



Chapter Title: The Aesthetics of Incongruity

Book Title: Flannery O'Connor

Book Subtitle: The Imagination of Extremity

Book Author(s): FREDERICK ASALS

Published by: University of Georgia Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt46n7vn.9>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Georgia Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Flannery O'Connor*

JSTOR

CHAPTER FOUR

The Aesthetics of Incongruity



If the jangle of conflicting wills is at the core of Flannery O'Connor's stories of the double, that essentially internal battle is acted out on the surface of her many domestic dramas. In the recurrent context of a small family whose members are abrasively tied together, the chief antagonists become a parental figure and a child, whether the "parent" be a literal father or (almost always) mother or a surrogate such as a grandfather, and whether the "child" be the ten-year-old Nelson of "The Artificial Nigger" or the sixty-two-year-old Sally Poker Sash of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Whatever the variations played on the pattern, these family relationships always involve a struggle for power, a power the parent may assert simply by his continuing presence and which the child, bent on his own autonomy, is determined to wrest to himself. The mother and daughter of "A Circle in the Fire" speak in their own individual tones, but they capture the friction that underlies all of O'Connor's domestic stories: "'Why do you have to look like an idiot?' [Mrs. Cope] asked. 'Suppose company were to come? When are you going to grow up? What's going to become of you?' . . . 'Leave me be,' the child said in a high irritated voice. 'Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you'" (p. 190).¹

In her presentation of these generational struggles O'Connor carefully maintains an emotional tension within the story. When the parent is as aggressively domineering as the grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or Mrs. May of "Greenleaf," for instance, the

children are as unattractive as Bailey and his family in the former or as Mrs. May's sons, who are "different . . . as night and day" (p. 314) but equally unappealing, in the latter. If Asbury Fox's liberal clichés and aesthetic pretensions are subjected to a mocking tone in "The Enduring Chill," his mother's provincial practicality and officious optimism are treated with a comparable comic irony. And when we turn our gaze from individual works to this group of stories as a whole, an analogous detachment becomes visible: the protagonist in these tales, the central consciousness and focus of concern, may be equally either the parent or the child. No less obsessive a pattern than the *Doppelgänger* motif (with which, as we have seen, it sometimes overlaps), the family conflict is remarkable for the apparent ease with which O'Connor can shift her attention from one role to the other. Returning again and again to the situation, she reveals the depth of her involvement with, and her ability to detach herself from, both sides of the generational battle.

For the children (of whatever age) the struggle begins in the desire to be let alone, to be given room, to differentiate themselves in an arena dominated by a "parent" who complacently insists on his or her "own way of doing." As Asbury Fox reflects about his mother, "her way had simply been the air he breathed," and he had left home, as he melodramatically puts it, "to escape the slave's atmosphere," "to find freedom." His pompous accusation of her voices the rage of all these children: "Woman, why did you pinion me?" ("The Enduring Chill," pp. 365, 364). But since the parents show no inclination (or even ability) to surrender their positions of power, they are increasingly challenged by the children, and the stories resound with the discord of clashing wills. That discord is often resolved in a violent climax, but the upshot is virtually always the same: the protagonist, whether parent or rebellious child, is defeated and even broken in his willful assertion of self. On this level, it changes nothing that their opponents are sometimes literally destroyed, as are, for instance, Thomas's mother or Mary Fortune. That Thomas and Mr. Fortune have had to resort to murderous violence is in fact the final index of their frustration and failure. The will to power always fails in O'Connor, for it thrusts at last against a reality greater than itself.

As we saw in looking at the double motif, this drive for control is finally a desperate attempt to project the ego into the external world, to make life conform to the mind's conception of it. "This is my place" ("A Circle in the Fire," p. 186), O'Connor's farm matrons cry, implying more than the mere possession of property. Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" puts it explicitly: "When she looked out any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character" (p. 321). But the most articulate believers in the mind's control are not of course these parental figures, but the children, almost all of whom conceive of themselves as intellectuals, and their universal failure is perhaps best illuminated by setting them against the protagonist of one of the few stories in which the generational struggle plays no part, O. E. Parker of "Parker's Back."²

Among other things, Parker is one indication of the shift in O'Connor's work after *Wise Blood*, for he is essentially a sympathetic reworking of the "unconscious" figure exemplified in the novel by Enoch Emery. That Parker's life develops independently of and sometimes quite against his conscious desires make him of course comic, but he is not the buffoon Enoch was, nor is his end the mocking emptiness of the man in the gorilla suit. Far from being an intellectual, Parker is "a boy whose mouth habitually hung open"; he is "as ordinary as a loaf of bread" (p. 513). 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: "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. *Even then it did not enter his head*, but a peculiar unease settled in him" (p. 513; italics added). The relation of the O'Connor intellectual to the world is the attempt, as old Tarwater says of Rayber, to "get everything inside his head" (*The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 76). Parker's initial desire is to appropriate the images of "everything" to his *body*, but in such a way as to retain their independent life: on the man at the fair "the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own" ("Parker's Back," p. 513).

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 the creature who inhabits this microcosm as Obidiah 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" (p. 528). 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.

Parker himself may not know how to name this instinct, but in an early draft for "The Fiction Writer and His Country" O'Connor suggested its nature. "The writer's true country," she said, "is the world of innocence, which is to say, the world of the uncorrupted imagination. . . . Of course, we have all been expelled from the Garden of Eden . . . and this is why the world of the imagination is so hard for us to enter. . . . It demands a pull against gravity."³ 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. He feels the "pull against gravity," the abnegation and pain and loss that this demands, but he knows intuitively that it must be followed: "Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him" (p. 527). His imagination works to create in him his most deeply authentic self, even if that self is not one that Parker, had he been asked, would have chosen. But the cost of that achievement is enormous, and the story's final sentence proclaims both a mourning for what has been lost and the birth of genuine identity: "There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (p. 530).

The will to vision that Parker acts out is deeply opposed to the

will to power that governs most of O'Connor's protagonists, an antagonism most clearly revealed in precisely those who pretend to live by "imagination," the would-be artists. Asbury Fox, Calhoun of "The Partridge Festival," and (more incidentally) Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" all aspire to being writers, although only Asbury has produced anything at all to support his pretensions, and even he admits that his work is "lifeless." Asbury's lament, "I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things" ("The Enduring Chill," p. 364) might serve for Julian and Calhoun as well, and they blame stifling parents or a hostile society for their failures. The real problem, of course, is that in rebelling against those parents they have adopted a role which, they think, opposes the older generation's philistinism without exploring their fitness to play that role—a domestic version of *épater les bourgeois*. Indeed, their most genuine selves may not be the "rebel-artist-mystic[s]" they would like to think they are, but the very epitome of those middle class traits they intellectually despise: this, at least, is the central meaning of Calhoun's revelation at the end of "The Partridge Festival." It is not, as Asbury moans, that they have "no imagination," but that they have suppressed the genuine imagination, and the genuine self, they do possess by imposing an arbitrary control on their lives. As Asbury steps from the train at the opening of "The Enduring Chill," he looks at his ordinary home town and momentarily feels "that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets of some exotic temple for a god he didn't know." But provincial Timberboro is the embodiment of everything Asbury scorns, and he is "irked that he *had allowed himself*, even for an instant, to see an imaginary temple in this collapsing country junction" (pp. 357, 358; italics added). By the end of the story Asbury will no longer be able to suppress his imagination, but he will also discover that it is not simply a cosy artistic faculty when it opens him to the enduring vision of purifying terror.

The failure of these pseudoartists, then, is less their lack of imagination than their willful denial of it, their refusal to trust it, their attempts to coerce it, to lead rather than be led by it—their assumption, in short, that like all the forces in life it is subject to human

control. 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. But in their will to power, Asbury, Calhoun, and Julian are essentially no different from O'Connor's other intellectuals nor, ironically, from those intensely practical parental figures against whom so many of them are in revolt. Their invariable failure to impose the ego upon the world thus can also be described as a refusal to submit to the imagination, to surrender to that faculty that might enable them to discover both the genuine self and the true dimensions of the universe they inhabit. Again and again O'Connor's fiction implies that the will to power and the will to vision are incompatible drives, that control and surrender are necessarily contradictory, that the reasonable and the unreasonable are ever at war.

