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On the Critique of Secular Ethics

An Essay with Flannery O'Connor and Hannah Arendt

Vikki Bell

What then becomes of this category [ethics] if we claim to suppress or mask its religious character, all the while preserving the abstract arrangement of its apparent constitution ('recognition of the other', etc.)? The answer is obvious: a dog's dinner [*de la bouille pour les chats*]. (Badiou, 2001: 23)

In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labour camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber. (O'Connor, 1969: 227)

I

FROM THE relative seclusion of her home in Milledgeville, Georgia – where she was forced to retreat by the lupus that would claim her life at the age of 39 – the Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor (1925–64) followed the controversy surrounding the publication of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (letter dated 22 June 1963, in 1979: 526). On 14 September 1963 she wrote:

I'm reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which Tom [Stritch] sent me. Anything is credible after such a period in history. I've always been haunted by the box cars, but they were actually the least of it. And old Hannah's as sharp as they come. (1979: 539)

One suspects that O'Connor's admiration of Arendt was due not only to the sharpness of the theorist's intellect but also to her capacity to be cutting in critique. Certainly Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial was

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a cutting down to size of this smug, self-important man, and O'Connor would surely have enjoyed Arendt's wit as she exposed him as a fool. For O'Connor – known for stories profoundly rooted in her Catholic faith that, without exception, turned on the inevitability of the revelatory 'action of grace' – was herself a formidable critic. And since her telling of the undoing of the flawed characters in her stories made their various moments of revelation both funny and shockingly violent, one can imagine her delight in Arendt's assertions that Eichmann 'illustrated how the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny' (1984: 49), and that while Eichmann was perhaps not a 'monster', 'it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown' (1984: 54). Not infrequently O'Connor would pen her own 'clowns' only to dramatize their downfall.

But there is surely more to be said about this intriguing admiration for the work of Hannah Arendt evidenced in O'Connor's letters. First, it prompts one to reconsider the political context of O'Connor's work, so downplayed in the secondary criticism with its intensive focus on her religiosity. If the 'box cars' so haunted her, can their ghostly trace be detected in her fiction? And, second, it prompts one to consider whether the admiration would have been reciprocated: how would Arendt have responded to O'Connor's writings?¹ The relationship is triangulated by Eric Voegelin, who figured in the articulation of both women's responses to 'the secular'. O'Connor was an admirer of Voegelin, agreeing enthusiastically with his highly influential critique which railed against secularism in all its versions – in the guise of all those other 'isms' and most notably Communism – which he argued had led humankind astray. The Cold War fears of the period are an important political context within which to understand both Voegelin and O'Connor's work. Read in this way, O'Connor's literary interventions were never 'merely' literary, nor were they simply 'Catholic'. For her part, Arendt was less taken with Voegelin's views, and was dismissive in response to his 1953 review of her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1953/1994). This is not to say that Arendt did not respect this fellow scholar, and she readily agreed to co-edit a special journal to celebrate his 60th birthday in 1961.² But Arendt questioned the central division that animated Voegelin – as it did O'Connor – between those who retained their 'love of being through love of divine Being as the source of its order' (Voegelin, quoted in Sandoz, 1997: ix) and those who had 'obliterated' the transcendent origin of being, placing the order of being as 'essentially under man's control' (Voegelin, 1997: 35).

These explorations would be little more than historical ruminations were it not for the resonance they have with recent re-invigoration of scholarly debate around the (im)possibility of ethics without God. Of late, the possibility of a 'secular ethics' has been placed in question, even under attack. The attack presented in Alain Badiou's (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on Radical Evil* is, in Barthes' sense,³ a *cutting* critique in which the loftiest of aims – that is, the search for an ethics rooted in the love of human, *only* human, alterity – collides with the most scathing of pronouncements: a dog's dinner. Badiou presents a critique of dominant ethics discourses, not only

those founded in ‘human rights’ but also the dominant alternative discourse founded in, as he disdainfully puts it, ‘recognition of the other, etc.’ He deflates those who seek to pronounce upon questions of response and responsibility from within the secular materialist traditions of cultural critique by reclassifying their task as a rehearsal of those perspectives to which they had believed themselves opposed. The trace of God remains, he argues, in the contemporary pursuit of ‘the ethical’, as in the Levinasian ethics of the face-to-face, where the face of the other simultaneously summons an absolute alterity. Thus, and despite their differences, Badiou joins with Derrida⁴ insofar as both ask theorists of the ethical to ‘admit’ the trace of religion and, in the latter’s case, to admit that the repeated figuring of an ideal future as one that privileges alterity means that this work’s ultimate concern is disjuncture, writ small and writ large, such that it always returns one to mystery, to the reassertion of a relationship of wonder with other existents and with human existence itself. It is this reassertion that, as Derrida would say, may ‘just as well’ bear the name religion.

For Badiou, such a critique opens the space into which he is able to reassert the importance of truths, by which he means not Truth but the truths to which one holds, to which one is subjectively faithful. While contemporary ‘anti-philosophy’ pretends a form of materialism in its assertion that there are only bodies and language, it cannot simply be ‘done with Platonism’ (2003: 128). Badiou’s ‘Platonism’ means that for him there is more than bodies and multitudes. And ethics is precisely about the subjective fidelity to a truth ‘particular to but unlimited by the contents of the situation in which it comes to exist’ (Hallward, 2001: ix). Truths are singular in location and occasion, but universal in their ‘address’ and import (2001: ix). Hence the lie of those who would attempt to be done with truths while espousing human rights or an ‘ethics of the other’ that set up certain Truths across all situations. These are the targets of Badiou’s scorn, for it is they who reassert something akin to religion while considering themselves ‘beyond’ it. The rhetorical brilliance of Badiou’s text – its shaming, mocking, ‘redistributing’ – makes the formulation of a dissenting response a formidable task. But to simply sign up to this cutting critique is to perform a remarkable *volte face*. If Derrida’s ‘just as well’ is admitted, doesn’t one renege on the very possibility of ‘secular ethics’ and its critical project, what Edward Said (2000) termed ‘secular criticism’? The finesse of the unsettling Badiou effects makes him an important figure in present philosophical debates, once again challenging post-structuralist cultural theorists, *inter alia*, to reconsider their chosen path. Here, by returning to O’Connor and Arendt as an earlier instance of just such a debate, I mean to present such a reconsideration.

Through a reading of one of O’Connor’s short stories ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’ (1965), which directly turns on the question of secular ethics, and through the exploration of both the enjoyment of narrative ‘cuts’ that O’Connor displays in that story, as well as the conceit of ‘secondary’ criticism that either insists on identification with the author or else proceeds by

sociological contextualization, I suggest that recognizing narrative as a form of social critique that is also an *intervention* rather than merely an illustration (of either her personal belief or her socio-historical context) is important in the formulation of a response. As such it is entirely appropriate to consider O'Connor on the same terrain as Arendt. That is, she can be approached not merely as a fictional writer to be contextualized within socio-political events, but also as a writer making interventions into the political theoretical world that was more obviously Hannah Arendt's domain.

While O'Connor's admiration of Arendt is documented, the latter's possible response to O'Connor's project remains necessarily speculative. In speculating on Arendt's possible response to the protagonist in 'The Lame Shall Enter First' (1965), I argue that reading Arendt's work for the 'answer' to this speculation takes us to a, if not the, crux of the matter: how to understand the relationship between goodness and action. From Arendt's thought, formed within the political and religious context of the 1950s she shared with O'Connor, one can begin to draw out a response to the provocations at stake here. Ultimately, by following Arendt's responses both to Voegelin and to questions of religiosity more generally, one can form an Arendtian 'defence' of secular ethics that remains relevant to our contemporary debates.

