

Evangelical Satire and Bodily Redemption in Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Spirit" and "Parker's Back"

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Religious scholarship on Flannery O'Connor rivals that of any other author in twentieth-century American literature. As early as 1977, Louis Rubin lamented how O'Connor criticism had become less an "expression of literary taste" than "of theological allegiance" (47). Surveying commentary on O'Connor, one can see how Christian doctrine suffuses scholarship so greatly that the author's religious views are privileged over the fiction she actually wrote, making criticism appear more apologetic than aesthetic.¹ O'Connor herself is largely responsible for this legacy: in many letters and essays, she suggested that her work's primary subject was "the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil" (*Mystery and Manners* 18). In her famous essay "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," she addresses two contexts that shaped and enriched her creative process: region (South) and religion (Christianity). She peopled her fiction with characters whose language conveyed the rhythms, manners, platitudes, and scripturally inflected speech of the South. As her readership increased, she grew increasingly concerned about misinterpretations of her evangelical characters: "When you write about backwoods prophets, it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them, but that their concerns are your own and, in your judgment, central to human life" (204). The Catholic author discovered kindred spirits among southern evangelicals who shared her concerns over postwar national trends toward scientific materialism, social liberalism, and cultural secularism.

Despite offering many insights into the author's approach, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" arguably prevented fuller considerations of the poignancy and humor of the characterization of evangelicals in O'Connor's fiction. To put it in theological terms,

scholars heeded O'Connor's metacommentary as orthodoxy, so that counter-interpretations run the risk of seeming heretical. I see two problems that need to be addressed here. First, it is easy to conflate O'Connor's imaginative prose and her retroactive commentary on her stories, forgetting that these are two very different things. While O'Connor certainly knew what she was doing as an artist, she hardly intended her commentary to be received as definitive criticism of her work.² I agree with Harold Bloom's suspicion that the theology implied in O'Connor's fiction is often quite different from what the author herself thought it to be (4). Furthermore, O'Connor's sympathy for southern evangelicals need not imply an absence of critique.

Evangelical Christianity has singularly dominated the American South, establishing a cultural hegemony that shaped the region's social and political views from the nineteenth century forward. Assuming the inerrancy of scripture, evangelical theology stresses human sinfulness and the need for redemption achieved through Christ's atonement, appropriated by individual faith, and accompanied by personal morality. This individualist streak among evangelicals devalued churches, sacraments (especially the Eucharist), the human body, and social institutions. Indeed, the evangelical milieu of O'Connor's native Georgia afforded plenty for her to satirize. My essay, therefore, will highlight satire on evangelicalism in two of her stories, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "Parker's Back," in which destructive views of the human body are reconfigured through unexpectedly sacramental means.

Both stories employ taboo bodily manifestations to correct evangelical sensibilities that devalue human flesh.³ "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" makes a hermaphrodite at a local fair bear drastic witness to obedience to God's will, invoking a sacramental theology teaching that human corporeality, no matter how strange or deformed, envelops the indwelling Holy Spirit. The freak show is reconstructed through the imagination of a precocious twelve-year-old girl who dreams of the hermaphrodite leading an evangelical revival complete with traditional call and response preaching. The preaching she imagines urges congregants to honor God with