But when we shift our attention from this pattern of action to the larger strategies of her fiction, or when we listen to the voice of the occasional prose, we encounter an apparent contradiction. "When I write," O'Connor remarked, "I feel I am engaged in the reasonable use of the unreasonable," adding, "In art the reason goes wherever the imagination goes."⁴ "We write with the whole personality" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 193), she noted, and once elaborated explicitly, "the conscious as well as the unconscious mind" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 101). The deeply dualistic tendency of her thinking is evident in the language here—*reasonable* and *unreasonable*, *reason* and *imagination*, *conscious* and *unconscious* (at other times she would add *judgment* and *vision*, *mystery* and *manners*, or the theological terms *grace* and *nature* to the list)—but she always insisted that for her the act of writing was a reconciliation of these potentially discordant qualities. Yet it is surely more accurate to speak of tension rather than harmonious reconciliation in her fiction, for if the thematic implications bear down hard on one side of those dualities—on the unreasonable, on imagination and the unconscious—other features of her work witness her commitment as a writer to the reasonable and the conscious.

Whatever is suggested by the fates of her characters, O'Connor's fiction everywhere manifests her powerful control of her material. She had nothing but scorn for what she saw as the outpourings of

"unrestrained feelings" by the "very vocal writers from San Francisco," and endorsed instead Aquinas's "cold" definition of art as "reason in making" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 82). Elsewhere she said, "I belong to that literary generation whose education was in the hands of the New Critics or those influenced by them, and with these people the emphasis was on seeing that your thoughts and feelings—whatever they were—were aptly contained within your elected image."⁵ Even without such an explicit acknowledgment, the evidence of her deliberate shaping power is everywhere. The chiseled sentences, the sense of pace and form, the probing for meaning within outrageous or ludicrous action, the manipulation of tone, all point to her absorption of that atmosphere in which craftsmanship was valued above spontaneity, where technique became a form of discovery. Indeed, even without the lectures and essays and letters, the sometimes voluminous drafts of the fiction, the impressive contents of the library, it is clear from the finished stories and novels themselves that Flannery O'Connor was a highly conscious, intelligent—even "intellectual"—writer. Thus if her stories imply the necessity of surrendering the intellect, the impulse to control the world, in order to confront the larger powers of the unreasonable and the imagination, the shape of her work as a whole makes it clear that for her as a writer any such surrender would have been entirely debilitating. For O'Connor to operate at all, both sides of the duality were essential. Her description of how "Good Country People" came into being—a process both unconscious ("seemingly mindless") and yet "under control throughout" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 100)—presents the act of writing as a seamless web, a happy reconciliation of the reasonable and the unreasonable. Indeed, O'Connor herself suggested that it was only in the act of writing that she felt this sense of wholeness: "I never completely forget myself except when I am writing and I am never more completely myself than when I am writing" (*The Habit of Being*, p. 458).

Yet whatever was involved in the act of composition, the fiction encountered by the reader exhibits everywhere not a harmonious oneness but the tautness of *concordia discors*. If, like the motif of the double, the recurrent clash between parent and child almost never leads to a scene of reconciliation, this pattern of action has

striking analogues on other levels. The litotes of the plain style and the hyperbole of gesture and action, the containment implied by the craft and control and the unleashing dramatized in the rampant feelings and violent plots, the manners of the local, the everyday, the ordinary and the mystery of the devastating intrusions of psychic and cosmic forces, the laughter induced by the comic and the terror evoked by violence—out of all these dualities comes that vibrant tension that gives her work its disturbing power. None is more unnerving than the apparent gap between manner and matter, the distance between, on the one hand, the spare coolness and control of style and voice and, on the other, the violence and melodrama that make up the substance of what that style and voice convey. Like one of her more memorable characters, O'Connor as narrator is "clear and detached and ironic . . . regarding [her materials] from a great distance" (p. 285). But those materials create a world of such abrasive energy that the landscape of her fiction is littered with thefts, strokes, car accidents, self-mutilations, shootings, drownings, beatings, crushings, hangings, and gorings. The climaxes of her stories and novels are often the stuff of the tabloids, unabashedly sensational, the renderings of nightmares and fantasies of violence and sudden death. But through the carefully regulated style which mediates these horrors, O'Connor herself appears to look on with ironic equanimity as she propels her characters toward their appalling ends. Like God Himself, she seems to preside in her fiction as both creator and derisive judge.

Stephen Dedalus articulated the main direction of modernist fiction when he theorized that the dramatic artist was godlike in his disappearance from his handiwork, aloof, invisible, "indifferent"; and O'Connor echoed Joyce in placing the modern author "behind the scenes, apparently disinterested" and in insisting that "a piece of fiction must be very much a self-contained dramatic unit" (*Mystery and Manners*, pp. 74, 75). Yet if she is clearly in the modernist mainstream in the formal absence of herself-as-author from her narratives, the lack of overt commentary is hardly synonymous with Dedalian indifference. O'Connor's narrative voice is never merely neutral, and at least some of the rhetorical power given up through the adoption of formal impersonality is recaptured through her ma-

nipulation of tone. She is quite capable, particularly in her later stories, of a rapid shifting of tone (demanding a comparable nimbleness in the reader), but her most characteristic voice is that of the ironist who speaks at a great emotional distance from her subject yet, paradoxically, with great intensity, as if, although her characters must be viewed as fools or worse, what happens to them *matters* enormously. With characteristic understatement, she drily assured one interviewer that few readers "claim to see themselves"⁶ in her figures; in fact, her entire narrative stance is designed to short-circuit the empathic response. In forcing the reader away from the characters, the sharp irony leaves open no vantage point but that of the narrator herself. From this distance we often—and, in the later stories, increasingly—look through the eyes of the protagonist, but we look at and around him as well to discover not only his own absurdity but the frightening dimensions of the world he inhabits.

The act of looking demands distance, sharp vision requires removal from the object viewed. If O'Connor's detachment implies anything but indifference, the severity of her act of perception is inextricable from the disconcerting laughter that sounds through her fiction. For her view of man is incorrigibly comic, comic with the piercing insight that can suddenly flip up the dark underside of human folly to reveal the matching grin of the memento mori. The grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," for example, dresses elaborately for the family trip so that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (p. 118). The wild disproportion of the terms, the vapid composure that summons up the ultimate violence only to treat it as a rare social opportunity, and the cool irony with which O'Connor presents the sentence makes it both fearful and ludicrous. The ridiculous in her work is often etched in a withering dryness: "He intended to stretch the boy's mind by introducing him to his ancestor, the fish, and to all the great wastes of unexplored time" (*The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 140); "She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" ("Greenleaf," p. 316). In passages such as these, the irony is so sharp, the exposure of folly so pitiless, that the revelation of emptiness and self-deception is as appalling as it is comic.