II

In this section I want to discuss one of O'Connor's short stories – 'The Lame Shall Enter First' (1965) – because of its explicit foregrounding of questions concerning what might be termed secular morality. The story is one of the longest of O'Connor's short stories, one that bears a strong affinity with the second of her two novels, *The Violent Bear it Away*, written as it was from the latter's rejected remnants, and rewritten – painstakingly, her letters suggest, and never to her complete satisfaction (1979: 460, 464, 475) over a period of some nine months during 1961–2. 'The Lame Shall Enter First' was published in 1962, and again as part of the collection *Everything that Rises Must Converge* after O'Connor's death in 1964. The story illustrates O'Connor's characterization of unbelievers and 'intellectuals',⁵ those who reject faith. The central character, Sheppard, is a 'do-gooder' who rejects Christianity. The story turns on Sheppard's relationship with his son and with another boy to whom he has offered a home.

I use this story as the basis of a reading of the criticism of O'Connor, in order to see how different critical responses to O'Connor involve different critical strategies on the part of her readers. It is only recently that literary criticism has dared to criticize O'Connor's narrative strategies in 'defence' of her characters, an interesting if somewhat peculiar manoeuvre that in the critique ultimately seems to imply a passivity on the part of the reader. It is more recently still that the secondary criticism has criticized O'Connor herself on the basis of her downplaying of the inter-human aspects of her story in order to elevate the spiritual; indeed, to criticize O'Connor's

own ethical stance by reading her work *against* her. I want to pursue the path implied in this later strategy in order to suggest that O'Connor can and should be read within a more overtly political context in which her political fears loom as large as her religious faith. The argument is not that her concerns are 'really' political, masquerading as religious. Rather, while the narrative displays O'Connor's faith, it is also and as much about O'Connor's politics, specifically: her sympathies for Voegelin's thesis; the 'revelations' that were emerging about the atrocities of the Nazi regime; and the contemporary US context in which Cold War ideologies were entwined with domestic fears.

The central character, who in O'Connor's deliberately curt⁶ rendition 'thought he was good and was doing good when he wasn't' (1979: 490) is the widower, Sheppard, who works during the week as the city's recreational Director and on Saturdays at the reformatory 'receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing that he was helping boys no one else cared about' (1965: 145–6). His attitude to the world is thoroughly materialistic, anchored in a trust in scientific rationality to explain its ways and wonders. He is, however, a man of high principles and a moralist. His morality, the one he tries to pass on to his son, is that of an altruistic humanist, based in the confrontation of present inequities.

In the opening scene, Sheppard tries to convince his 10-year-old son, Norton, that he is better off than the young boy Rufus Johnson whom Sheppard has invited to come and stay with them since his release from the reformatory. His assessment of his son's comparative advantage operates only at the level of material situation; the boy's emotional life, and in particular his grief for his dead mother, is ignored by Sheppard's assessment:

'You have a healthy body . . . a good home. You've never been taught anything but the truth. Your daddy gives you everything you need and want. You don't have a grandfather who beats you. And your mother is not in the state penitentiary.'

The child pushed his plate away. Sheppard groaned aloud.

A knot of flesh appeared below the boy's suddenly distorted mouth. . . . 'If she was in the penitentiary' he began in a racking bellow, 'I could go seeeee her.' (1965: 146)

Sheppard responds to his son's grief with admonishment, advising him to turn outside himself, and with generalized platitudes about 'helping other people'. He judges himself well: 'Do you see me just sitting around thinking about my troubles?' (1965: 147).

It is Sheppard's parenting of Norton that reveals O'Connor's judgement of him: Norton may have cake but it is stale; the boy may still have a father who provides for him but his grief for his mother is denied as indeed Sheppard denies his own. He sees neither the emotional needs of his child nor his own irreplaceable role in the child's life, using his son to further his own plan to prove himself a good person. To Sheppard, his own child is

materially advantaged and intellectually average; Norton will be ‘a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company’ (1965: 143). By contrast, he judges Rufus as materially disadvantaged, emotionally needy and intellectually promising. His judgement, however, is woefully askew. For although, as in so many of O’Connor’s stories, Rufus enters the family home seemingly the one in need, he quickly emerges as an incarnation of evil. At least this is how O’Connor would have us read him. The afternoon he arrives the rain ‘slashed against the window panes and rattled in the gutters’; Rufus appears ‘like an irate drenched crow. His look went through the child [Norton] like a pin and paralysed him’ (1965: 153). The visitor sets about his invasion of Norton’s deepest and most personal emotions, insulting both his father’s good intentions by mimicking Sheppard (‘yaketty yaketty yak . . . and never says a thing’ [1965: 155]) and, most painfully, the boy’s dead mother. Rufus blithely crosses the line between the profane and the sacred, entering the shrine in the home, the faintly scented bedroom that had been Norton’s mother’s. Rufus combs his hair with her comb, and rummages in her clothes, forcing the ‘stricken’ Norton to watch as he fastens her corset around his waist and dances around the room singing rock and roll.

Sheppard is determined to pursue ‘the good’ and this makes him oblivious to the clues O’Connor gives the reader as to Rufus’s evil. Despite the resistance and ridicule that his efforts meet, Sheppard persists, believing his intervention will eventually be rewarded with Rufus’s gratitude and his own sense of satisfied pride in the difference he will have made for the boy. When Rufus refuses the new shoe that Sheppard had ordered for the boy’s ill-formed foot, Sheppard comforts himself by understanding Rufus’s response through the lens of psychology, another subject of O’Connor’s disdain: ‘something he had been was threatened and he was facing himself and his possibilities for the first time’ (1965: 177). Sheppard wants to give the boy a new life, while Rufus is set upon ensnaring Sheppard.

O’Connor said of this story that she wanted people to be sure where the devil was in it. Certainly Rufus’s dialogue is stark. When Sheppard tries to engender a fascination in the stars and the moon by buying a telescope and enthusing ‘you boys could go to the moon’ (1965: 163), Rufus replies: ‘I ain’t going to the moon and get there alive . . . and when I die I’m going to hell’ (1965: 164). Later in the story he argues with Sheppard: ‘Satan has you in his power. . . . Not only me. You’ (1965: 184).

Sheppard tries to employ ‘gentle ridicule’ as a means of responding to Rufus’s description of hell by answering ‘nobody has given any reliable evidence there’s a hell’ (1965: 164). But ridicule is powerless here and, as one commentator would have it, Norton’s ‘boundaries of yearning’ are gradually expanded⁷ as Rufus works on the son, explaining to him, whispering like Iago in his ear, replying to his unanswered emotional needs. He undermines Sheppard’s materialist belief, his secular ethics and his parenting, suggesting to Norton that there is a higher authority. While Sheppard

attempts to maintain his paternal authority, to use his counselling training and to be endlessly patient, hoping to give Rufus ‘security’ and to ‘save’ (1965: 188) him from his material disadvantage, Rufus scoffs at Sheppard’s modelling himself on Christ – just as Badiou scoffs at the contemporary ethicist – hissing to Norton: ‘How do you stand it? . . . He thinks he’s Jesus Christ!’ (1965: 161).

Rufus teaches Norton that ultimately judgement occurs only at one’s death. The young boy’s initial fear is that his mother may be in the dreadful place that Rufus describes, where ‘the dead are judged and the wicked are damned. They weep and gnash their teeth while they burn . . . and it’s everlasting darkness’ (1965: 164). But the idea that his mother might be ‘saved’ offers to Norton the possibility that Sheppard had had to deny him, lest he bring the boy up ‘on a lie’ (1965: 165). That is, the possibility that he might be reunited with her in Heaven.

