

A REFLECTION OF GRACE: THE PLACE OF HUMOR IN THE THEOLOGY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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Carter Martin has written that the "most troublesome critical problem" for those who read the stories of Flannery O'Connor is the "justification of the laughter which her work most assuredly does arouse"(5). This dilemma involves, among other things, the question of where humor fits in the world of "mystery", in the eternal and Christian context where, O'Connor emphasizes, her stories inevitably occur. Such a question is not easy to answer. To say, for example, that such elements as the ironic and the grotesque have their place in this world because they contain serious as well as comic characteristics seems an unsatisfactory argument, for this implies that only the "serious" elements are important and that humor has its place only as a vehicle for these deeper truths. Such an argument also neglects the other types of humor in O'Connor's stories, consigning these comic elements solely to the world of "manners", and denying them a position of any significance in the moral landscape of O'Connor's fiction. Such attempts to sever her humor from the "mysterious" dilute the real importance of laughter in these stories. For, in O'Connor, humor has its place not only as an ornament to the narrative, nor as a mere adjunct to serious spiritual themes, but as a reflection and an exercising of a deeper mystery. In this regard, the comic element in O'Connor's stories becomes a clue from the author to the Christian context within which her stories take place, an expression of faith, hope, and compassion.

Before discussing the significance of her humor, it ought to be noted that critics have often neglected the comic elements in O'Connor's stories, a situation which has perhaps developed because O'Connor herself, in her lectures, essays and letters, tended to encourage such a reading by emphasizing the theological aspects of her fiction. Indeed, as Rebecca Butler has observed regarding this common critical disposition: "There is an assumption, more or less obviously at work... that overt references to religion, violence or death automatically shift the tone to the sombre or horrific end of the scale" (32). It is this sort of attitude that O'Connor complains about in several places, for instance in her first letter to the anonymous "A" when she refers to a review that calls "A Good Man is Hard to Find" both "brutal and sarcastic" (*Habit* 90), and in a letter to the Fitzgeralds in which she mentions Van Wyck Brook's comment that it is sad she must "look upon life as a horror story" (*Habit* 85). Rather than seeing life as cruel or hopeless, however, O'Connor, as Sally Fitzgerald remarks in her introduction to *The Habit of Being*, "never ceased to be amused" by the world and the people around her (xiii). This attitude carries over into O'Connor's fiction as well; as she wrote to Robie Macauley: "I read [my stories] over and laugh and laugh, then get embarrassed when I remember I was the one who wrote them" (*Habit* 80-1). O'Connor, then, despite the tendency by critics to neglect the humor in these stories, is herself convinced that they are funny, not by accident, not only in rare circumstances, but in story after story and without any apparent contradiction to her serious theological perspective on life.

O'Connor grounds much of her humor in her careful attention to physical detail, whether the description of a character's clothes, hair, gestures or words. This is an element in O'Connor that is hardly accidental, for, in her view, the attention to physical detail was important both as the foundation of a good story and as a testimony to the value of the visible world in the context of her theology. In her letters and essays, O'Connor consistently emphasizes such detail as a starting point for effective fiction. She writes, for instance, that the aim of the artist is "to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe", observing in the same letter that "the moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God" (*Habit* 128). This "naming" is a naming of the physical world, and, O'Connor suggests, a story begins to work at this point, for "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins — with the senses" (*Mystery* 42). Such an emphasis on the physical universe also reflects O'Connor's valuing of the visible world in a theological context, illustrated, for example, by her

insistence on the importance of the Incarnation of Christ (see *Habit* 92) and her repudiation of the Eucharist as symbol rather than physical reality. It is with reference to this second point, of course, that O'Connor once remarked: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it" (*Habit* 125). Clearly, for Flannery O'Connor the visible world of the senses was extremely important, both in the context of the Christian message of redemption and as the soil in which the best fiction is rooted, a fiction of physical detail which, for O'Connor, time and again produces laughter.