their bodies, which are temples of the Holy Spirit. Despite the hermaphrodite's biblical summons, however, the exhibition proves too risqué for local evangelical pastors, who have the police shut down the entire fair because its indecency shocks their sensibilities. O'Connor also provides comically insightful contrasts between modern evangelical hymns and their ancient Catholic counterparts. Meanwhile, "Parker's Back" dramatizes the conversion of a sensual tattoo enthusiast who eventually resembles the prophet—Obadiah—after whom he is named. O'Connor contrasts her protagonist's sacramental tattoos with his wife's "straight gospel" theology, which eschews all physical signs as idolatrous. With their shared emphasis on the human body, both stories exemplify O'Connor's oblique treatment of human sexuality in her fiction.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" comprises the most explicit Catholic narrative in O'Connor's entire oeuvre. Set in the fictional rural town of Mayville, the story inhabits the perception of a nameless, twelve-year-old girl who, along with her mother, hosts her two fourteen-year-old cousins, Susan and Joanne, during their weekend getaway from Catholic school. The ages of the girls—all Catholic—emphasize the story's prevailing themes of adolescence, chastity, and the relevance of religion to everyday life. The protagonist watches as her older cousins arrive and immediately discard their brown convent uniforms in favor of red skirts, "loud blouses," lipstick, and high heels. The girls then take turns prancing in front of a hallway mirror, admiring their budding sexuality. Obsessed with boys and clothes, they ridicule the religious teachings exhorting them to shun sexual immorality (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 238; hereafter *CS*). The story's title is first mentioned when the cousins explain, over dinner, how Sister Perpetua, the convent's oldest nun (who is named after a prominent third-century female martyr), instructed them to ward off sexual advances in the backseats of automobiles by saying, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" (238). In fact, the cousins mockingly call themselves Temple One and Temple Two, showing their disdain for the convent's teachings about the Holy Spirit's indwelling in the human body as the basis for sexual purity. Despite the cousins' giggling interjections, the young girl

finds this discussion no laughing matter. She is transfixed by the traditional teaching the girls reject: “I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present” (238).

The precocious girl plans to entertain her shallow cousins by suggesting that Wendell and Cory Wilkins, two farm boys and aspiring Church of God preachers, escort them to the local fair. The girl thinks the Wilkins boys are perfect matches for her cousins: they are sixteen, drive an automobile, and are similarly religiously ignorant: “They were both going to be Church of God preachers because you don’t have to know nothing to be one” (CS 239). While this withering observation highlights the young girl’s pride, it also satirizes the ease with which evangelicals heed the “call” to ministry with little examination or evidence of qualification. The narrative underscores this idea further when physically describing the boys: “They sat like monkeys, their knees on a level with their shoulders and their arms hanging down between. They were short thin boys with red faces and high cheekbones and pale seed-like eyes” (240). As they sit with Susan and Joanne, the boys display an evangelical penchant for sentimental music that fuses popular regional sounds with old time religious hymns:

They had brought a harmonica and a guitar. One of them began to blow softly on the mouth organ, watching the girls over it, and the other started strumming the guitar and then began to sing, not watching them but keeping his head tilted upward as if he were only interested in hearing himself. He was singing a hillbilly song that sounded half like a love song and half like a hymn.... Wendell began to smile as he sang and to look at the girls. (CS 240)

O’Connor understood how centrally evangelical Christianity used music to draw in audiences with familiar, sentimental sounds. The narrator satirizes Wendell’s contrived attempts to entice the girls with his “dog-like loving look” (CS 240). As the boys commence singing “The Old Rugged Cross,” the girls interrupt and mockingly sing in Latin the *Tantum Ergo*—the famous medieval Roman Catholic Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament composed by

Thomas Aquinas. It venerates the mystery of Christ's body as the host upon which believers feast in the sacrament. The juxtaposition of a ubiquitous evangelical hymn alongside an ancient Latin benediction might seem an ecumenical gesture, uniting evangelicals and Catholics by emphasizing the common features of their worship of Christ crucified. However, upon closer inspection, the juxtaposition actually satirizes the narcissism and sentimentality reflected in the hymn. Written by Methodist evangelist George Bennard in 1913 and popularized during the revivals of Billy Sunday, "The Old Rugged Cross" was composed to fit the familiar country music verse-chorus pattern. It embodied both the adaptability and rugged individualism of American Protestantism. Bennard penned the hymn during a low point when he was heckled and ridiculed during revival meetings; his mistreatment helped him identify with the burden Christ must have felt while carrying the cross that bore humanity's sins. Ostensibly, the hymn honors the sacrifice of Christ's body on the cross for the forgiveness of sins; in reality, it celebrates the speaker's courage, constantly employing first-person speech. In this hymn, Christ's body is an afterthought to the speaker's own "ever true" response to the cross he so "loves, cherishes, clings [to], lays down, exchanges, gladly bears, and shares" (Baxter 6).