All comedy is perhaps in some measure cruel in its laughter, but O'Connor's fiction contains a comic perception that is frightening in its very relentlessness. The scorn, the astringency, the refusal to soften the harshness of the mocking outline, to compromise comic justice with mercy, is compelling in its fierce integrity, but it also contains the fearsomeness of that "guffawing peal of thunder" ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own," p. 156) cited earlier. O'Connor's comic range is of course not limited to any single effect; she moves easily from paradoxical wit to the confusions of farce, from sharp satire to dialect humor, from subtle ironies to broad laughter. The stories are not monochromatic: they possess shadings of tone, degrees of distance and sympathy, and the later works in particular require complex responses throughout. Yet even the most sympathetic figures are viewed by an austere eye that blinks at no human absurdity, that notes ironically the gestures that reveal the rampant ego. It is as if the characters demand being stripped bare, as if their pretensions and evasions and self-deceiving lies must be swept ruthlessly aside until they are shown for the Old Adam they are, naked before all-seeing eyes in a kind of fictional Last Judgment. But the mocking laughter this process evokes is chilling; it is little wonder that John Hawkes thought he detected the Satanic note in it.⁷

In the rhetorical sense, comedy is by its very nature cathartic. As Wylie Sypher says, "Like tragedy, comedy is homeopathic. It cures folly by folly."⁸ But in O'Connor's fiction the purgative action seems to work not only on the reader, but by a strange metamorphosis on the characters as well. The aggressive component in purposive (as distinguished from harmless) jokes was long ago pointed out by Freud, and Eric Bentley has recently observed the element of violence, of "destructive force," in both kinds of purposive jokes, those designed to "smash" and those to "strip." These he argues, are at the root of the main tradition of scornful comedy, the tradition in which O'Connor obviously belongs.⁹ In her work the gradual comic stripping away parallels the thrust of the action that in story after story drives the characters to an extremity of abasement or guilt which rips aside their illusions. The relentless laughter of the narrator and the frightening drama of the action seem to converge toward a single point, the unmasking of their evil and folly. They are finally driven

to see themselves as she has seen them throughout. But at the violent climaxes of O'Connor's stories all laughter, but not all irony, drops away, for these glimpses of reality lay bare the pain and terror that has lurked beneath the comedy all along.

The implicit violence in comedy is the hidden link between manner and matter in O'Connor, between the freeing of laughter and the freezing of fear. As they touch at the ultimate horizon of her fiction, the terrifying and the comic create a tension analogous to the recurrent motif of unrecognized double figures, or the repeated clashes between parents and children. Yet this fundamental doubleness also makes itself felt in her pervasive use of that highly ironic narrative voice. The duality implicit in all irony is heightened and sustained in O'Connor's work. In insisting on the split between what the protagonist takes himself to be and what he actually is (which in turn is inseparable from what he takes his world to be as opposed to what *it* is), her narrator points not just to a misjudgment or incomplete awareness, but to a veritable chasm of self-deception. "You aren't who you think you are" ("Everything That Rises Must Converge," p. 419), one of those protagonists smugly tells his mother (neither, of course, is he), and the remark might serve as a motto for all her central figures. That gap between the fabricated and deeply false persona and the true self (whether or not embodied in a *Doppelgänger*) is already implied in the double consciousness of the ironic narrator, whose false speaking masks true knowing and who thereby creates a double consciousness in the reader as well.

Along with the poised distance of that ironic narrative voice and the sustained comic perception, the rigorous attention to craft and the sparely honed style help achieve in O'Connor's fiction that reasonableness of which she spoke, the powerful sense of discipline and control that seems at the opposite pole from—and so perhaps made possible—the unleashing of the dark unreasonable forces of the violent and terrifying. For at the heart of her imagination is an irremediable wildness, a deliberate pursuit of the "extreme situation" that for her seems to have demanded the craftsmanship and coolness and ironic comedy to bring her obsessive materials under control. She was clearly determined to make the violence she conjured up engage a larger meaning and thus point to a greater order, but much

of the power of her work flows from the unimpeded intensity of deeply felt sources which she learned how to shape without suppressing. One of Flannery O'Connor's firmest convictions is that the vital centers of life, both within and beyond the self, are radically unreasonable, and in her fiction the nonrational expresses itself in violence.

As a result, the shocking climaxes of her stories are frequently appropriate to the action that precedes them without seeming entirely inevitable. O'Connor herself once described those moments as characterized by "an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 111). Almost inescapably her plots have a melodramatic cast, sometimes sensationally so. The number of accidents in her fiction alone is an index of the bent of her imagination, from the overturned car of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to the runaway tractor that kills the displaced person, from the bull's goring of Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" to Thomas's shooting of his mother in "The Comforts of Home." But despite the gratuitousness inherent in melodramatic action, O'Connor's climaxes grow out of an incipient violence of language, imagery, and emotion which creates explosive pressures. In "A Circle in the Fire," for example, the increasing fierceness of the landscape, from the opening "black wall" of trees behind which "the sun was a livid glaring white" to that sun "swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods" (pp. 175, 184), parallels the developing antagonism between the farm dwellers and the invading city boys. Yet this hostility is itself rooted in the obsessive fears and negations of the farm owner, Mrs. Cope—she tears at weeds "as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (p. 175)—which in turn increasingly evokes the boys' latent destructiveness; and the atmosphere of impending violence is further heightened by dialogue given over to discussions of fires, hurricanes, European boxcars, iron lungs, guns, fighting, stealing, and poisoning. When the story bursts into the climactic fire, that outcome immediately seems right if not inescapable.

O'Connor's use of melodramatic action is central to her strategy to make available in fiction that realm of mystery beyond manners.

"If art imitates life," Bentley has noted, "it should be added that while naturalistic art imitates the surfaces, 'melodramatic' art imitates what is beneath the surface."¹⁰ Elsewhere he has elaborated on the capacity of melodrama to evoke fear, not the common-sense fear of the everyday world, but the fear that "perhaps none too rationally is called irrational. Savage superstitions, neurotic fantasies, and childhood imaginings spring to mind, and equally outside the bounds of common sense is the fear of God."¹¹ Peter Brooks has recently gone further in terms directly relevant to O'Connor. Tracing the rise of stage melodrama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the "desacralization" of the universe, the final breakup of a widely shared belief in Christianity, Brooks sees melodrama as an attempt to recover not the realm of the sacred, which is "no longer viable," but "the ethical imperatives that traditionally depended on it." In this effort, melodrama becomes "an emblem of the cosmic ethical drama, which by reflection illuminates life here below." Necessarily, the world of melodrama is sharply dualistic: "What we most retain from any consideration of melodramatic structures is the sense of fundamental bipolar contrast and clash. The world according to melodrama is built on an irreducible Manichaeism, the conflict of good and evil not subject to compromise. . . . The middle ground and middle condition are excluded." The melodramatic mode, Brooks argues, is by no means an outdated, Victorian excess, but "a central fact of the modern sensibility."¹²

If we recall O'Connor's own comments on the problem of the Christian writer in a time of no certain belief, an age which "doubts both fact and value," and of the "violent" fictional methods such a gap entails, Brooks's description of the plight of earlier figures like Balzac and James will sound in many ways quite familiar:

In the absence of a true Sacred . . . they continue to believe that what is most important in a man's life is his ethical drama and the ethical implications of his psychic drama. Yet here they are dealing in quantities and entities that have only an uncertain ontology and, especially an uncertain visibility: they are not necessarily seen in the same manner, if perceived at all, by an audience, since the social cohesion of an earlier society with a greater community of belief no longer obtains. In the manner of the melodramatist, such writers must locate, express, demonstrate,

prove, the very terms in which they are dealing. They must wrest them forth from behind the facades of life, show their meaning and their operation. Precisely to the extent that they feel themselves dealing in concepts and issues that have no certain status or justification, they have recourse to the demonstrative, heightened representations of melodrama.¹³

It is hardly necessary to add that the problem Brooks describes was anything but alleviated by the middle of the twentieth century, nor that, as *Mystery and Manners* shows, Flannery O'Connor had a remarkably clear grasp of it.

Yet of course her aims were not those of the earlier writers, and she took from melodrama only those elements she needed. For O'Connor's concern is not with the "ethical imperatives" of traditional melodrama but with just that theological dimension from which the ethical traditionally derived. Her assault, in short, is precisely on the sacred, which had seemed, in Brooks's words, "no longer viable" in literature. If, for instance, she borrows from melodrama the clash of violently opposed and irreconcilable characters, those characters are not presented as the embodiments of good and evil or innocence and villainy—comically conceived, her villains apt to look like inverted heroes (witness *The Misfit* or *Manley Pointer*), and in O'Connor's fiction no one is truly innocent. Melodrama opens in a world of bipolar contrast and clash and never leaves that world. O'Connor's stories, however, begin on the middle ground of manners. It is precisely the function of the action to open up the off-balance world of mystery, that dimension in which "the middle ground and middle condition are excluded," and to reveal it not as a "domain of moral imperatives," but as eschatological reality. Finally, her climaxes come closer to those of tragedy than of traditional melodrama. Innocence never having truly existed, it can hardly be restored triumphantly: the wrenching encounters with the numinous in O'Connor, as we have seen, bring no sense of reconciliation, but only pain, loss, and displacement.