O’Connor’s negative judgement of Sheppard is evident throughout the story. Sheppard is portrayed by O’Connor as a fool who attempts to fight with the devil, who believes in his own powers to effect change but who must ultimately confront ‘the failure of his own compassion’ (1965: 181). While he finds this failure numbing, he is to face a much deeper blow. Sheppard places his quest to help Rufus above his paternal love for Norton. He fails to appreciate the impact that Rufus has on his son, and he fails adequately to challenge the power that works on the child. Rufus has the club-foot, but it is Norton who is ‘lame’. Indeed, the first time the word is used in the story it is with reference to Norton, who answers his father ‘lamely’. Later it is he who takes the ‘hobbled step’ (1965: 164) toward Sheppard to ask if his mother is in hell: ‘Is she there?’ It is Norton who has been chosen; and it is he who will ‘enter first’.

Sheppard’s attempt to interest Rufus in astronomy, to help him ‘reach for the stars’, backfires and instead it is Norton who begins to spend his time looking at the night sky searching for his beloved mother. Towards the end of the story, Norton thinks he has seen her: ‘“She’s there!” he cried, not turning around from the telescope. “She waved at me!”’ (1965: 186). Norton tries to show his father but Sheppard’s attention is on Rufus, who has gone missing again, only to reappear escorted by two police officers who have arrested him for burglary. After they have taken Rufus away Sheppard tries to comfort himself in his ‘failure’ to help Johnson, but, as he slowly repeats his secular mantra, he is confronted with his revelation:

‘I have nothing to reproach myself with’ he repeated. His voice sounded dry and harsh. ‘I did more for him than I did for my own child.’ He was swept with a sudden panic. He heard the boy’s jubilant voice. ‘Satan has you in his power.’

‘I have nothing to reproach myself with,’ he began again. ‘I did more for him than I did for my own child.’ He heard his voice as if it were the voice of his accuser. He repeated the sentence silently.

Slowly his face drained of colour. (1965: 189)

A visceral reaction accompanies the realization that dawns on him; he had ‘stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson’ (1965: 190). Sheppard’s heart constricts and he is breathless, ‘paralysed, aghast’ (1965: 190). When his child’s image appears to him, he experiences ‘agonising love’ and rushes to find his son, ‘to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him’. The child’s bed is empty. He climbs the attic stairs and

... at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over from it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space. (1965: 190)

O’Connor’s portrayal and narrative ‘punishment’ of Sheppard is uncompromising. Even on his own terms, O’Connor repeatedly implies, Sheppard’s desire to do good is streaked through with a desire to reflect well upon himself. There is an obvious calculation in Sheppard’s ethics. He chooses to help the boy whose IQ test indicates he is already intelligent; he offers help and gifts while imagining the pride that he will feel in the future; and he admits defeat in a way that reveals his personal stake in Rufus’s transformation. More than this hypocrisy, however, O’Connor judges Sheppard because he is, as Rufus accuses him, an atheist who ‘thinks he’s God’ (1965: 187). While attempting to pursue a plan according to his own design, Sheppard is exposed to the vice beneath his virtues. He undergoes a ‘shock of recognition [that] demolishes the fabricated vision’ of himself, and according to this reading, he emerges with the possibility of a new integrity in which he might truly see that to which he is called: not a virtue according to his own image and likeness but, in the words of one critic, a ‘shattering sacrifice that plunders whatever is not genuine love’ (Giannone, 2000: 205). It is the harshest of lessons.

O’Connor’s traditional critics tend to support this literary shattering of secular do-gooders because they accept the violent power of the love of God. As Giannone wrote in his earlier (1989) study of O’Connor, divine love is one that ‘cuts and burns to prepare for the glory to come’ (quoted in Gordon, 2000: 131). The telescope and the microscope enhance the possibilities for literal vision, as scientific discoveries and possibilities of space travel were doing all around O’Connor at the time she was writing, but these pursuits of scientific knowledge are unable to help Sheppard to see what is unfolding before his eyes. Giannone asserts: ‘Being able to recognise what is true and from God or what is false and from Satan is the habit of being that protects one’s other habits from disintegrating into ends in themselves’ (2000: 217). Sheppard attempts to see the natural world through the lens of rationality, and human relations through that of psychology. He cannot recognize, but neither will he escape, God.

O’Connor believed the novelist’s task was to provoke ‘a renewed sense

of mystery' (1969: 184). Through the crafted portrayal of the untidy realities of 'weakened' life,⁸ she argued, Catholic writers should promote their faith by showing 'mystery as it is incarnated in human life' (1969: 176). The writer has to both show the concrete and 'make the concrete work double time' (1969: 98) to allow the human action to show the action of God's grace. It is clear that, in this way, O'Connor regarded her fiction as a *weapon* 'in a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life' (1969: 185). She argued: 'This frequently means that [the fiction writer] may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience, and the images and actions he creates may seem distorted and exaggerated to the Catholic mind' (1969: 185). Indeed, the action of grace as it is depicted in O'Connor's fiction is frequently shocking and violent, as she explained: 'I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace' (1969: 112). One commentator, Desmond, asserts that O'Connor's use of violence is a response to the spectre of 'human closure to metaphysical reality'. According to his interpretation, one influenced by a reading of Voegelin, O'Connor wanted to show through her fiction that this closure was:

. . . a deformation of being and at the same time to reveal the possibility of breakthrough to a higher, more complex level of consciousness. Such a revelation would at least open her characters – if only in defeat – to the possibility of self-transcendence and a more authentic personality rooted in the divine. In the stories . . . *violence becomes the means of disrupting closure* in order to create these possibilities, for a world of possibility is a world governed by the mystery of being that she so forcefully reveals to the reader. (Desmond, quoted in Gordon, 2000, emphasis added)

However, by reading O'Connor's textual violence as illustrative of the depth of her faith and her explicit concerns for what she understood as the dangerous secularization of the Christian world, these critics read O'Connor without attention to the active pleasure exhibited in her penning of the narrative that punishes Sheppard. To the critic unattuned to the divine, this use of the narrator's privilege can appear all too human. A less theological reading might justifiably interpret O'Connor's literature as *sadistic*, inviting the readers into an enjoyment of the narrative punishments she metes out to her characters. Just as Nietzsche had found the pleasure of punishment at the heart of Christian morality, so Patricia Yaeger writes: 'there is no place the reader can feel safe, except in identification with the narrator's sadism and in the frequent upheavals of laughter that punctuate the text's discomforts with such bizarre gaiety' (1996: 195).⁹ As Yaeger's thesis would suggest, throughout the story O'Connor is preparing the reader for Sheppard's eventual cutting, a revelatory cutting perhaps, but one that is also, more mundanely, a cutting down to size. So while O'Connor's narrative mimics the blow that she believes divine love can deliver, and in her stories will deliver, she is also presenting a critique of the secular world

around her, a scolding that she invites us to accompany her in delivering. Indeed, the reader is invited to join her as she speaks through the character of Rufus. By judging Sheppard for his resistance to an individual's duty to further 'the divine plan for all creation' (Giannone, 2000: 131), she is aligning herself with Rufus: 'I'll admit the devil's voice is my own in this one', she wrote to John Hawkes,¹⁰ an admission to which I shall return.

This reading insists that 'The Lame . . .' be read as O'Connor's story. It is not, in that sense, divine love at work here. The invitation to identify with O'Connor, and to read Sheppard with her as an unseeing clown, is a literary strategy O'Connor employs masterfully. It is a strategy designed by O'Connor, and one designed, moreover, from within an understanding of the historical present. This is of utmost relevance to her portrayal of Sheppard.