When confronted with the Latin *Tantum Ergo*, which rightly adores the sacred host while asking for faith to supplement feeble human senses—a striking contrast to their very American hymn to human effort and mobility—Wendell retorts, "That must be Jew singing" (CS 241). The young girl, hiding nearby, cannot restrain herself: she shouts, "You big dumb Church of God ox!" (241). While her outburst displays her sense of superiority and frustration with the ignorance of the evangelical boys, O'Connor's use of animal imagery as insult aptly alludes to Aquinas, who was nicknamed "the dumb ox" for his large size and reticent manner by his peers at the University of Cologne. Aquinas's mentor, the celebrated Dominican saint and scholar, St. Albert the Great, famously declared that the dumb ox's teaching would eventually "produce such a bellowing that it will one day be heard throughout the world" (Stump 3). O'Connor's allusion suggests that the young girl may also be shortsighted about

the future of these evangelicals as potential ministers. Her disdain for evangelical simplicity and sensationalism is further displayed when she mocks a Baptist preacher who had visited her school to give a devotional. Drooping her mouth and holding her forehead as if in agony, she ridicules his benediction by groaning, “Fawther, we thank Thee” (CS 243).

While the girl possesses perceptive theological instincts, her precociousness cuts both ways, as the narrator makes clear: “She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one” (CS 243). Even her bedtime prayers reflect her smug superiority: she thanks God repeatedly that she’s not in the Church of God like Wendell and Cory. As in many O’Connor stories, her means of grace comes from an unlikely source: the two cousins return late that night to tell about a freak show at the fair. The cousins describe a hermaphrodite in a blue dress walking back and forth on each side of a circus tent divided by a black curtain to separate the men and women. Upon entering each side, the hermaphrodite lifts a blue dress to reveal both male and female sexual organs while boldly declaring:

God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it. I don’t dispute hit. (CS 245)

The startling imagery of double genitalia alludes to the scriptural context of the story’s title. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians concerning sexuality and the body, urging them to flee immorality; he contends that sexual union between two people, “joined in the flesh,” should reflect the spiritual redemption by which they were justified in Christ’s name and through the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. By declaring human bodies are intended for the Lord, not fornication, Paul grounds his argument in the mystical union between Christ and his church:

Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? Know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? For two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:15–19 KJV)

This “two become one flesh” doctrine is first mentioned in Genesis 2:24 and reinforced throughout the New Testament by Jesus (Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:8) and Paul (again in Ephesians 5:31). The hermaphrodite, by possessing male and female genitalia, is a profane sacramental vessel illustrating a sacred doctrine. Denise Askin keenly notes how the hermaphrodite might also function as a “parodic reflection of the hypostatic union defined by the Council of Chalcedon, a mystery of the true union of two full natures with neither of them compromised—the scandal of the God-made-man” (563).

As the young girl later processes the freak show’s meaning, she imagines the faces of the country people watching the hermaphrodite with a solemnity more profound than they would display even in a church. This imagined voyeurism seems appropriate to the young girl, who has been cast as an isolated watcher of what goes on around her. Her imaginative reconstruction of the freak show resembles the deep evangelical features of a Holiness-Pentecostal worship service, with its hymns, beats, clapping, and signature call-and-response preaching style. The child’s imagination emphasizes the story’s central theological message:

God done this to me and I praise Him.
Amen. Amen.
He could strike you thisaway.
Amen. Amen.
But he has not.
Amen.

Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?

Amen. Amen.

If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing.

Amen. Amen.

I am a temple of the Holy Ghost.

Amen. (CS 246)

The girl spiritually augments her earlier musings on the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit. She sees the hermaphrodite's acceptance of circumstances—and his vocational proclamation of such circumstances—as part of the divine plan. Ironically, the sources of both ideas (the body being a temple of the Holy Ghost and the hermaphrodite's freak show) are the fourteen-year old cousins who ridicule both concepts. Such irony underscores O'Connor's sacramental vision of God's grace being present throughout the empirical universe; the young protagonist possesses the eyes to see and ears to hear the summons awaiting her at the story's conclusion.