This humor of detail occurs in, among other forms, the humor of physical description, both in O'Connor's detailing of physical appearance and in the descriptions of the gestures and actions of her characters. Examples of this sort are numerous. In "Greenleaf", O'Connor gives the following comic description of Mrs. May as she peeps out at the stray bull from behind her blinds: "Green rubber curlers sprouted neatly over her forehead and her face beneath them was smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept" (*Stories* 311). And Bailey's wife in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a woman "whose face was as broad and as innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears" (*Stories* 117). As for instances of the comic in simple gestures or actions, O'Connor writes of Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" that he "backed [the nymphomaniac] out the door, holding [a] chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat" (*Stories* 384), and of Manley Pointer in "Good Country People", that he "began methodically kissing [Hulga's] face, making little noises like a fish" (*Stories* 287). Such brief yet comic details recur often in O'Connor's writing, providing some of the specifics of setting as well as elements of character and action, illustrating her attention to the world of the senses and providing at the same time a persistent note of laughter throughout the stories.

Another source of humor in O'Connor's fiction is the use of comic dialogue. She uses this technique in story after story, for example, in the exchanges between Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People", in the waiting-room conversation of "Revelation" and in the initial encounter between Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own". Another instance of humorous dialogue occurs early in "A Circle in the Fire", this between Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard as they dig in the flower beds by the house:

"Every day I say a prayer of thanksgiving", Mrs. Cope said. "Think of all we have. Lord", she said and sighed, "we have everything", and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back.

Mrs. Pritchard studied the woods. "All I got is four abscess teeth", she remarked.

"Well, be thankful you don't have five", Mrs. Cope snapped and threw back a clump of grass. "We might all be destroyed by a hurricane. I can always find something to be thankful for". (*Stories* 177)

In this episode, as in many of the instances of comic dialogue in O'Connor, the conversation is not necessarily humorous because the characters say funny things, but because the discussion exposes the characters' banality and foolishness. This occurs in the exchange of biased pleasantries, the swapping of cliches, and in the self-assured pronouncements of intellectuals like Asbury and Hulga. Furthermore, these moments are often comic since they involve the expression of extremely different perspectives, at times phrased in quite different language — the conversations between Mrs. May and Mrs. Greenleaf, for instance, in "Greenleaf", or between Asbury and Father Finn in "The Enduring Chill".

This use of comic dialogue, as well as the use of descriptions for comic effect, often is crucial in the development of O'Connor's characters, a particularly important source and often the focus of humor in her stories. Such an emphasis on character is suggested, among other places, in O'Connor's remark that "fiction [is] about people" (*Habit* 254), and it is out of this regard for individuals, and the careful chronicling of the habits and attitudes of these people that much of her humor arises. As for the characters themselves, it seems that those who are comic become so through a variety of means — through their reactions to other characters, through what they say and do, through the contrast between what they think of themselves and what they really are. Whatever it is that makes them funny aside, however, the list of these characters is long. There is Mrs. Hopewell, for example, in "Good Country People", who thinks and speaks in cliches, who hires the Freemans because she knows "that nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you get good country people you had better hang onto them" (*Stories* 273). In the same story, we encounter Hulga,

the Ph.D. with an artificial leg, a young woman "whose constant outrage [has] obliterated every expression on her face" (273), who, in what she considers her "highest creative act" (275), changes her name from Joy to Hulga.

While the humor in O'Connor's stories often finds its focus in the characters she creates, it is generally the situations these characters find themselves in that offer the broadest comic possibilities in O'Connor's writing. This is the comedy of predicament, generally made humorous when a character confronts an unexpected or difficult situation with a blend of ignorance and misplaced self-confidence. It is humor of this type that Louis Rubin refers to in his description of "The Artificial Nigger" as "the classic humorous situation of 'country-come-to-town'" (120). And it is a case of comic predicament when, on a walk through the woods, Mrs. May finds Mrs. Greenleaf sprawled in the dirt where she has buried her newspaper clippings. Thinking at first that the woman has been hurt in some way, Mrs. May then is horrified to discover that Mrs. Greenleaf is doing what she calls her "prayer healing".

Mrs. May stood, bent forward, her mouth open and her stick raised off the ground as if she were not sure what she wanted to strike with it.

"Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs. Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus stab me in the heart!" and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.