As would Badiou, O'Connor repeatedly suggested that even Sheppard's 'secularism' is shaped by religious belief. His ethical sense is a (per)version of Christian heritage. She portrays him as a type who, as she categorizes it elsewhere, 'can neither believe nor contain himself in unbelief and who searches desperately, feeling about in all experience for the lost God' (1969: 159). That is, he has attempted to emerge out of a spiritual age, to dismiss the Bible as 'for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves' (1965: 184), but he remains deeply and inevitably marked by it. Her present was, O'Connor believed, an un-believing age where one 'breathes in nihilism' (1979: 97) but, nonetheless, one which was 'markedly and lopsidedly spiritual' (1969: 159). Sheppard's use of language reflects O'Connor's belief, as stated in one of her talks, that even secular outlooks could not escape the religious societies from which they have emerged:

The Judaeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has even formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed the shape of modern atheism. (1969: 155)¹¹

Most clearly, when faced with Rufus's description of hell, Sheppard's mode of comforting his son is marked by the trace of a denied spirituality: "Listen," Sheppard said quickly and pulled the child to him, "your mother's spirit lives on in other people and it'll live on in you if you're good and generous like she was" (1965: 165).¹²

Sheppard's ethics led him to govern through what O'Connor termed 'tenderness'. Propelled by theory rather than faith, his tenderness is depicted by O'Connor as too weak to confront evil in the world as it is incarnated in the body of Rufus. This is a dramatization of O'Connor's strongest belief and strongest fear. Such was the strength of her conviction on this matter that, in one halting and oft-quoted comment, O'Connor offers a formulation that links secularism – and specifically its attempt to replace faith with forms of 'tenderness' – causally with Nazism:

In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labour camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber. (1969: 227)

As I have indicated, O'Connor's convictions were close to those of Eric Voegelin, whose works she praised; her 1958 review of Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation* (1956) called it a 'monumental study' in which Voegelin presents history as 'a journey away from civilizations by a people which has taken the "leap into being" and has accepted existence under God' (Getz, 1980: 143). O'Connor shared Voegelin's concerns about the unbelieving world that sought to replace faith with the quest for knowledge, thinking that 'the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man' (1969: 158). In one of her letters (to Betty Hester), O'Connor explained why her short stories appeared bleak and 'negative'. They had to be, she wrote, because of the nihilistic 'gas' within and against which she wrote:

Another reason for the negative appearance: if you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe. . . . With such a current to write against, the result almost has to be negative. It does well just to be. (To 'A' 28 August 1955, in O'Connor, 1979: 97)

The argument that I am developing here – that O'Connor's political imagination is as important a context for understanding her literary portrayal of Sheppard as her religious belief – is one that both agrees with and detracts slightly from the compelling analysis recently put forward by Sarah Gordon (2000).

III

Although Yaeger's critique usefully indicates the need for an awareness of the literary strategies employed by the writer herself, her reading of O'Connor still implies, as does the traditional theological reading, an obligation to identify in order to 'feel safe' within the world Connor paints. In a different vein, Sarah Gordon has suggested that readers of O'Connor need not be bound by explanations offered by the author herself, nor by those offered through traditional readings of her fiction. Indeed, despite the obvious 'truths' of these readings, 'like Tarwater's "congregation" on some anonymous street, we as readers of O'Connor's fiction may very well not feel a sense of connection – much less communion – with her stringently prophetic fiction' (2000: 219). Gordon's reading opens up the possibility that we might read 'The Lame Shall Enter First' not only *without* identifying with the narrator but that we might even read it *against* O'Connor.

Reading *The Violent Bear it Away*, the novel from whose remnants 'The Lame Shall Enter First' was crafted, Gordon highlights the desert of human love in the novel, the lack of 'delight in human exchange and community'.

While O'Connor finds divine incarnation in the angelic or the afflicted child, or in the natural world, she never does so in a romantic relationship or that of a parent and child. In O'Connor's fiction 'human engagement is valuable only insofar as it directs the soul to salvation' (Gordon, 2000: 222). Gordon argues that this steady focus might be challenged by Sheppard's tale read as one of 'an innocent life lost by reason of [Sheppard's] inability to see the actual human face of his child before him' (2000: 233). For while Sheppard is punished for having his mind set on high-minded principles in his pursuit of the good, O'Connor's vision might be regarded likewise. That is, O'Connor's focus is set above the inter-human, only ever concerning the relationship between solitary (predominantly masculine) figures and God. O'Connor's need to tell the story as one of Sheppard's mistaken pursuit of secular morality serves to concentrate her narrative on his myopia while revealing, to the critical reader, her own.

Gordon ventures to suggest that in 'The Lame Shall Enter First' O'Connor is inadvertently giving a warning to herself. For all her attention to manners, conventions and locale, O'Connor's own beliefs keep the eyes of her fiction steadily on the horizon, 'on last things, on human choice under the aspect of eternity'. Thus Gordon challenges any reading that only affirms O'Connor's own faith, without paying attention to what she chooses to ignore or, more fairly perhaps, under-emphasize. For while it is true that inter-human questions of socio-political community are muted in her fiction, her reference points were clearly in the world. This observation of the world is what gives authenticity to the action in her fiction. So, while muted, in 'The Lame Shall Enter First' the social and political preoccupations of her geopolitical time are apparent, acting as indices of the society within which the story's action takes place, of a South where faith was entangled with the politics of sex and 'race', of religious, geographic and ideological divisions.

The hatred of abstraction that O'Connor dramatizes in Sheppard's character, and especially in his relationship to Norton, is one that reverberates with her political context, in which the Northern States were considered to be encroaching on the South, bringing ways of being that were secular, intellectualized and ultimately dangerous to the traditional ways of the South. In Tate's 1936 essay 'Religion and the Old South', with which O'Connor was familiar, Tate asserts that the northern industrialist has succeeded in 'making a society out of abstractions' and proposes that the southerner may 'take hold of his tradition' only 'by violence'.¹³ Moreover, at this time tense North-South relations were figured not simply as a struggle on these terms, but also became figured as a struggle against the implications of secular political ideologies: communism and anti-Americanism. The North, and especially the urban North, was understood much as Voegelin implies, as a hotbed of ethical corruption, a breeding ground and hiding place for communism. It is unsurprising, then, that in 'The Lame ...' Sheppard's intentions are socialistic in broad sweep (Bacon, 1993). That the telescope and the stars feature so prominently reflects the 1950s Cold War culture, in which the exploration of space was a political drama fuelled by

earthly rivalry. The optimism surrounding the exploration of space was accompanied by intense fear that attacks would come from above. The sky had become a source of deep fear, such that people's fears came to be repeatedly depicted as attacks that came from the sky to obliterate American life (Bacon, 1993).¹⁴

Even changing sexual mores and political struggles around race relations indicative of the soon-to-emerge civil rights movement make their shadowy appearance in the story, although, again, without having any real purchase on the action. They appear as casual references to the inter-human issues animating the political scene at the time. Rufus's dance in Norton's mother's bedroom – described by one commentator as 'an obscenely hermaphroditic phantom of his mother' (Giannone, 2000: 219) – has Rufus singing rock and roll, implying an association between the devil and 'youth culture', thus alluding to a contemporary culture anxious that sexual propriety and the clarity of gender roles were under threat from rebellious youth. Moreover, O'Connor has Rufus insult Leola the cook, calling her 'Aunt Jemima', reminding the reader of the exploitation that Sheppard unquestioningly tolerates on a daily basis.¹⁵

In these ways O'Connor references socio-political dynamics of the time but here, as in her *oeuvre* as a whole, they remain mere contexts. When Rufus combs his hair with Norton's mother's hairbrush he sweeps it, O'Connor tells us flatly, 'to the side, Hitler fashion' (1965: 157). Indeed, her cutting judgement of Sheppard's secular ethics takes precedence to such an extent that one can wonder, with Sarah Gordon, at the harshness of O'Connor's punishment of him. Surely the events of the Second World War deserved O'Connor's judgement more than Sheppard's plodding but well-intentioned ethical outlook? But even Nazism is merely a detail and cannot turn O'Connor from God to the inter-human aspects of the 'turbulent times'¹⁶ in which she wrote.