Indeed, O'Connor recalls these very elements at the climactic ending, when the protagonist and her mother return the two cousins to the convent on Sunday. Upon arriving, they are greeted by a "moon-faced nun"—a reflection of the sun (or Son)—who ushers them into a chapel just as the *Tantum Ergo* benediction is given for Eucharist. When the girl beholds the priest kneeling in front of the monstrance, she realizes she is "in the presence of God" (CS 247). When the priest raises the monstrance with the Host shining in its center, her thoughts return to "the tent at the fair that had the freak in it" (248). Like the monstrance, the hermaphrodite symbolizes the mystical union of body and spirit, human and divine. Of course, not everyone can see the hermaphrodite as sacramental vessel: local evangelical preachers inspect the freak show and have the police shut it down (248).

Because of its originality and theological sophistication, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is one of O'Connor's best works. Yet

for all the violence and disturbing imagery she famously employed to shock the allegedly dull sensibilities of a post-Christian reading audience, I find the oblique treatment of sexuality in her fiction—particularly in a story devoted to the very topic—puzzling. While O’Connor lacked much personal sexual experience, the same can be said of many other experiences (like violence and murder) she emphasizes. While her fiction does contain some unsettling sex scenes, involving a grotesque prostitute (*Wise Blood*) and rape (*The Violent Bear It Away*), these moments pale in comparison to her explicit depictions of violence. Reciprocated romance is unusual in her fiction, even in a rare scene involving seduction (“Good Country People”). This absence of romantic sexuality, acknowledged by O’Connor herself, was intentional, not accidental. She explicitly noted how “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” was concerned with sexual purity (or abstinence), “the most mysterious of the virtues,” and argued that purity involves embracing “what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances” (*The Habit of Being* 117, 124; hereafter *HB*).

O’Connor thought purity must be grounded in the mystery of the Eucharist—the Catholic belief that the Host is “actually the body and blood of Christ, not a symbol” (*HB* 124). “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” explicates her belief in the sacrament as the embodiment of human existence, making all else “expendable” (*HB* 125). As late as 1962, she wondered why the story had not been anthologized or received much critical attention (*HB* 487). Fifty years later, we should all be wondering the same.

Like “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” “Parker’s Back” explores sexuality and the human body within the context of the evangelical South; however, instead of offering Catholicism as an alternative to the region’s un-sacramental tendencies, the author dramatizes the conversion of a sensualist and the subsequent navigation of his newfound vocation as a prophet within the destructive confines of his wife’s fundamentalist theology. “Parker’s Back” was the last story O’Connor would write before her untimely death. While she here again addressed the familiar subject matter of Christian

redemption through violence, she also tackled new material with a tattoo enthusiast as her protagonist.

O'Connor employs the carnival tent in "Parker's Back," as she did in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," to function as a secular surrogate for church. At the age of fourteen, Parker experiences an epiphany upon seeing a man covered from head to toe in tattoos with only his loins girded in panther hide. The tattoos radiate a "single intricate design of brilliant color," creating an "arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin," which possesses a "subtle motion of its own" (CS 512–13). The scene resonates with Parker, leaving his mouth agape as he lingers in the empty tent long after the show concludes. The narrator conveys his experience through the language of religious conversion: "It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed" (513). Parker demonstrates an inherent religious wisdom about tattoos and their connection to suffering upon receiving his first one: "It hurt very little, just enough to make it appear to Parker to be worth doing. This was peculiar too for before he had thought that only what did not hurt was worth doing" (513). Tattoos also signify his quest for sensual pleasure. Endowed with a sixth sense "that told him when there was a woman watching him," Parker thinks that his alluring skin helps make him seductive (511). With each sexual conquest, his conceit increases. His tattoos of fierce animals reveal his lust for life and color; conversely, the tattoos reveal an emptiness underneath, for when the novelty of a tattoo wears off, Parker's dissatisfaction with life reemerges as if "the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare" (514).