What O'Connor takes from melodrama, therefore, is not its style or presentation of character or its focus on the moral realm but its "radically hyperbolic," "bigger-than-life" conception of *action* in order to "reach in grandiose reference to a noumenal realm" of irreconcilable dualities.¹⁴ She grasped early what Richard Chase called

melodrama's "capacity to evoke ultimates and absolutes, in order to dramatize theological . . . ideology,"¹⁵ and she praised Hawthorne, from whom she repeatedly claimed literary descent, for his "lean and dark" fiction, "characterized by a melodrama which somehow carried more weight than one would think such a frail vessel would support."¹⁶ In her own hands, the violent shattering of ordinary verisimilitude, of everyday events and logical connections, allows us to glimpse through the surfaces of actuality the workings of irrational and suprarational powers and invests them again with the terror and awe which are their due.

If O'Connor unashamedly draws on the disjunctions of melodramatic action to propel her figures toward the "extreme situation," that movement characteristically manifests itself in violence. Most often, but by no means always, the violence in her stories springs from a human source. As her myopic protagonists find their single-minded approaches to existence increasingly challenged, they are driven to greater and greater intensity of defense. The grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" falls into hysterical parodies of her claims to gentility, jolly Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation," the woman with a "good disposition," finds herself shaking a furious fist at God, and old Mark Fortune of "A View of the Woods" kills the very granddaughter he has doted on. At their ends the tales rupture into a moment of violence which either bursts from within as the protagonist's last implacable defense of his threatened ego or rushes from without, as if to fill or annihilate the internal vacuum which has invited it. The degree of climactic violence is carefully calibrated to the denials that evoke it—yet one more sign of the reasonableness of O'Connor's control. But even "The Artificial Nigger," which may contain her most beatific climax, closes in language that is by no means free of pain and violence. Mr. Head acknowledges his own "agony," he "burned with shame," "he stood appalled" while "the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it" (pp. 269–70).

Mild as it is for O'Connor, that language is a reminder that not all the violence in her fiction springs from human origin. Nevertheless, she seems to have seen a central wildness, a radical "irrationalism," at the core of man which for both better and worse defines his inmost being. Violence carrying overtones of the demonic

consistently grows out of the subrational, a point most ironically demonstrated by those intellectuals whose devotion to principles of reason involves them in fatal acts. When Thomas shoots his mother, for instance, or when Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First" recognizes his own guilty part in his son's hanging, the supreme irony is not that reason has produced these terrible climaxes, but that both men in their rigid intellectualism have opened themselves to precisely the irrational sources their minds so contemptuously dismiss. Thomas insists on logic with his mother, but, as we have seen, what drives him toward the shooting is the disturbance deep within his psyche increasingly brought into play by the story's action; and Sheppard's determination to "save" the delinquent Rufus Johnson masks in rationalistic language a devouring egotism that helps send his own son to his death. In stories such as these the veneer of intellectualism is revealed as a flimsy covering for an essential and unrecognized selfishness which, when pressed, erupts violently through the thin rational surface. In their dangerous divorce of mind from deeper feelings and their denial of the explosive force of the unconscious, O'Connor's intellectuals come very close to enacting a modern version of the duality Hawthorne called head and heart. Typically, however, there are no reconciliations in her work: within the characters, at least, the dissociation of sensibility is complete.

Yet if for O'Connor the intellect is at best a useless defense against inherent human depravity, it is also a stumbling block to genuine vision, and while the outbreak of violence may reveal the demonic, it may also suggest the presence of the divine. The most obvious examples here are to be found in the novels, but we have already observed the irrationality of O. E. Parker, who moves on a level beneath the conscious as he is driven to the suffering of his tattoo of Christ and the violence it provokes. Under the pressures of the prophetic mission, the Tarwaters of *The Violent Bear It Away* lose their reason altogether, yet madness is here, as with the fanatical Mrs. Greenleaf in the story of that name, O'Connor's characteristically extreme and literal metaphor for the essential nonrationalism of belief. However, the violence which not only matches but surpasses man's is that of divine revelation itself, which descends in a whirlwind on the hapless characters below. If the deepest vitality of man has its roots in the irrational, O'Connor's God is a being supra-

rational, and the encounter of the human with the divine takes place beyond the categories of the intellect, in a timeless recognition where the mind's discursiveness gives way to paradoxical vision. The God of Wrath and the God of Love seem to be one: mercy and judgment, like the horns of the Greenleaf bull, come together in an awesomeness suggested in Asbury Fox's discovery that the Holy Ghost is a "purifying terror." O'Connor might well have agreed with Pascal that the apparent violence of God is a function of the evil in man: "We suffer only in proportion as the vice which is natural to us resists supernatural grace. . . . But it would be very unfair to impute this violence to God, who is drawing us on, instead of to the world, which is holding us back."¹⁷ Yet "vice" is "natural to us," and no rationalization can dispel the dramatized experience of the stories, the immense disproportion of the human and the divine that causes them to meet with a terrifying shock. The fearful encounters with the ultimate Other produce in a stroke for the characters what the mocking laughter has all along suggested to the reader—the violent shattering of all the claims of the self. Out of these wrenching displacements emerge, again and again, the archetypal features of the Old Adam.

O'Connor thus learned early how to control the melodramatic tendencies of her imagination, how to turn her fascination with violence, mutilation, and sudden death into strategies that create meaning. The violence that erupts from man and that which descends from God are both terrifying and mysterious, finally beyond rationalization, and the stories that end in apparent salvation are hardly more comfortable than those that end in murder. As one moves toward the eschatological poles, the poles move toward each other. "Be saved in the Lord's fire or perish in your own!" (p. 135) cries the child evangelist in *The Violent Bear It Away*. The choice is real in O'Connor's work, but it's fire either way.

The form of tension we have been exploring—between comic perception and melodramatic plotting, ironic voice and violent action, the release of laughter and the constraint of fear—seems to return us inescapably to that center of the incongruous, the grotesque. It is little wonder that O'Connor happily accepted that term as descriptive of her fiction, for the grotesque is precisely that mode that achieves its effect not by reconciling conflicting forms and responses, but by

holding them in insoluble suspension: its very nature is to be not simply comic or frightening, but both simultaneously, at once ludicrous and terrifying. In discovering early in her career that the grotesque was her true *métier*, O'Connor committed herself to an aesthetics of incongruity, to the exploration and exploitation of jarring disharmonies which by definition were not finally to be reconciled. Yet if this remains the mode of her fiction, she found a way, at the end of her career, to bring together on the level of character those very qualities that she had dramatized as at war throughout her fiction.

In her last published work, "Judgement Day," O'Connor presents a protagonist unique in her stories, one in whom control and surrender, will and imagination, are reconciled and made one. It begins this way: "Tanner was conserving all his strength for the trip home. He *meant* to walk as far as he could get and *trust* to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way" (p. 531; italics added). Tanner is an old man near death, and he knows it, and his single-minded desire to get home is informed by a perspective that has already moved beyond time and beyond the great dichotomy of existence, the underlying source of all human conflict. "Dead or alive," the old man thinks, "he would be home. Dead or alive. It was the being there that mattered; the dead or alive did not" (p. 532). The local and the eternal for him are one. In his imagination he arises from his coffin at his hometown railroad station to announce the end of time and the arrival of "Judgement Day." Being an O'Connor work, the story is not without its comedy and violence, its ironies and reversals, but if these necessarily qualify the old man's vision, they do not finally undercut it. In Tanner, O'Connor at the end of her own life reconciled those very impulses that form the basis of conflict throughout her earlier work. Not surprisingly, he is the most sympathetically handled adult protagonist in all her stories.

