the sun rises, a 'tree of light' bursts over the horizon, and Parker falls back against the door 'as if he had been pinned there by a lance,' feeling the light 'pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts'... This arabesque is painted for us in all the colors of redemption. In fact, the very openness to ridicule of Parker's act becomes grounds for taking it seriously when we recognize that among the burdens of this story is the demonstration of how enlightenment, because it must always come in unexpected ways, must always look like something else, something false or embarrassing. Parker's vision...seems ridiculous only because all vision must seem to be so... When Sarah Ruth beats Parker with her broom, screaming that his new tattoo is idolatrous, and that God is a spirit whom no man shall see, our sympathies are entirely with poor Parker, and our judgment is that Sarah Ruth is wrong not only about her husband's motives but also about God."

John Burt

"What You Can't Talk About"

Flannery O'Connor, ed. Harold Bloom
(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1986) 131-33

"Parker is O'Connor's final and most brilliant portrait of a divided self. Proclaimed by her as an attempt at a story 'too funny to be as serious as it ought,' this portrait reaffirms the author's deep involvement with exploring 'the mystery of personality' and human life—a mystery because inherently contradictory—comic and tragic, sacred and profane....

Obadiah Elihue Parker is attracted at the age of fourteen to a tattooed man who represents unity and wholeness, 'a single intricate design of brilliant color.' As he studies this man, Parker feels incomplete, divided, and spiritually empty... Dividedness, fragmentation, and a sense of alienation from body are exactly what Parker aims to overcome: 'Whenever a decent-sized mirror was available, he would get in front of it and study his overall look. The effect was not one of intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him.' He struggles for unity of self, a secure identity that cannot be achieved without acceptance of the body and mortality, not to mention positioning himself as a constructive member of the whole human community, the first step accomplished by marriage....

Parker's first efforts to establish a sense of a whole and sound identity depend on physical appearance. Parker feels he is physically 'attractive' because his tattoos attract women. He displays his body by removing his shirt whenever possible, especially when his female boss is watching... Parker's attraction to Sarah Ruth resides in the fact that, unlike himself, she seems to know who and what she is (a Chosen One—all Spirit). Parker does not know who or what he is, but he hopes his wife will help him to gain a sense of his own identity. Ironically, what she does is to confuse her husband further because of her denial of the body. Just as Sarah Ruth's quest for fulfillment through the spirit alone seems suspect, so fulfillment of Parker's desire for completeness cannot be achieved through the body alone... He is not one to deny the body, but he is spiritually hungry....

Subtle allusions to Eve undercut Sarah Ruth's 'relish' for the apple Parker gives her.... Sarah Ruth's worst fault is 'ice in the veins'—the Hawthornian sin of a cold heart suggested by the 'icepick' eyes of her first description. A castrating phallic woman wielding a broom, she drains Parker of vitality when she misreads his tattoo of an eagle. From her perspective, it is merely a chicken.... Sarah Ruth avoids self-examination by repressing her own weaknesses and by 'sniffing up sin' in others. She defines 'sin' in terms of indulgences of the body: smoking, drinking, sex—ladies painting their faces to attract men and Parker tattooing himself to attract women. Repulsed by the body, she examines Parker's supposedly wounded hand as if it were 'a poisonous snake.' She pays him as much heed as 'a stray pig'...

Parker's gesture of love is what allows him to feel 'that his dissatisfaction was gone.' We ought to be moved by his desire to please Sarah Ruth, especially given her unyielding disposition and his previously narcissistic motivations. Parker has changed from behaving according to the exhibitionist's self-involvement to wanting for the first time in his life to 'please' someone else. When Sarah Ruth Cates beats the man who wants so much to win her love and inflicts wounds on the face of the tattooed Christ, there can be no doubt where the reader's sympathy lies. Parker becomes a kind of Christ figure, and the story ends with biblical resonances: 'There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.' Ironically, Parker's first name suggests the author's own struggle with the body at the time she wrote this story: O-BOD-DIE-AH."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 103-08

Michael Hollister (2014)