Despite a vow to "never get tied up legally," Parker's pride gets the better of him when he encounters an indifferent fundamentalist (CS 511). Sarah Ruth is introduced when Parker's truck breaks down near her house. She somehow intrigues Parker when she disdains his tattoos, for he "had never yet met a woman who was not attracted to them" (512). Perpetually "sniffing up sin," she rejects smoking, dipping tobacco, drinking whiskey, using profanity, using makeup,

and driving. When she first inspects the tattoos on Parker's arm, she drops his hand "as if she had accidentally grasped a poisonous snake" (512). This striking biblical allusion to the Genesis account of original sin intimates how she will undoubtedly add tattoos to a growing litany of other sins she fondly externalizes. The evangelical tendency to externalize vice conveniently reduces the complexity of sin, which actually resides in the human heart, not in bars or tattoo parlors. Her impassioned condemnations make Parker wonder why she would marry someone like him, who literally embodies what she hates: "Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn't" (510). The last sentence insightfully suggests that fundamentalists' strictures often shroud a suppressed desire for the very sins they revile.

O'Connor contrasts the puritanical wife and the tattooed protagonist: Parker's sensuality suggests his predisposition to a deeper appreciation of the empirical world. Sarah Ruth's skin appears plain, thin, and tight, in contrast to her husband's scintillating skin. Similarly, her gray-colored eyes appear sharp, like icepicks, implying a simplistic, black-and-white, judgmental outlook on the world. Parker's eyes, on the other hand, display "the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea" (CS 514). While Parker's expansive vision enables him to seek adventure and appreciate complexity, it also frightens him, making him embrace the parochialism that comes so naturally for Sarah Ruth: "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion" (516).

O'Connor's characterization of Sarah Ruth satirizes the evangelical penchant for ahistorical, disembodied religiosity. The couple marries in the County Ordinary's office "because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous" (CS 518), and she similarly regards Parker's tattoos, like makeup and anything pictured on the skin, as the "vanity of vanities" (518). Parker incorrectly speculates that Sarah Ruth might enjoy a tattoo if it were religious and positioned

on his back, a location he perceives as linked with self-renunciation. He becomes increasingly preoccupied with some unknown mystery, which breaks him of his self-conscious concern over appearance and what others might think. As his dissatisfaction grows, the idea of a back tattoo becomes irresistible. He first considers having the Holy Bible or a verse from scripture tattooed on his back before imagining Sarah Ruth's objections: "Ain't I already got a real Bible? What you think I want to read the same verse over and over for when I can read it all? He needed something better even than the Bible!" (519). Envisioning something superior to the Bible would be unthinkable for evangelicals, who champion the divine inspiration of the written word above all else. But O'Connor's narrative reveals how over-emphasizing the written word can mean neglecting Christianity's most essential doctrine: God taking on human flesh. O'Connor depicts the consequences of such disembodied religion by describing Sarah Ruth's preparation of food: she simply tosses ingredients in a pot and boils them, and her indifference to empirical facts leads to Parker's malnourishment and loss of literal flesh.

O'Connor further highlights the importance of embodied faith by describing violent encounters and visible signs of grace breaking into the ordinary. In a clear allusion to the Apostle Paul's conversion experience (Acts 9:1–9), Parker experiences his own vision one day at work while riding a tractor. When he crashes into a tree that bursts into flames, he yells, "GOD ABOVE!" In addition to employing this burning bush imagery (Exodus 3:2), the narrative at this point repeatedly uses the terms "back" and "backward," along with the sign of the cross and Parker collapsing to his knees, to connote conversion. Parker immediately heads to the city to seal his conversion with a tattoo, knowing that "there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished" (CS 520–21). Arriving at the tattoo parlor, he asks to see sketches of God. The artist informs him that the "up-t-date ones are in the back." The up-to-date images—"The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician's Friend"—comically depict the evangelical ethos of adapting Christ to modern sensibilities. Yet

Parker, who has just experienced religious conversion, continues to flip backward to less assuring pictures. Again repeating the term *back*, the voice of God tells Parker (just as he passes a picture with a pair of eyes glancing swiftly and severely) to “GO BACK.” There, Parker sees a “haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes. [Parker] sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power” (522). His tattoo embodies a return to ancient, incarnational Christianity and all its representational qualities; the image of the stern Christ possesses “eyes to be obeyed” (527).