The calm assurance of this late work, the compassionate view of its central figure and the harmonizing in him what are elsewhere presented as battling conscious and unconscious forces may suggest that, had she lived, O'Connor's fiction would have moved into a mellower phase—a view that might be supported by pointing to "Parker's Back," to the surviving fragments of *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*, and to the complex emotional tonality in late versions of

such recurrent figures as the mother ("The Comforts of Home," "Everything That Rises Must Converge") and the intellectual ("Revelation"). But as things stand, "Judgement Day" must be seen as a finale rather than a departure, and as such it is hardly representative of the fiction O'Connor did achieve. Much more typical are those stories in which the clash opens into a wider and wider breach, in which resolution but not reconciliation is achieved (and that only at terrible cost), in which antithetical figures glare at one another across an ever-increasing gap, as if those dichotomies were the fictional embodiments of Flannery O'Connor's own irreconcilable dualities—between parent and child, conscious and unconscious, the reasonable and the unreasonable—which, if she could not heal, she could in story after story at least make work for her under the pressure of her art. In this respect, far more instructive than "Judgement Day" is a story that lies at the other end of her mature canon, one published soon after *Wise Blood*: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Here, perhaps more starkly than ever again, O'Connor revealed and exploited, on all levels, the tensions that are most characteristic of her fiction.

II

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" continues to be O'Connor's best-known work, the story most often chosen to represent her in anthologies now as during her lifetime. Yet, fine as it is, it is not self-evidently her best story: something more than quality must account for its repeated selection by textbook editors. One reason for its popularity may well be precisely that "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" writes large the representative O'Connor themes and methods—comedy, violence, theological concern—and thus makes them quickly and unmistakably available. But another, surely, is the primordial appeal of the story, for "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" captures a very old truth, that in the midst of life we are in death, in its most compelling modern form. The characteristic contemporary nightmare of the sudden onslaught of violent death, a death that chooses its victims without warning, impersonally, apparently at random, without either motivation or remorse, the victims helpless either to escape or to defend themselves—this scenario for some of our deepest,

most instinctual fears is the very basis of the story and the source of its immediate hold on our imaginations.

Interestingly enough, O'Connor's own public remarks on the story dismiss this level almost entirely. Stressing its spiritual implications, she emphasizes the grandmother's final action while brushing aside everything that leads up to it, saying, "If I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story. What was left would not be worth your attention." Her advice to readers of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is, "You should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (*Mystery and Manners*, pp. 112, 113).

This is all very high-minded, but it would seem a little difficult for the unprejudiced reader of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to ignore the dead bodies; and while one may agree with O'Connor that the story is "something more than an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 114), it surely is, most immediately, just that "account." Any full discussion of the story must deal with both the grandmother's soul and the dead bodies, and indeed with the tension between the two levels implied here, for that tension is at the very heart of the story.

It is The Misfit who, in stating his own dilemma, articulates the story's central metaphor in the most frequently quoted passage from O'Connor's fiction:

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.¹⁸

In every sense, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" dramatizes a world radically off balance. Precisely at the center of the story a pleasure trip to Florida suddenly becomes an extended encounter with death when the family's car flips over, thereby slicing the action of the story neatly in half. O'Connor makes no attempt to mask the melo-

drama of this turning point; indeed, she insists on it by having the children shriek not once but three times ("in a frenzy of delight"), "We've had an ACCIDENT!" (p. 125). It is left to the reader to try to reconcile the two halves of the story, to make them balance around this pivotal act.

And on the most obvious level, that of action, the two sections remain resolutely off balance.¹⁹ The first half of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is apparently as random and purposeless as the lives of the family it focuses on: they are headed for Florida, but, as episode succeeds episode, it is far less clear where the story is headed. The characters talk on diverse topics, quibble, make observations on the scenery, the children play a game, the grandmother tells a story, they stop for lunch, June Star tap dances, and so on. As a mimetic technique, the impression of fragmentation in the opening half of the story is O'Connor's way of establishing the discordance and emptiness of their superficial lives. Beneath the surface, however, this section has a greater coherence than first appears. The silent juxtaposition of apparently unrelated episodes both further reveals their, and especially the grandmother's, values and binds this part of the story more firmly together on a level beyond action. Consider the following examples of one episode giving way to another so that the second forms an ironic comment on the first:

"In my time," said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. *Oh look at the cute little pick-aninny!*" she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack.

He [Red Sammy] and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. The children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree. *He was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy.* [pp. 119, 122; italics added]

Nevertheless, the initial impression of the episodic and the directionless is functional in the story. When the grandmother notes the

mileage on the car—she “wrote this down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back” (p. 118)—she reveals the family’s trip as mere empty movement through space. Only with the accident that ends the outer journey does the action take on coherence and direction. Now the true, inner journey begins, and its destination is not Florida but death. Exterior motion in the second half of the story is minimal; aside from the eloquently understated trips into the woods, all physical traveling is over. The characters are now so motionless that small gestures acquire a disproportionate expressiveness, and the focus shifts from actions to words, from the episodic movement toward Florida to the gradually unfolding dialogue between the grandmother and *The Misfit*.

That dialogue has a continuity and cumulative force that is precisely what the action of the first half of the story lacked. Through it O’Connor achieves the mutual unmasking of these central figures, a process necessarily different for each, but nonetheless parallel and wrought out of their mutual interaction. If the action of the first half of the story is that of random exterior movement, that of the second is a progressive motion toward the deepest interiors of these two characters. Both figures are subjected to the distinctive O’Connor pressure, that intensity of situation that strips away the accretions of the false self.

This gradual revelation is most evident in *The Misfit*; indeed, if we fail to recognize the progression in his unburdening, he will seem simply inconsistent. At first, for all the menace in his appearance, *The Misfit* is remarkably well-mannered toward his intended victims. He blushes at Bailey’s “shocking” remark to the old woman, consoles her, apologizes for his half-dressed condition “before you ladies” and couches his murderous orders in a deferential gentility: “Would you mind stepping back in them woods . . .” But the grandmother’s desperate flattery gradually moves him beyond mere politeness. At first her accolade, “I know you’re a good man,” produces only the formulaic, “I pre-chate that, lady,” but a few moments later the same remark elicits a more carefully considered response: “Nome, I ain’t a good man” (p. 128). With this, *The Misfit* shifts to another level, gradually uncovering the dimensions of his quest to “know why it is,” a quest that has led him to the tomblike penitenti-

ary and a sense of the baffling injustice of life. But when the grandmother self-servingly introduces religion into the dialogue, she forces another turn of the screw, although again the shift is not apparent at once:

"If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."

"That's right," The Misfit said.

"Then why don't you pray?" she asked. . . .

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself." [p. 130]

The offhand acknowledgment here of the efficacy of Jesus and the claim to self-sufficiency without Him gradually gives way to the famous passage already quoted where The Misfit confesses his doubt of Jesus and poses his stark alternatives. There The Misfit shows himself as literally a rational animal, reasoning with a frighteningly icy logic to arrive at a snarl like that of the family cat as he speaks his doctrine of Jesus or meanness. But there is a still deeper self beyond that. Pretensions to "doing all right by myself" drop away, and what appears is the face of the anguished and angry child: "'It ain't right I wasn't there [when Jesus claimed to have raised the dead]. . . . Listen lady,' he said in a high voice, 'if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now'" (p. 132). The center has at last been reached, and the painful uncertainty there is only confirmed by his (and the story's) final line: "It's no real pleasure in life."