But as we have seen in the preceding section, this is not simply, as Gordon would argue, a *refusal* to engage in the implications of inter-human community, a *reduction* of the socio-political contexts to one drama, that between belief and secular ethics. That Nazism is so subordinated is *precisely O'Connor's response* to the changes that were surrounding her, in the South and in the world. For her, the socio-political context in which the full horrors of Nazism were becoming apparent and in which Cold War ideology and its associated fears raged, *was* this same drama. The battle between belief and secular ethics was key to understanding all that had gone awry in the world, including the events precipitating the Second World War. One cannot 'win' an argument with O'Connor by the socio-historical contextualization of her narratives, therefore, because for her these contexts remain muted *in order* to concentrate on what she believed, in line with Voegelin's thesis, was the principal question: the world's loss of faith. It is 'worse' than Gordon portrays it, therefore, because O'Connor doesn't merely mute the socio-political contexts and inter-human aspects of her stories; her convictions were such that she would have wished to

have actively translated those dimensions into the battle between faith and non-faith. If she was ‘haunted’ by the boxcars, she transformed that image into the portrayal of a character whose good intentions were leading him dangerously astray, whose life should be made into a fable warning of the dangers of following an ethics without God. ‘The Lame . . .’ should be read, therefore, not merely as an illustration of O’Connor’s belief, nor even as an illustration of her lack of attention to the socio-political and inter-human, but as both of these *and* also, as a *political* intervention on O’Connor’s part.¹⁷

As such, it is possible to consider O’Connor on the same terrain as Hannah Arendt, whose arguments concerning faith, the loss of faith and politics are more conventionally understood as interventions. Arendt’s writing may also, it is argued below, offer some subtle reflections on questions raised here that to a certain extent enable a reading of the debate surrounding ‘secular ethics’.

IV

Let me return to the speculative question concerning Arendt’s response to O’Connor. How, one wonders, would Arendt have responded to O’Connor’s ‘clown’, the story of the ‘self-regarding do-gooder’¹⁸ Sheppard?

Certainly Arendt would have found O’Connor’s textual punishment of Sheppard a harsh but unsurprising twist from a devotee of Eric Voegelin. Voegelin’s thesis was that the ‘essence of modernity’ had its roots in heretical anti-Christian Gnosticism that was alienated from the real world and rebelled against the divine ground of being. For him ‘modern’ philosophy had lost its sense of the divine Being and sought the transformation of the world through the atheistic deification of Man (Sandoz, 1997). His argument put fascism and communism together, as did Arendt’s concept of totalitarianism in a different sense, but it also sought to argue their equivalence with other modern movements such as positivism, Freudianism, existentialism, utopianism. These were indicative of the decline of faith and the rise of schools of thought that put man at the centre of the world order. Voegelin’s critical review (1953) of her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* gave Arendt the opportunity to articulate her opposition to his central thesis, especially as it attempted to account for National Socialism (see 1994 ‘Reply to Voegelin’).¹⁹ In his review, Voegelin admired Arendt’s book, but criticized her methodological habit of presenting the events of which she wrote in too fatalistic a manner. The story of Western disintegration, he believed, was not a fatal sequence. It arose not only due to the breakdown of institutions and modes of conduct, but also from the *spiritual* disease of agnosticism. For him totalitarianism was ‘an immanentist creed movement’ so that if one considered, as one should, ‘the rise of immanentist sectarianism since the high Middle Ages . . . [then] the totalitarian movements would not be simply revolutionary movements of functionally dislocated people, but immanentist creed movements in which medieval heresies have come to their fruition’ (1953, quoted in Cooper, 1999: 136).

One might suppose that Arendt's opposition to Voegelin's – and hence to O'Connor's – view that an 'immanentist heresy' associated with a loss of faith was threatening the world, would make her more sympathetic to Sheppard than to the judgement O'Connor passes on him. However, there is little about Sheppard that Arendt would obviously admire. Arendt, for her own reasons, would join O'Connor in a critique of the ethical stance implied by such a figure.

First, there is a sense in which Arendt would *also* regard Sheppard, despite himself, as a religious figure whose interventions in the world will falter. This is so exactly because Sheppard attempts to pursue 'the good'. As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition* (1959), the pursuit of 'the good' is always going to fail. In contrast to the model of action that Arendt is developing, goodness tends toward its own end. Whereas action proper is a sign of the human ability to begin, to – as it were – 'open up' to the world, good works are 'eschatological' (see Gottlieb, 2003: 157). Wherever goodness is perceived, even by the actor him or herself, it is no longer goodness. It may arise out of solidarity or duty, but goodness as such has a 'curious negative quality' that means the pursuit of the good cancels itself out; goodness has 'an essentially non-human, superhuman quality', making 'the lover of goodness an essentially *religious* figure' (Arendt, 1959: 68, emphasis added). Indeed, teases Arendt, even Jesus taught no man can be good: 'Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is, God' (Arendt, 1959: 66 quoting Luke 8: 19).²⁰ The same thought occurs in Matthew, Arendt continues in a footnote, where 'Jesus warns against piety. Piety "cannot appear unto men" but only unto God, who "seeth in secret"' (1959: 321, fn. 85). Arendt goes so far as to suggest that 'the whole life story of Jesus seems to testify how love for goodness arises out of the insight that no man can be good' (1959: 66). Sheppard's confidence in his own attempt to do good, his own awareness of his 'good deed' and his self-congratulatory attitude in relation to Rufus Johnson, would all suggest that Sheppard would be a target for Arendt's criticism. For Arendt, goodness has a paradoxical 'ruinous quality' (1959: 68) that, as Susannah Gottlieb has astutely observed, associates it with her messianic vision of 'the ruin to which the world would succumb were it not for the redemptive power of action' (2003: 157).

Second, having no 'outward phenomenal manifestation' (1959: 66), 'good works' have a 'worldlessness' that differentiates them from action; goodness lacks the capacity to *appear* in the world. Goodness as an activity can *never* appear in public without destroying its essential quality: 'The moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake' (1959: 66). Thus Sheppard's pursuit of the good necessarily entails a retreat from the shared world. Sheppard's literal bringing home of Rufus – into the 'private' sphere – is different from action 'proper', which is orientated to the shared, public world, the space of appearance. For Arendt, goodness in its purity does not belong – indeed, cannot exist – within the public realm. But Sheppard attempts to pursue 'goodness' and to make his private sphere

operate as if it were a public space. All that is associated with the private realm – particularity, affection and love – is demoted in this house where even the need to mourn the mother is ignored. The attempt to make the home operate in this way leads to problems that Arendt would associate with the attempt to make goodness appear in public.