As O’Connor concludes the story, her use of Christian imagery becomes more heavy-handed. Parker drinks a pint of whiskey in a back alley and enters a pool hall where he starts a fight when locals poke fun at his new tattoo, only to be tossed out like “Jonah had been cast into the sea” to take up his vocation as unwilling prophet (CS 527). The allusions to prophets continue when he returns home to Sarah Ruth, who won’t allow him to enter until he speaks his baptismal name, “Obadiah Elihue.” Doing so makes him feel “light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (528). When he shows Sarah Ruth the tattoo of Christ on his back, she retorts (alluding to John 4:24) that God is a spirit whose face no man shall behold. Condemning idolatry, she beats Parker senseless, creating large welts on the tattooed face of Christ. The story concludes with Parker, clinging to a tree, weeping like a baby. The final persecution scene reveals O’Connor’s judgment of Sarah Ruth’s Protestant overcorrection.

After reviewing early drafts of the story, Caroline Gordon told O’Connor that she had succeeded in dramatizing a heresy in her characterization of Sarah Ruth. O’Connor concurred, noting that Sarah Ruth commits heresy by subscribing to the belief that one can worship in pure spirit (HB 593–93). Parker’s story is an adult conversion experience of a troubled soul. His sensualistic pursuits and wanderings, epitomized by his tattoos, impulsive joining of the Navy, hard drinking, and womanizing all suggest a soul starved for spiritual sustenance. “Parker’s Back” leads readers to anticipate

Parker's future vocation as a southern prophet—a motif explored in other O'Connor stories.

Because O'Connor's characters are so clearly drawn, readers familiar with southern religious culture (as opposed to unfamiliar, secular readers) will recognize her evangelicals as more real than exaggerated. O'Connor resisted the temptation to use imaginative fiction to make religious faith more easily appealing. She once acknowledged this temptation when addressing complaints from Christians that her fiction was too disturbing and did not present their faith more positively:

Ideal Christianity doesn't exist, because anything the human being touches, even Christian truth, he deforms slightly in his own image always toward the abstract and therefore toward allegory, thinness, and ultimately what they are looking for is apologetic fiction. The best of them think: make it look desirable so I won't look like a fool for holding it. (*HB* 516)

To write merely about ideas (she believed) is the role of theologians and philosophers, not creative writers; the consequences of ideas observable in human relations and actions, O'Connor asserted, are the province of imaginative fiction.

Notes

1. In introducing *New Essays on Wise Blood*, Michael Kreyling correctly surveys how O'Connor's fiction has been canonized by Christian critics due to the often discussed Catholic faith she reveals in her prose and letters, her untimely death from lupus (analogous to martyrdom), and her obvious scorn for those who misread her fiction in non-religious ways. All these factors have made most O'Connor criticism religious, leaving little room for secular readings of her fiction.
2. Frederick Asals observes the opposing critical poles many readers adopt in light of O'Connor's letters that dissuade them from other interpretations: "At one pole, she can be taken as the final and definitive authority on her own writing; at the other, she can be viewed as so unaware of what she was up to as to be irrelevant if not positively misleading. Each of these stances has its attractions—

the attractions of simplicity, if nothing else—and each has in fact been adopted by O’Connor’s critics” (4). Robert Brinkmeyer avoids such simplicity by examining tensions present in O’Connor’s fiction: “The interplay between the dominant voice of O’Connor’s Catholicism and her fundamentalist voice—an interplay expressed most significantly in the relationship between Catholic author and her fundamentalist fiction—is complex, rich, and central to O’Connor’s imaginative life” (34). Brinkmeyer observes how the confrontation of fictional characters with the “fundamentalist imperative” embodied O’Connor’s own threshold of religious doubt and exerted pressure on the author, her characters, and her readers.

3. This sensibility did not originate with evangelicals. Dating back to the second century (ACE), Docetism was a heresy that denied the doctrine of Christ’s full humanity, arguing that he only appeared to possess a human body in which he suffered and died. This doctrine stemmed from Hellenic views that regarded the body as an inferior vessel imprisoning the more important soul or spirit.

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