The revelation of The Misfit is a gradual one, the piercing through of layer after layer until we arrive at the core of his torment.²⁰ The unmasking of the grandmother follows a different curve, the rising intensity of her habitual responses, which, reaching the point of hysteria, suddenly burst like a bubble; and out of the wreckage emerges a more deeply authentic self. Her situation, at least, is symbolized by the relative physical postures of the two antagonists. Whereas The Misfit "squats" soon after his entrance into the story and does not budge from that position until he leaps back to shoot the old woman, the grandmother stands "looking down on him" through almost all of their dialogue. She begins with her genteel flattery—"I know you're a good man . . . I know you must come from nice people!" (the line that had recently worked so well with Red Sammy)—proceeds through advice for gaining middle-class security ("Think

how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life"), and, all else failing, grasps frantically at her religiosity. Nothing silences the gunshots from the woods, and the grandmother's final attempt to stave off the inevitable is a hysterically garbled parody of all her arguments: "'Jesus!' the old lady cried. 'You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!'" (pp. 132–33).

There is nowhere further to go in that direction, and amongst the shattered confusion of her customary values, she collapses from her position above The Misfit, literally sinking down to his level of anguish and uncertainty. She cannot answer his arguments, but, stripped of her middle-class pretensions and self-serving assurances, she can, and does, respond as a "grand-mother" (and she is given no other name)²¹ to his suffering. Rather than attempting to manipulate those around her to her own ends, for the first time she "reach[es]" out to the need of this surrogate child. The Misfit, of course, shoots her at once. The mutual revelations thus come together: as he discloses his deepest torment, she responds with her deepest self. It is the convergence that the entire latter half of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" has been moving relentlessly toward.

If the action of the two parts of the story is remarkably different both in kind and direction, O'Connor's control of narrative voice and tone works toward creating a sustained aesthetic whole. The dominant tone of the first half of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" must certainly be called comic, but it is O'Connor at her most ironically astringent and sharply satirical, and the voice that, for example, presents the children's mother—her face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage and . . . tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears" (p. 117)—is ruthlessly detached from her characters. The very chilliness of the comic distance here might itself be felt as a bit unnerving. Moreover, there is a darkly menacing undertone that runs throughout the first part of the story in the form of recurrent references to violence and death: the various allusions to the exploits of The Misfit which, more than foreshadowing his later appearance, suggest the inability of the characters genuinely to imagine what he represents; the grandmother's complacent fantasizing of her own violent death in a car accident or of

her cat asphyxiating himself; the graveyard that is the occasion for an arch joke; the violence of those dreadful children toward each other and their father; the verbal aggressiveness of Red Sammy's wife; even the name of the town Toombsboro.²²

This sinister undertone moves closer to the surface when the family turns off the main road—"The dirt road was hilly and there were sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments" (p. 124)—and deepens still further when the hidden cat springs "with a snarl" to precipitate the accident. With the threateningly slow appearance of The Misfit and his accomplices in the "hearse-like automobile," it spreads into the central action of the story, which it will dominate until the end.

As the menacing undercurrent of the first part of the story rises to dominate the second, the prevailing comedy of the first half sinks and darkens still further, but it does not disappear. The elaborate politeness of The Misfit has already been mentioned; in the midst of the ruthless death dealing, it repeatedly strikes a bizarrely incongruous note. Consider the exchange about The Misfit's improper attire which comes just after Bailey and his son have been escorted into the woods:

"I'm sorry I don't have a shirt on before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. "We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped and we're just making do until we can get better. We borrowed these from some folks we met," he explained.

"That's perfectly all right," the grandmother said. "Maybe Bailey has an extra shirt in his suitcase."

"I'll look and see terrectly," The Misfit said. [p. 129]

It is all very well bred, but since the story has begun with the grandmother admonishing her son to "read here what it says [The Misfit] did to these people," the context and the euphemistic *borrowed* makes the entire exchange horrifyingly ludicrous—black comedy indeed. And here as elsewhere the grandmother becomes not less but more absurd, for her sentimental gentilities were never so preposterously at odds with the actual situation.

The extension of comic perception throughout the sinister second part of the story is a reminder that the coolly observant narrator, the

detached voice of the first part, is still present, noting the terrors of this family, and especially of the grandmother, from the same emotional distance that she reported their follies. When the grandmother first recognizes The Misfit, this passage occurs: "'You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?' the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it" (p. 127). The old lady has just learned that she faces almost certain death and she is understandably frightened, but the precise notation of action and the single word *slap* preserve the narrative distance: no sympathy is added to her self-pity here. When the last of five pistol shots sounds from the woods, "the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, 'Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!'" (p. 132). Those pistol reports signify the end of her entire family, but the animal simile qualifies and contains the pathos inherent in the situation. The controlled detachment of the narrative voice perhaps makes the horror of the second half of the story bearable, but such unflappable poise is more than a little frightening in itself. In any case, the sustained consistency of that voice is a powerful means of binding the two sections of the story together.

O'Connor's use of tone and voice thus works toward reconciling the two halves of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" despite the rather disparate action contained in each. Tonally the story maintains a mixture of the comic and the sinister throughout, with different emphases as demanded by the differing kinds of action, and the narrative voice preserves its ironic detachment with implacable consistency. More, however, remains to be said about precisely that incident which seems to snap the action of the story in two, the car accident, for of course that event is by no means as simple as I have suggested above.

If O'Connor at first glance appears to insist on the melodrama of the car's overturn by having the children underline it with their delighted screams, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" does not allow the attentive reader to miss the sense in which that accident is not accidental at all, but the responsibility of the grandmother. We recall the story's opening in which, wanting to travel to Tennessee rather than Florida, she attempts to change the family's mind by a hypocritical use of the threat of The Misfit, and we particularly savor the irony of

"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did" (p. 117). For this of course is exactly what she does. The detour that leads to that accident on a deserted dirt road is a response to her nostalgia for an antebellum mansion where, she fibs enticingly, legend holds that treasure is hidden—a house, she belatedly remembers (and again we note the irony), which is not in Georgia at all, but in Tennessee. The immediate cause of the accident is the cat she has smuggled along against her son's wishes "because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself" (p. 118). In all of this we recognize how the grandmother's rampant selfishness, her sentimentality, gentility, nostalgia, materialism, and uncertain hold on reality have contributed to the accident on this sinister back road. The ironies, up to this point in the story, are evident and a bit pat.

But through *The Misfit* the second half of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" raises questions at another level altogether and invites a re-evaluation of the import of the car accident. The first imbalance in the world that he had detected was not that introduced by Jesus. This prior one he articulates in explaining his act of self-naming:

"I call myself The Misfit," he said, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit with what all I gone through in punishment."

There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report. "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?" [p. 131]

Again, we note the irony of the juxtaposition (although, given the premises *The Misfit* gradually reveals, the logic of his "mean" actions is frighteningly consistent), but the problem of justice he raises here bears directly on the upshot of the car accident. By any human standards, does it seem "right" that not only the grandmother herself but her entire family down to the baby should be murderously "punished" for "what all [she] done wrong"? Even if we grant that the old lady bears responsibility for the accident, is she also responsible for the fact that this dirt road, of all the dirt roads in Georgia, is the one that harbors *The Misfit* and his gang? In light of the con-

sequences of the car wreck, that accident is, in a deeper sense, fully as melodramatic as it first appeared.

The form of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" thus supports The Misfit's arguments, for to him life *is* melodrama: if he says his punishment exceeds his crimes, the two parts of the story show both this family's sins and the excessiveness of their punishment. Thus far, however, The Misfit has been considering the problem of suffering horizontally, as it were, finding it unresolvable by human reason, unamenable to the desire to make this world fit into coherent patterns. It is only now that he introduces the other possibility, the vertical dimension of another life through which such dilemmas might be resolved. Unlike the problem of justice horizontally considered, this question requires not the mental weighing of experiences, but the fullest commitment of the self—thus the off-balance demand which it forces. The choice is finally a stark either/or, which to The Misfit takes the form of Jesus or meanness.