In *On Revolution* (1963b), Arendt discussed the inability of goodness to appear, and to found political institutions, in relation to Melville's *Billy Budd*. She read the story as a commentary on the 'men of the French Revolution' (1963b: 77) who had proposed that 'man is good in a state of nature and becomes wicked in society' (1963b: 78). Billy Budd is a foundling, the 'natural man' who comes from outside society such that the story explores this reversal of the notion of original sin upon which the French Revolution was built. In the place of original sin, Budd personifies original goodness. But, argues Arendt, Melville's story dramatizes the violence which goodness harbours, precisely *because* it is part of '“natural” nature' (1963b: 78). When natural nature confronts wickedness – 'nature's depravity' – it does not attempt to persuade, for it has no conception of temptation and is thus ignorant of the argumentative reasoning processes by which temptation is warded off (1963b: 82). Instead of persuasion, it acts violently. Budd murders the man who bore false witness against him, eliminating wickedness (1963b: 78) and displaying the violence by which goodness confronts evil. Herein lies the problem with goodness; that is, that the good man 'because he encountered evil', and because he must confront and eliminate it, becomes a wrong-doer himself (1963b: 79). Billy Budd shows that goodness is not capable of founding institutions because it is 'incapable of learning the arts of persuading and arguing' (1963b: 82); it is not weak but strong, perhaps more so than wickedness, and strikes with 'elementary violence' (1963b: 83). Institutions cannot be founded on goodness; they cannot respond to things outside the world, 'whether angels or devils' (1963b: 79), which is why Arendt reads Melville as arguing that any absolute will spell 'doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm' (1963b: 79). Sheppard's story might be read likewise as a doomed attempt to follow the path of goodness; he is attempting to give to the world, but his attempt to do so means he withdraws from it. In the course of events his pursuit of the good encounters evil and, although by a more indirect route than Billy Budd, Sheppard causes the death of pure goodness in the figure of Norton.²¹

In place of and in contrast to goodness, Arendt would of course offer her understanding of the term 'action'. Action doesn't transcend the world; it doesn't seek an otherworldly salvation. Rather, it testifies to the *human* capacity to begin in which it is ontologically rooted. Never one to allow the terms of religious discourse to 'belong' to religion alone, Arendt grants action a 'miraculous' quality, meaning that the potential to appear is rooted in the appearance of human beings in the world, in natality, which one can only witness and at which one can only marvel. Indeed, the public realm may be what inspires men to dare the extraordinary and insofar as it does 'all things are safe' (1959: 184) because action 'redeems' the world by

interrupting the automatic quality of life; it intervenes for the sake of the world.²² Unlike goodness, action is orientated to the public realm and the common world. Unlike goodness, action requires a shared space of appearance in which plurality is preserved.

Third, Arendt might well have considered Sheppard's story an example of unresponsiveness to the world. For while Sheppard's pursuit of good does not make him an evil man – 'the sad fact is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do evil or good' (Arendt, 1977)²³ – it does make him both naive and impotent. Sheppard's pursuit of the good approaches has an almost automatic quality that makes him fatefully unresponsive to events and people around him. In this he displays an attenuated sense of reality, the critique of which underlies the Arendtian project (Curtis, 1999). He is in danger, for all the this-worldliness with which the term 'secular' is associated, of becoming unresponsive to his immediate inter-human world. In the story this is played out most poignantly in Sheppard's unresponsiveness to his son, Norton, whose requests for comfort are refused or dismissed as Sheppard prioritizes his 'good works' project: Rufus. Further, it is apparent in Sheppard's failure to respond adequately to the power of the terms of Rufus's discourse on the younger boy's imagination. His response to Rufus's invocation of hell, for example, is articulated in the terms of 'scientific rationality'. Sheppard attempts to remove Norton's fear that his mother might be suffering in hell with the comment that 'there is no reliable evidence' for the existence of hell, as if the language of scientific method ('evidence', 'reliability') were all that is required to counter Rufus's deployment of these terms.²⁴ Sheppard fails to appreciate that Rufus's words are not merely based in faith (if they are at all), but are part of Rufus's intervention between father and son. Whatever Rufus's true beliefs, in this instance the notion of hell is deployed by Rufus as part of a power play, and not as part of an innocent debate between faith and non-faith. Sheppard's naivety about Rufus forces him to argue in terms inadequate to the task, just as Arendt argued there was a tendency to set up the debate about 'secularism' on the terms of faith, which gave the advantage to the latter. Speaking at a conference in 1953, Arendt objected to the way in which the conference rubric displayed an assumption common to arguments such as Voegelin's, that not only oppose secular outlooks in the name of faith but also seek to drag secular outlooks onto the terrain of faith regarding them as perverse forms of faith (in Arendt, 1994).²⁵

As this suggests, however much Arendt would criticize the figure of Sheppard, she would nevertheless disagree with O'Connor, as she did with Voegelin, that the faults of Sheppard and his ilk were to be explained in terms of loss of faith.

Arendt argued forcefully that it was not faith and its loss that characterized the present era, but the events that made *doubt* central to all modern life. Here Arendt is referring principally to Galileo's demonstrations, registered most clearly at the philosophical level by Descartes, where Being and Appearance 'part company forever' (1959: 250). Descartes' doubt had

resolved itself into a treatise on method, and it is this tradition of thought that lends Sheppard his discourse of rationality and evidence. But Sheppard mistakenly misunderstands his own ‘modern’ attitude as succeeding Christian faith, as both coming after and as superior to Christianity, to such an extent that he fails to recognize that his response to historical events coexists with other responses to doubt, including those who had taken Kierkegaard’s leap into faith, because they are both attempts to resolve the doubt that pervades the modern world. Indeed, the fact that Norton can find through that most modern of scientific inventions – the telescope²⁶ – confirmation that his mother was ‘up there’ waving to him, highlights the sense in which, while modern instruments can magnify and improve the sense-perception that had been put into doubt, they cannot of themselves relieve that doubt. Nor can they persuade a believer into non-belief, let alone confirm the necessity of so doing. Indeed, as Arendt asserts, modern science emerges from and requires doubt; doubt is the condition of possibility of all modern science.

But equally, insofar as it exists in this world, in this same present with its same history, so too does *faith* ‘include’ doubt. Without some place for doubt, one might say, faith becomes a refusal to dwell in this present world; not because belief has to shade into doubt, but because it has to be understood as a *response* to doubt. Arendt makes the argument in her reply to Voegelin by reference to Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*. The reference is employed in order to suggest that doubt is carried into ‘authentic faith’:

Modern belief, which has leapt from doubt into belief, and modern atheism, which has leapt from doubt into non-belief, have this in common: both are grounded in modern spiritual secularism and have evaded its inherent perplexities by a violent resolution once and for all. Indeed, it may be that the leap into belief has done more to undermine authentic faith than the usually trite arguments of professional enlighteners or the vulgar arguments of professional atheists. The leap from doubt into belief could not but carry doubt into belief, so that religious life itself began to assume that curious tension between atheistic blasphemous doubt and belief as we know it from the great psychological masterpieces of Dostoevsky. (1953/1994: 369)

Later, in *The Human Condition*, she refers instead to Kierkegaard:

No one perhaps explored its [Cartesian doubt’s] true dimensions more honestly than Kierkegaard when he leaped – not from reason as he thought, but from doubt – into belief, thereby carrying doubt into the very heart of modern religion. (1959: 250–1)

In this way Arendt’s manoeuvre makes symmetrical Sheppard’s and O’Connor’s ‘mistake’. Again, one can read Sheppard with and ‘against’ O’Connor insofar as they both deny the condition of doubt that is ‘the human condition’ by resolving it in one direction: both attempt to ‘still’ the tension that arises between their different modes of living in the world. One might say that a stance such as O’Connor’s risks the denial of modernity and its

implications, while that exemplified in the character Sheppard risks the denial of alternative responses to modernity.

Sheppard's tragedy, then, is that he allows doubt its centrality within his belief system too late. Belatedly, because thinking, 'though it may be the most solitary of activities, is never altogether without a partner and without company' (Arendt, 1959: 67), it is in Sheppard's reflection upon his actions that he recognizes – even experiences – plurality. He recognizes that his actions might legitimately be understood not as the pursuit of goodness but in an opposing fashion: baldly stated, not goodness but neglect. This 'revelation' comes when he allows Rufus's words – 'Satan has you in his power' – to enter his considerations. But his experience is a revelation that we do not have to understand as coming from God, as O'Connor would have us do; the words he recalls are after all *Rufus's* words, not the words of God. Rufus's accusation becomes part of Sheppard's thought process. It is an existential experience of the 'two in oneness' of thought that allows him to reflect critically on his actions in the world. This admission of plurality leads to the acknowledgement of the partiality of his convictions and dislodges his previous unthinking assessment of himself as engaged in the pursuit of 'good'.