Mrs. May felt as furious and helpless as if she had been insulted by a child. "Jesus", she said, drawing herself back, "would be *ashamed* of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" and she had turned and walked off as fast as she could. (*Stories* 317)

This sort of humorous encounter between characters with strikingly dissimilar views occurs often in O'Connor's stories, for instance, in the exchanges between Parker and his future wife in "Parker's Back", between Thomas and the nymphomaniac houseguest in "The Comforts of Home" and during Manley Pointer's picnic with Hulga in "Good Country People". At times, the humor arises from differences in educational background or from distinctions of race or class; whatever the reasons, though, the humor of these predicaments arises ultimately from the characters' perceptions of their own

self-sufficiency or superiority and from the comic possibilities that such distortion inevitably brings.

Perhaps the humor of circumstance is at its finest in what might be called the humor of "overblown gesture", the deflation through circumstance, as Miles Orvell observes, of "certain would-be intellectuals" in O'Connor's stories (48-9). Among the instances of this sort of humor, there are the encounters between Asbury and the black farmhands Randall and Morgan in "The Enduring Chill", both their meeting at the barn when Asbury drinks the unpasteurized milk and their awkward "communion" in his room as he lies on his sickbed. Another story in which O'Connor uses this type of comic deflation is "Everything That Rises Must Converge". Here the character is Julian, and again the humor involves confrontation with Negroes. Julian remembers two episodes as he recalls his efforts at relating to "the better types [of blacks]"; one man had turned out to be an undertaker, and another had handed Julian two lottery tickets as he passed him on his way out of the bus. In the story itself, Julian again finds himself seated next to a black man, and seizes the opportunity to show his liberal attitude toward Negroes and, by doing so, to teach his mother a lesson about her own racist attitudes:

"Do you have a light?" he asked the Negro.

Without looking away from his paper, the man reached in his pocket and handed him a pack of matches.

"Thanks", Julian said. For a moment he held the matches foolishly. A NO SMOKING sign looked down upon him from over the door. This alone would not have deterred him; he had no cigarettes. He had quit smoking some months before because he could not afford it. "Sorry", he muttered and handed back the matches. The Negro lowered the paper and gave him an annoyed look. He took the matches and raised the paper again. (*Stories* 413)

Here is O'Connor's humor of predicament at its best, specifically in the comic deflation of the "overblown gesture"; in the case of Julian, as in that of Asbury, O'Connor manages to bring the foolishness of a character clearly into focus through a predicament of the character's own creation, a circumstance that serves to humorously undercut the individual's self-righteous and self-important gestures and to expose him for what he is.

Yet another characteristic of these stories which often has a humorous side is the element of the grotesque. Whether this occurs in the form of physical distortions or bizarre dramatic circumstances, the grotesque, as Claire Kahane observes, creates in the reader an "oscillation between the comic and the fearful response" (114-15). Or, to borrow O'Connor's description of the life of Simone Weil, it is a "blending of the Comic and Terrible, which two things may be opposite sides of the same coin" (*Habit* 105). And this is what separates the grotesque as a comic strategy from the techniques we have examined to this point, for there is inherent in the grotesque this element of horror or repugnance, the possibility of widely differing responses to a single image or circumstance. In O'Connor this might be seen in the menagerie of "freaks" that inhabit her stories — a tattooed man in "Parker's Back", an hermaphrodite in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost", a nymphomaniac in "The Comforts of Home". The word "grotesque" also describes Manley Pointer's theft of Hulga's artificial leg or Mrs. Greenleaf's "prayer healing". Indeed, vestiges of the grotesque appear throughout O'Connor's stories, in simple descriptions as well as in the oddity of characters and circumstances. Note, for instance, this description of Tarwater in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead: " "The old man unbuttoned his coat and allowed his stomach to ease forward and rest on his lap while he ate. His face worked wrathfully; the skin between the pockmarks grew pink and then purple and then white and the pockmarks appeared to jump from one spot to another" (*Stories* 301). There is in this description the possibility for more than one response; this is both repulsive and comic, the merging, again, of "the Comic and the Terrible". By using the grotesque, then, O'Connor takes advantage of a technique which fits the humorous quality of her stories while at the same time suggesting serious thematic possibilities, a distortion which, O'Connor says, is not the kind that is destructive, but "is the kind that reveals, or should reveal" (*Mystery* 162). The use of the grotesque is consistent with O'Connor's comic disposition, but is in line as well with the more serious themes in her stories, a "[leaning] away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected", the "kind of realism", as O'Connor wrote, "that I want to consider" (*Mystery* 40).