O'Connor's own remarks on this story (and everywhere else) leave of course no doubt where she felt herself committed. Emphasizing the grandmother's recognition of The Misfit and calling it her "moment of grace," she insisted that the assumptions underlying her writing were those of "the central Christian mysteries" (*Mystery and Manners*, pp. 112, 109). And it would seem difficult, watching the grandmother reach out to The Misfit as "one of [her] own babies" or responding to the overtones of her final posture ("her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky"), seriously to dispute this element in the story. Nevertheless, however childlike or smiling, that final posture does belong to a corpse, the object not only of the acknowledged meanness of The Misfit, but of a more devious cruelty in the story.

O'Connor was once approached directly on the question of this tension in her work: "If the Redemption is a framework for your writing, how do you account for the brutality in your stories?" In reply, she cited "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": "There really isn't much brutality. . . . People keep referring to the brutality in the stories, but even 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is, in a way, a comic stylized thing. It is not naturalistic writing and so you can't really call it brutal."²³ Apparently taking *brutality* here to mean simply vi-

olent action, O'Connor's response, perhaps deliberately, evades the question, implying that one can speak of cruelty only in connection with identifiably naturalistic writing (recall her admonition to ignore "the dead bodies" in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"!). Most interesting of all is her failure (or refusal) to recognize that the comic, far from automatically ruling out cruelty, may itself be simply a more subtle source of it.

As O'Connor herself seems here to acknowledge, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" may well be her most violent story, but it is also one in which the comic tone is at its most astringent, the ironic voice at its most drily mocking. The first half of the story is given over to the narrator's relentless revelation of the selfishness, the vacuousness, the nastiness of this family, and especially of its key member, the grandmother. In the exposure of her smugness, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, of her egoistic manipulation of others, of the role of all these qualities in the causing of the car accident, the presentation walks a fine tonal line between laughter and outrage. The manner of her portrayal in the opening part of the story creates the expectation that the sequel will provide her with some comeuppance, that she will be made to offer satisfaction for such behavior. If, as I have argued above, the punishment that does come seems by all reasonable standards excessive, nevertheless the sense of satisfaction is projected into the landscape of the story, for as the murderous gunshots begin to echo from the woods, the very sound of the wind in the trees becomes "like a long satisfied insuck of breath" (p. 129). It might indeed be argued that the violence of the second part of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the transposition of the biting tone of the first onto the level of action. In any case, the climax of the story manages to have it both ways at once. The grandmother does indeed have what O'Connor calls her "special kind of triumph," her "moment of grace," but she is made to pay immediately not only for that moment but for all her conduct with her life. At this point the two poles of The Misfit's conundrum, Jesus and meanness, converge, and the ambivalence is captured in the final image of the grandmother as a beatific corpse in a puddle of blood.

The full resonance of The Misfit's shooting depends upon our recollection of the grandmother's position in her family, for "A Good

Man" is among the first of O'Connor's mature stories to revolve around the conflict between generations. The old lady's recognition of this criminal as "one of my own children" is made literally plausible by his donning of the same shirt her son Bailey had been wearing earlier, but in the imaginative economy of the story that shirt signifies the symbolic presence of the now-dead son through the rest of The Misfit's confrontation with the grandmother. Bailey's most salient trait, his edgy sullenness, is clearly the mask of suppressed anger toward his garrulous and manipulative mother, an anger that bursts through only once, in his "shocking" rebuke to her when she identifies The Misfit. That psychopath has of course his own reasons for shooting her, but when he does so he also symbolically acts out the rage that Bailey has smothered, the repayment of all her crafty domineering and self-serving hypocrisy, for the smuggled cat, the dirt road, the car accident, the blurting out of the name that ensures the family's doom. It is the first, but not the last, occasion in O'Connor's fiction when the confrontation between a mother and an angry child results in violent death.²⁴

The encounter between the grandmother and The Misfit that occupies the second half of "A Good Man" is thus in one sense an extension and deepening of the more sporadic and superficial battle between the old lady and her family in the first half. Punctuated by the gunshots from the woods, their confrontation is also the most obvious source of the tensions within the story, and O'Connor uses the juxtaposition of this strangely mismatched pair to introduce those thematic misfits of crime and punishment, Jesus and meanness, and further echoes these dualities in a structure which divides the action midway with the car accident. Aesthetically, as we have seen, the story is sustained by the persistence of the coolly detached narrative voice throughout and by the careful control of comic and sinister tonal elements in both parts of the work. Nevertheless, O'Connor's use of melodramatic action is nowhere clearer than in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the tensions between violent material and comic treatment nowhere more blatantly exploited. At the climax of the story, we receive rapid successive glimpses of both the grandmother's soul and her dead body, an intimation of Jesus and an expression of meanness, the antithetical terms momentarily

brought together in the image of her smiling corpse. It is a paradoxical joining, but without these poles "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" would not exist at all.

III

In her later essays and lectures, O'Connor repeatedly used the analogy of biblical prophecy to characterize the nature of fiction. For herself as a Catholic, she left little doubt what the prophetic gift involved, as she saw it: "It is one of the functions of the Church to transmit the prophetic vision that is good for all time, and when the novelist has this as a part of his own vision, he has a powerful extension of sight" (*Mystery and Manners*, pp. 179–80). Later we must consider more fully what this analogy seems to imply for her fiction as a whole; at present we may confine ourselves to the observation that her comments on the prophetic vision of the writer coincide with her creation of some rather curious prophets as characters. Furthermore, certain aspects of the prophet that seem to have held great significance for her suggest from a slightly different direction the larger tensions of her work that this chapter has been exploring.

Early in 1960 she wrote to a correspondent, "I have been reading what St. Thomas has to say in the *De veritate* on prophecy. He says prophecy depends on the imaginative and not the moral faculty. It's a matter of seeing."²⁵ Indeed, Aquinas says considerably more than this: he insists that the prophetic gift "can be found indifferently in good men and in evil men." "Man's goodness," Aquinas maintains, "consists in charity," and "prophecy does not have any necessary connection with charity." Since prophecy is a matter of the understanding and charity of the affections, "some [sinners] who lack charity have minds more fit [than those of good men] to perceive spiritual things, since they are free from carnal affections and worldly cares and are gifted with a natural clarity of understanding."²⁶ Commenting on Aquinas's teachings on the nonrational nature of the prophetic gift, Victor White underlines the rather startling implications of these views: "More shocking still perhaps to sweet reasonableness is St. Thomas's emphasis that prophetic revelation is as such independent of good morals—let alone of personal

sanctity. For prophecy is required, he says tersely, not 'goodness of morals' (*bonitas morum*) but 'goodness of imagination' (*bonitas imaginationis*). . . . Aristotle, St. Thomas reminds us, had already remarked on the fact that it is not the best people who have the best dreams."²⁷

Certainly the O'Connor characters from Hazel Motes onward who have the best dreams are hardly the best people, but Aquinas's distinction between the imaginative and the moral bears most illuminatingly on the prophetic figures who populate the later fiction. The sullen and murderous Tarwater of *The Violent Bear It Away*, the furious Mary Grace of "Revelation," that apparent epitome of blasphemous carnality, O. E. Parker—none of these clearly prophetic characters is presented as morally good, some are indeed viciously destructive, all are grotesque. Perhaps the most revealing of such figures in the short fiction is the leering, malevolent Rufus Johnson of "The Lame Shall Enter First."

In the presentation of Rufus Johnson, O'Connor has typically seized on the independence of the imaginative and the moral, pushed them to jarring extremes, and, with no apologies, left them unreconciled. Rufus enters the story bearing the Word in its least palatable form, in the rigid fundamentalist doctrines he has learned from his fanatical grandfather, and he never abandons them despite the short course in liberal humanism his benefactor Sheppard attempts to supply. Indeed, quite the contrary, for Sheppard's opposition not only confirms Johnson in his beliefs, but inspires him to use them in a malicious plan of revenge on the social worker. By the end of the story there is little doubt that Johnson has flowered into a full-fledged prophetic figure. At the dinner table, Sheppard challenges him one final time on his belief in the Bible:

"I believe it!" Johnson said breathlessly. "I'll show you I believe it!" He opened the book in his lap and tore out a page of it and thrust it into his mouth. He fixed his eyes on Sheppard. His jaws worked furiously and the paper crackled as he chewed it. . . .