It is tempting to make a similar manoeuvre with regard to O'Connor in that, although she always asserted her faith in the strongest and most uncompromising of terms, there are times when she admitted of doubt – such as in her letter to Alfred Corn (Cash, 2002: 247), where it is significant that she reveals that it was the existence of other religions that once gave her (brief) pause, and where to comfort him she reaches for the prayer of St Peter 'Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief' (Cash, 2002: 247), or in her letters to her friend 'A' (now known to be Betty Hester), where she shows support for her friend's troubled relationship to Catholicism (although she admits elsewhere – in a letter to Cecil Dawkins – that she found it difficult to remain patient with Hester), or in her long friendship with atheist Maryat Lee. There is, however, little point in making O'Connor less religious (nor for that matter, as some have done, Arendt more Christian [see Bernauer, 1987]) because it is the story itself that leads us in such a direction.

The point is more the necessity of recognizing one's 'leap' as a leap and, consequently, of maintaining the ability to imagine oneself otherwise, the capacity for 'inner' plurality (Curtis, 1999: 63). It is in this respect that Arendt's work can be regarded as a forerunner of a contemporary political theorist such as William Connolly (2000), *inter alios*, in whose work the religious/secular distinction is refused.²⁷ Being open to plurality can, as Connolly's reading of Deleuze suggests, open us to the hilarity of having any faith at all, and to the potential – actual – clown in all of us, believers and non-believers alike. Perhaps one only need recall O'Connor's awareness that 'I'm the devil in this one' to get a glimpse of the moments in which such a movement potentially resides. Ultimately it is from this, 'the "naked fact of plurality"', and not from any ethical code, that all action must spring' (Curtis, 1999).

V

Unsurprisingly perhaps, this discussion of O'Connor and Arendt does not enable one to provide definitive 'answers' to the numerous and varied questions raised in contemporary work on the (im)possibility of secular ethics. It does, however, potentially recast some of the lines of the debate in interesting, generative ways.

The discussion of O'Connor adds weight to the observation, made by Talal Asad (2003) among others, that it is wrong to presume that the 'religious motive' for arguments or actions can be easily discerned. For while there is of course plenty of evidence for O'Connor's 'religiosity' in her fiction writing, as well as in her lectures and letters, her depiction of a non-believer such as Sheppard as a foolish man whose fate is to lose his only son is not in any obvious way motivated by 'religion'. It is certainly contextualized by O'Connor's understanding of how the loss of faith operated in the social and political realm, but as such it is as political a comment, one motivated by socio-political issues of her time, as it is religious. Indeed, the two are entwined for O'Connor as the infamous 'gas chambers' comment suggests. To argue that O'Connor's work should be regarded as political intervention is not to escape the religious therefore, but to place 'the religious' in the world and as a response to the world.

O'Connor's admiration for Arendt is in part what gives us licence to make this manoeuvre in a re-reading of 'The Lame Shall Enter First'. Not only because her admiration illustrates the interest that O'Connor herself had in political configurations of the changing world in which she lived – to the extent of being 'haunted' – but also because in reading O'Connor alongside Arendt one is obliged to question how a figure such as Sheppard – weak, ineffectual, pathetic – comes to represent non-belief?²⁸ One suspects that this also happens in contemporary debates around ethics wherever the 'secular figure' is metaphorically stripped of his or her convictions revealing the 'true' motivations underlying them. With the 'perversion' of faith exposed, the ethical project in which s/he was engaged is revealed as a wrong-headed calamity: a dog's dinner. Arendt offers the opportunity to dismiss this recurring figure as incorrectly drawn in opposition to a 'religious' figure. Her reconfiguration of the oppositions that continue to structure much debate emerges as important and fruitful.

In imagining Arendt's response to Sheppard it becomes clear that Arendt would also have her own critique to level, one that has little to do with his lack of religious belief. In fact, Arendt's arguments in *The Human Condition* provide something of a rejoinder to Derrida's well-known suggestion that, given the conditions of undecidability in which the decision is taken, with any decision one is asked to act like a 'knight of faith', insofar as her arguments lead one to notice how, likewise, those who act from a position of faith do so within a context of undecidability, that is, of doubt. This doubt is shared, in other words, by all who dwell in modernity, where modernity is characterized qualitatively by the events that have established doubt as procedurally integral to contemporary life. Arendt references

Dostoevsky, but the modernity of which she speaks is also philosophical and scientific, governing the processes by which rational method has sought to contend with necessary doubt. It is, furthermore, institutionalized in the ‘secularization’ process within which political institutions have developed. Importantly, she argues, both believers and non-believers are obliged to respond to events in their shared history: both ‘leap’.²⁹

It is the possibility of recognizing that shared history that provides the glimmer of hope for a shared present and future. Although for Arendt, the world needed to be ‘saved’, there was no implication that this meant that humankind should appeal to a transcendent Being. It would be saved only if actors within it orientated themselves toward the public realm, the world shared in common with others. If, in expressing her hope in the human capacity for beginning, founded in natality, she returns us to mystery and wonder (the ‘miraculous’), it is tenuous to read this as a simple smuggling back in of religion. Rather, Arendt was pointing to the evidence that humankind has shown a remarkable capacity to ‘begin anew’, to act. The contribution of this discussion has been to highlight the sense in which that action both emerges from and takes place within conditions of doubt. Moreover, the recognition of these common conditions, the sharing of a present formed in relation to this common past, together with the recognition that we will continue to leap in different directions, can only be enabling insofar as these acknowledgements underscore the simultaneous commonality and the plurality of human lives. The world is saved from ruin not by the articulation of any faith or secular-based ethical code upon which all must agree, but by action that serves – not by its results but in its very performance³⁰ – as the sign of this human capacity to use and to preserve their being-in-common.

Lest this sound platitudinous, verging on as ‘vague and soppy and sentimental’ a note as that struck by the versions of weak Christianity that so riled O’Connor, it is worth recalling that, just as there was a certain amount of friction between Arendt and Voegelin, so certainly would there have been between Arendt and O’Connor. Voegelin depicted Arendt’s work as a version of the ‘immanentist heresy’ against which he pitted his own; Arendt was by no means sentimental in her reply. To allow the events of the Second World War to be understood within a ‘secularization thesis’ was anathema to Arendt. In her response to his 1953 review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she dealt, *inter alia*, with his objection to her description of the Nazi concentration camps as ‘hell on earth’. She argued that this description was both accurate and objective:

When I used the image of Hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally: it seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise will not be able to establish it on earth; but it is not so certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about Hell. In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on

earth is more 'objective', that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature. (Arendt, 1953/1994: 404)

In her defence of her book, as in her defence of the need to preserve commonality and plurality, Arendt moved with an assured clarity and, it can be said, with a capacity to be 'cutting' that would have rivalled O'Connor's narrative twists. To accept Arendt's depiction of the necessity of 'action' in order to preserve the world is also to accept the need to enter the public realm boldly, for the political realm requires the capacity to cut, to redistribute language, to reconfigure the configurations of others. And such a task is especially pressing in situations in which those configurations entail or amount to a politics based on the suppression of plurality and the denial of doubt.