Another aspect of O'Connor's fiction that, like the grotesque, has both a serious side and comic possibilities is the element of irony. Indeed, in the use of the ironic as with the grotesque O'Connor often invites her audience to respond both with laughter and sober consideration to a single statement or event. In a sense, this is, in

O'Connor's terms, a chance to contemplate the "mystery" as we experience the "manners", an invitation to glimpse the world of possibilities, spiritual and otherwise, that is beneath the surface of day-to-day existence. And O'Connor's stories are loaded with irony. There is, in several of the stories, for instance, the irony of the "self-sufficient" child — Asbury in "The Enduring Chill", Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge", Hulga in "Good Country People" — who insists that his mother needs to be taught what life is all about, yet finds in the process of the narrative that it is he instead who has needed the lesson in reality. And there is the irony in Mr. Shiftlet, of all people, announcing to Mrs. Crater that though he isn't a "whole" man, he has "a moral intelligence" (*Stories* 149), or in Mrs. Turpin's exclamation, "thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you" (*Stories* 499) in the moment before the Wellesley coed Mary Grace attacks her in the waiting room of the doctor's office. So too, at the close of "Good Country People", there are the ironic remarks of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman regarding Manley Pointer. At this point in the narrative, the Bible salesman, fresh from his strange rendezvous with Hulga and with her artificial leg hidden in his bag, emerges from the woods near the two women and walks toward the road. Ignorant of the recent proceedings in the barn, the women stand in the pasture and watch Manley walk away. "He was so simple", Mrs. Hopewell remarks, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple". "Some can't be that simple", responds Mrs. Freeman, "I know I never could" (*Stories* 291). Here, as is often the case in O'Connor, the irony is at once strikingly comic and an indication of broader, more serious possibilities. It is a technique which, like the use of the grotesque, is a part of O'Connor's "realism of distances", a suggestion to the reader, here in the moment of laughter, that there is a world of "mystery" intimately involved in the world of "manners".

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The discussion to this point of the types of humor in O'Connor's stories has been meant to illustrate the variety of her humor, the grounding of that humor in the physical world, and, in the case of the grotesque and the ironic, to suggest strategies that contain both comic and serious elements at once. However helpful this may be, such a discussion, particularly in view of O'Connor's anagogical vision of existence, raises the question of how humor works in the specifically Christian context of O'Connor's fiction. To suggest that irony or the

grotesque, for instance, are suited to such a perspective since they include both serious and comic elements is inappropriate, for such an assertion implies on the one hand that what is important in the fiction is what might be termed "serious" content, and, in addition, contends that humor is justifiable only as it has a "serious" thematic edge to it. Furthermore, an argument of this type fails to appreciate other sorts of humor in O'Connor, limiting these humorous elements purely to the world of "manners". Attempts to confine the reach of O'Connor's humor in this manner ignore an important way in which laughter works in these stories. Indeed, in O'Connor's fiction humor is not intended simply as a touch of narrative color, nor is it a lesser companion to serious theological concerns. Rather, the comic element in O'Connor's fiction is a manifestation of the Christian mystery of God's grace, the expression of faith, hope, and love.

One way in which humor finds its place in O'Connor is as reflection of faith, a testimony to a world larger than the visible world, which is equally real, is unseen and which might generally be described as the "spiritual" world. This is what O'Connor means by "mystery", a realism which includes not just the physical universe, but "the ultimate reaches of reality" (*Mystery* 40). It is not that O'Connor wished, as we have observed already, to neglect the importance of the physical world, but sought to make known the equally real dimension of the unseen, particularly to an audience that often denied this further reality. It is with this in mind that she remarks, in "Novelist and Believer": "For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God in a double way, or at all" (*Mystery* 157-8). To flow from God "in a double way" is, as she mentions in the same essay, to come forth "intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things" (157), to find a place in either the invisible or the visible Creation. For O'Connor, then, the world of "mystery" is as real and as important as the physical universe, which is the realm of "manners", the soil and the setting for her fiction. The visible world of O'Connor's fiction, though, is often repulsive, alienated or violent; in this context, her humor introduces a note of optimism and becomes an assertion that there is something more than what the visible world can show. As such, the laughter in O'Connor's stories is a reflection of Christian faith, the "substance", as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews notes, "of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11: 1). It is a testimony to the fullness of reality, "the