Johnson swallowed what was in his mouth. His eyes widened as if a vision of splendor were opening up before him. "I've eaten it!" he breathed. "I've eaten it like Ezekiel and it was honey to my mouth!" . . .

"I've eaten it!" the boy cried. Wonder transformed his face

The boy rose and picked up the Bible and started toward the hall with it. At the door he paused, a small black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse. "The devil has you in his power," he said in a jubilant voice and disappeared. [pp. 477-78]

The allusion here to Ezekiel (and the only slightly less overt evocation of Saint John, the boy's namesake), the emphasis on the imaginative nature of the experience (the "vision of splendor," the transforming "wonder"), and the final word of prophetic judgment confirm the nature of Johnson's role in the story.

At the same time, the paradoxical "dark apocalypse" captures the duality of the boy, for Johnson is presented throughout "The Lame Shall Enter First" as, in a moral sense, deeply evil. If in this scene he recognizes the grip of "the devil" on Sheppard, he has earlier passed the same judgment on himself. "Satan," Johnson confides at his first appearance in the story, "He has me in his power" (p. 450). It is a conviction from which he never deviates, and O'Connor's portrayal of him seems to bear out the boy's view. Gratuitously malicious, he is a plunderer of garbage cans and homes, his look is described as "predatory," he is likened to a rat and a crow. Most disturbingly, his vengeful desire to "show" Sheppard takes the form of luring the social worker's young son Norton to his death. Here the imaginative and the moral, the prophetic and the demonic, conspire to achieve Johnson's aim, for while there is no doubt of the maleficence in his motives, his means are those of the evangelical proselytizer. He entices Norton to self-destruction by assuring him of a heaven where, the child believes, he will again find his lost mother. Thus the death of Norton is deeply ambivalent, for in that hanging culminates both Johnson's personal, malevolent revenge on Sheppard and the process of conversion that is a prophetic punishment for the social worker's atheistic pride.

Rufus Johnson is one of the more ostentatiously grotesque characters in the O'Connor corpus, the bizarre mixture of hard-shell Protestantism and seemingly gratuitous malice in his behavior matched on the physical level by the "monstrous" clubfoot he sports. Although Sheppard, with his social scientist's assumptions, tries to make a simple equation between the boy's deformity and his delinquency—"His mischief was compensation for the foot"—he has a

deeper and less comfortable insight as well: "He felt a momentary dull despair as if he were faced with some elementary warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now" (p. 450). In the biblical context evoked in the story, the "warping of nature" would seem to cut both ways. The hideous foot, which, as we have seen earlier, Johnson treats "like a sacred object," is the visible sign of the boy's prophetic role, warped to divine purposes, but it is also the palpable expression of his share in the Fall, the recognition of which lies at the bottom of Johnson's Satanism. Contrary to Sheppard's facile analysis, it is not compensation for but in a sense affirmation of the foot that produces the boy's apparently motiveless mischief. His intense awareness of his individual uniqueness, however deformed, is the perverse source of his pride, and the demonic impulse reveals itself as an egoistic cultivation of one's special traits:²⁸ "I lie and steal because I'm good at it," he sneers at the defeated social worker (p. 480).

Johnson's lying at least (we never observe him at his stealing) is a creative act, the ability to play out different roles—the hurt innocent, the grateful penitent—before the all too credulous audience that Sheppard provides, roles made believable largely through the boy's skillful manipulation of voice and tone. The ability is not, perhaps, very different from the fiction writer's power of creating character. "Why do you write?" O'Connor was once asked. She answered, "Because I'm good at it," and although she elaborated so as to seem to purge that response of all hint of personal pride—the ability to write is a "gift," "gratuitous and wholly undeserved," "a mystery in itself," and so on (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 81)—we can hardly fail to hear the direct echo of Rufus Johnson's affirmation of his special qualities: "I lie and steal because I'm good at it." O'Connor spoke of her writing in the religious language of vocation, but Johnson has no doubt that his own propensities are the work of the devil.

In speaking of freakish characters, O'Connor once confessed that the writer's "prophet-freak is an image of himself" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 118). If it would be naïve to take such characters as literal self-portraits, it would perhaps be equally naïve to refuse to see that they are creative self-projections. In the separation between the imaginative and the moral that she so eagerly seized upon in Aquil-

nas, and so explicitly dramatized in Rufus Johnson, O'Connor found articulated a justification for her own kind of fiction. If prophetic vision, the general substance of which was transmitted to her through the church, was essential to O'Connor, she was nonetheless sharply aware that to try to write out of religious conviction alone was inevitable disaster. The result, she said firmly, could only be "pious trash." When she insisted that "we write with the whole personality," she knew that some of the deepest springs in her own personality did not flow from Aquinas's order of charity. Preferring *Catholic* to *Christian* as a term for her own writing, she noted wryly, "The word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anyone with a golden heart. And a golden heart would be a positive interference in the writing of fiction" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 192). In the ordinary sense of the word, she was lacking in compassion and knew it. Sometimes she ironically deprecated the universal insistence on this quality in writers; at others she responded by redefining the term. One such redefinition—compassion as "being in travail with and for creation"—is accompanied by this revealing comment: "This is a sense [of the word] which implies a horror of sin as it is found, first in oneself, and from oneself communicated to the world."²⁹

If O'Connor could not follow Mauriac's dictum to "purify the source,"³⁰ she found in the Thomistic separation of prophetic vision and goodness that for the sake of her writing, at any rate, such personal sanctity was unnecessary. "St. Thomas Aquinas," she noted, "says that art does not require rectitude of the appetite, that it is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 171).³¹ Finding within herself impulses she could hardly view as good, rather than suppressing them for the sake of her piety, she exploited them for the sake of her art. The "territory" of her fiction, she said once, "is held largely by the devil" (*Mystery and Manners*, p. 118), but what her work dramatizes again and again is the folly of looking for the devil anywhere but in the depths of the self. Evil is a potent force in her fiction—a felt presence, not merely an idea—precisely because she could find it within herself, and she turned that self-awareness to fictional advantage. As in Rufus Johnson, the tension between the moral and the imaginative, between

sensibility and belief, produces the jarring paradox of the lacerating faith, the destructive salvation that her work everywhere displays.

Earlier, borrowing from Joyce, I suggested the analogy of God for the enormous sense of detachment O'Connor creates in her narrative voice; now it seems more apt to adopt her own metaphor and call that voice "prophetic." To John Hawkes, on the other hand, it sounded like the voice of the devil, and for "The Lame Shall Enter First," at least, she was willing to admit that he was right (*The Habit of Being*, p. 464). Indeed, the figure of Rufus Johnson seems almost calculated to show these designations as not only compatible but sometimes almost indistinguishable: if analysis can begin to separate elements of the prophetic and the Satanic in his portrayal, he speaks with a single voice throughout "The Lame Shall Enter First." Similarly, when Hawkes points to O'Connor's "demolishing" syntax, to the satirical judgments implicit in her narrative voice as coming from her "devil," he might just as appropriately have attributed these qualities to her prophet, that traditionally radical figure speaking out of his knowledge of God's demands in judgment on the life around him, remarkably specific in his indictments of that life seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. Both devil and prophet stand outside ordinary human existence and look on the sins and follies of men in judgment, but whereas the devil presumably takes a mean pleasure in what he sees, the prophet finds only outrage.³² As it would be hard to say whether a malicious meanness or a deep prophetic revulsion plays the larger part in Johnson's revenge on Shepard, so it finally becomes impossible to separate the cruel comedy from the outrage in the voice of O'Connor's fiction. Devil and prophet conspire to contribute to the distinctive tension of her work: in her second novel they become not mere figures of speech but recognizable shapes with voices of their own.