Notes

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1. This will inevitably be a speculative discussion since there is no record of this question having been asked of Arendt.
2. Arendt's own contribution to the special issue, 'Action and "The Pursuit of Happiness"' (1962), became part of *On Revolution* (1963b).
3. 'Sade: the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions). . . . As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, such redistribution is always achieved by cutting' (Barthes, 1975: 6).
4. Most clearly exemplified in the work of Derrida, this is a turn I understand, with de Vries (1999), not as a reassertion of theological truths, but a consideration of their trace. Derrida's 'adieu' captures what he regards as the aporetic nature of the dismissal of, the a-dieu to, mystery in the name of secular knowledge that attempts to cut away absolute alterity to leave existence free of all religious overtones. For Derrida, the dismissal that tries to bid farewell to God – this continual refutation of religious truth claims itself reaffirming religion's 'ever provisional survival' (de Vries, 1999: 4) – seems always to re-orientate itself to some horizon of gathering which reinstates an ultimate ethical witness. Repeatedly, conceptions of gathering are articulated that involve response and responsibility to the other, giving oneself 'back to and up to the other. To every other and the utterly other' (Derrida, 2002). Others too have argued that attempts to reach for an ideal secular community based upon transparent relationships will always run the risk of violating the distance among singularities that is at the heart of existential humanism, such that those projects inheriting its concerns tend to reinstate some notion of mystery or wonder.
5. This despite the fact that, as her biographer Jean Cash points out (2002: 169), she was an intellectual herself as her reading of Voegelin alone illustrates.

6. She is being deliberately curt because she is replying to the ‘mis-reading’ of Cecil Dawkins, who had found Freud in her portrayal of Sheppard (O’Connor, 1979: 490).
7. By Rufus’s warped versions of ‘the Truth’ (Giannone, 2000).
8. The writer should not promote a version of the good but reveal the ultimate reality in a world where – ‘as a result of the Fall’ – that reality had been weakened in human beings.
9. Asked to encompass the distance between the disparities in O’Connor’s fiction – the distance between ‘sadistic diction’ and the ‘numinous diction of spiritual excess’, ‘the mundane and the spiritual, the high and the low, the pornographic and the biblical’ – the reader is torturously stretched as on a rack (Yaeger, 1996: 196).
10. After the latter had written that, to his mind, the devil’s voice in O’Connor’s stories was always her own, a thesis she denied but found amusing.
11. Her argument was clearly influenced by her reading of Voegelin.
12. Underlining the point, O’Connor has Sheppard exclaim ‘Oh my God!’ twice (1965: 164, 168), pray ‘God give me strength’ (1965: 182) and three times describe himself as trying to ‘save’ Rufus (1965: 180).
13. Moreover, to be a Catholic at this time gave one a particular relationship to the majority Protestant South (see Bacon, 1993).
14. As we know from Cash’s (2002) biography, O’Connor had had her brush with McCarthyism while at Yadoo.
15. We do not get to hear O’Connor’s views on this relationship, as Leola remains a mere context incidental to the story, as if she were there simply to allow the children to eat in the story without having to depict Sheppard putting his care into cooking. Instead he serves it up to them, ready prepared, like his words of advice. Although, curiously, there seems to have been a scene that O’Connor cut from the story – as Norton, with no apparent motivation to lie, tells his father ‘he danced with Leola’ a scene the story does not describe.
16. The phrase is Arendt’s.
17. See Bewes (forthcoming) for a different take on this same subject. Bewes makes the argument that O’Connor’s ‘metaphysical’ impulses cannot be written out of her fiction, nor can they be said to define it; indeed, Bewes argues for a reading of O’Connor in terms of a Deleuzian immanence, such that ‘there is nothing transcendental, as such, in O’Connor’s stories’. Our response to the text shouldn’t be thought of as ‘interpretation’, he argues, situated across a divide from the literary nature of the text, such that, for example, its lack of social commentary might become a criticism of the fictional text. Nor should the text be approached as if it were unable to refer to its own ‘literary’ nature; there are moments in O’Connor’s stories when Bewes argues that they do just this. Correlatively, the politics of the text is not to be approached in terms of O’Connor’s representation of events, but operates, Bewes argues, on the plane within which we encounter it.
18. As Robert Fitzgerald called him in the introduction to the collection *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965).
19. This said, Arendt also recognized Voegelin’s stature; as noted above, she accepted an invitation to co-edit a journal to celebrate his work on the occasion of his 60th birthday.
20. Arendt’s surprising use of Jesus to support her argument that those who aim

for goodness disconnect themselves from the world is indicative of her reading of Christianity generally. Simultaneously she seeks to argue that ‘unworldliness’ is a characteristic of Christianity – and this was also part of her critique of institutionalized Christianity (Bernauer, 1987) – while suggesting that it may even have been cautioned against by Jesus himself. Jesus appears in Arendt’s texts as a quotable authority and only that. This is an important point here, for it displays the sense in which Arendt would wrest from Christianity the terms that it would seek to regard as belonging within its discourse.

21. Here one can see why Arendt’s thoughts on goodness can lead to a conservative individualism. If one shouldn’t attempt to pursue the good as an absolute, what room is there to judge one’s own interventions and those of others? How can Arendt advocate the role of principles while disallowing a role for ‘goodness’? The problematic qualities of her critique of ‘goodness’ as the foundation of social institutions have been pointed out in the secondary literature, as indeed have the conservative qualities of her version of democracy.

22. Somewhat surprisingly, Arendt’s praise of human action is *also* praise of something ‘unworldly’ (1959: 95). Action is unworldly insofar as it has to be actualized; it has to be accompanied by speech (1959: 158) for speech materializes and memorializes the new things that shine forth so that they might be remembered: ‘without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wandering of nomad tribes’ (1959: 183). So while Arendt insists that authentic action’s full meaning is in the performance itself, it nevertheless loses its non-teleological aspect as soon as any product results. Political action has to be memorable (Kateb, 2000: 133), but when it is remembered through human speech it enters the world of fabrication. Action, like goodness, is also inevitably ruined. This ruination of action is necessary if the fleeting nature of action is not to pass ‘as if it had never been’ (Arendt, 1959: 95). But, as Gottlieb (2003) points out, the pessimism to which this thought might lead is refused by Arendt as strongly as she refuses the optimism that leads to complacency and inaction. For although action will pass into the world of fabrication, action begins from elsewhere, from a perspective which has to trust the world as a place fit for action and speech, as a place fit for human appearance.

23. Likewise, religiosity is not to be blamed for the world’s ills: ‘the pious resignation to God’s will seems like a pocket knife compared with atomic weapons’ (1994: 380).

24. This is also Arendt’s point about forgiveness; see ‘What is Authority?’ in *Between Past and Future* (1963a).

25. Second, Arendt sought to distinguish her argument from the equally unsatisfactory accounts of the social scientists who, she believed, mistook the world as composed of ‘functions’, so that religion and communism become equated as ‘ideologies’ which function to anaesthetize and control the population.

26. Arendt gives the telescope a privileged position in her arguments in *The Human Condition* (1959).

27. Talal Asad also argues that the distinction is unhelpful, not least because, although the notion of ‘the secular’ works through a series of recurring oppositions, its meaning shifts and changes over history. ‘The secular’ is neither ‘singular in origin nor stable in identity’ (2003: 25).

28. As it does in other of O’Connor’s works. In *The Violent Bear it Away*, as in

‘Good Country People’, the non-believer and ‘intellectuals’ alike tend to receive this same treatment.

29. Leaping into faith with its ultimates provides no more assurance against political catastrophes than does leaping into non-belief or scientific method. As Arendt argued in the 1972 seminar transcribed in Hill (1979), totalitarianism cannot be avoided by any given set of values; those who are convinced of their values become attached to the support they provide, rather than the values themselves, such that the ‘bannister’ can be exchanged for a different set of values. She comments: ‘I do not believe that we can stabilize the situation in which we have been since the seventeenth century in any final way’ (Hill, 1979: 314).

30. ‘Action does not have an “end” because the end (telos) . . . lies in the activity itself: “action has no end” ’ (1959: 209).

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