experience", in the words of Clinton Trowbridge, "of the consubstantiality of all things under God" (82).

Closely tied to this understanding of O'Connor's humor as an expression of faith is the realization that this faith is accompanied by a sense of hope. In other words, the faith that O'Connor expresses about the world of "mystery" is associated with a belief that in this unseen world there is a reason for spiritual hope, particularly as it relates to the alienation, the sorrows and the "lostness" that she illustrates in the visible world. This hope, in Christian terms, is a confidence in the redemptive power of Christ, in the healing grace of a loving God. And, in the context of her stories, the reader experiences O'Connor's hope, not necessarily through dogmatic assurances of such confidence, but, in a more oblique way, through the consistent note of laughter in the midst of suffering. It is laughter of this sort that Trowbridge refers to when he writes of a humor that "clears the air, momentarily, of the ever-present fumes of sulphur" (78), or that Robert Fitzgerald is speaking of when, in his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, he remarks that "On the tragic scene [of O'Connor's stories], each time, the presence of her humor is like the presence of grace" (xxxiii). This is hardly "merciless laughter", as Clara Park suggests (252), but is laughter that acknowledges the hope of divine grace. The comic element in O'Connor's stories, then, becomes both a testimony and a celebration that in the unseen world there is a God who is working in the lives of men, and that the work of Christ celebrated in the Eucharist is far from being "only a symbol".

While the humor in O'Connor's stories might be seen as a reflection of both faith and hope, it also becomes, in a sense, an expression of Christian love. This is a love grounded in the hope of Christ, and, as a consequence, is phrased in humor that is neither trivial or cruel; it is "the humor of a religious man", in the words of Romano Guardini, "who carries everything into the boundless love of God, including the inadequate, the strange, the queer" (qtd. in Eggenschwiler 22). Here again, the humor acquires the character of grace, becoming a source of compassion in stories where alienation, not love, is the common element. Indeed, as Clara Park observes in this regard: "So little love shows in [O'Connor's stories] that it is easy to conclude that she does not care about her characters". However, as Park says of O'Connor's letters, if not her fiction, "Laughter... was one of her chief ways of cherishing the world" (257). It is a laughter — in the stories as well as the letters, Park's contentions notwithstanding — in which O'Connor herself participates, but, of

equal importance, it is laughter in which the reader is invited to take part, an involvement in the comic experience that becomes an involvement in O'Connor's compassion for this world and a sharing in the love of the Creator. To quote Guardini again, this humor is the bearing of all things "into the boundless love of God" — the circumstances and the characters in the stories and the readers of the stories, as well.

O'Connor's humor, then, is more than simply a source of pleasure; it is an expression of love, of faith, and hope. It is a natural, though perhaps unconscious application of St. Paul's conclusion to the thirteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Cor. 13: 13). With this, we find an answer to the dilemma that Carter Martin has identified, a justification for the laughter which O'Connor's stories cause, for the variety of comic elements in these stories offers joy in the midst of suffering, is a reflection of the eternal at work in the world of "manners". The grace that is only vaguely suggested in story after story — in the death of Mrs. May, for instance, or the "rape" of Hulga in the loft of a barn — appears most clearly in the guise of laughter, whether in the humor of physical descriptions, in the use of comic dialogue and predicament or in the use of the ironic and the grotesque. All, ultimately, are a source of delight, and may be seen as the incarnation of Christian hope, faith and love. To ignore or to neglect this humor is to minimize the importance of both the visible and the unseen in O'Connor's view of the world, to consign the comic solely to the dimension of "manners" and to ignore its significance as an expression of divine grace.

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