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Gary Sloan



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Mystery, magic, and malice: O'Connor and the Misfit

Gary Sloan

- 1 Throughout her brief but celebrated career, Flannery O'Connor groused that she must write for people "who think God is dead"¹ and who are therefore impervious to the Christian mysteries. Her own theology was impeccably Athanasian :

... all my own experience has been that of the writer who believes, ... in Pascal's words, in the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars." This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead.²
- 2 Her devil, too, was no wispy abstraction, diffusing into metaphor, but, like the one in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, palpably "precise" and indefatigably afoot. The devil, she insisted, is a "real spirit" with a "specific personality for every occasion," not "simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy" (M&M 117, 168).
- 3 While in her fiction O'Connor eschewed overt homily, her intent was ultimately proselytical. O'Connor, as Jill Baumgaertner notes, thought "God used her and her talents as an instrument" of divine revelation, that she was a "channel for God's grace and the Holy Spirit's breath" (10). As a conduit of divinity, she felt morally compelled to disseminate the sacramental vision to a benighted world ignorant of the ways of God to man. "The novelist," she said, "doesn't write to express himself, he doesn't write simply to render a vision he believes true, rather he renders his vision so that it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader" (M&M 162).
- 4 Transplanting her vision of God, let alone of Satan, was a procedure benetted round with difficulty because "religious feeling," she thought, "has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental" (M&M 161). Liberal theology had dissipated into secularism, for it operated on the precept "that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention" (HB 479). Since the church colluded with science to mythicize Jehovah, to transmogrify him and his adversary, Satan, from self-existent beings into vaporous

figments of imagination, her Christ-haunted heroes were dismissed as nugatory buffoons :

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. It is almost inconceivable to this reader that such could be the case. (M&M 204)

- 5 Had O'Connor lived longer (she died in 1964), she might have been compelled to reappraise the sensibilities of her audience. For readers, at least those who publish, have proved ingratiatingly receptive to her "prophet-freaks." In the grisly den of secularism, the university, critics have on the whole taken them as seriously as did O'Connor. Occasionally, the solemnity intumesces into the grandiose.
- 6 The response to *The Misfit*, the mass murderer and prophet manqué in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is instructive. He is, in the eye of one beholder or another, reminiscent of Oedipus (Scouten 63), Job (Johansen 38), Ulysses--Dante's--(Donahoo 32), Hamlet, Raskolnikov (Marks 26), Calvin, (Carlson 255), Pascal (Cobb; Hoffman 41), Baudelaire and Eliot (Currie 144-46). Abetting O'Connor's visionary conception of her art, critics have elucidated *The Misfit's* tutorial function. He sees "what is important in life and what is not" (Kaplan 120) and insists "on the plain truth against a more pleasing rearrangement of reality" (Renner 128). He has "credibility and authority" (Orvell 132), a keen "religious view of reality" (Desmond 92), a "scholarly awareness of alternatives" (Montgomery 12), and the wisdom to see that a concept of sin is essential to human significance (Currie 145). He is a "universal man" (Nisly 28) "who asks hard questions of life" (Johansen 38), poses "morally serious questions about human experience," and is "connotative of the eternal misfit, Christ" (Bonney 347). He is "admirably designed as an agent of divine wrath" (Marks 24). With his ministerial thunderbolt, he galvanizes the spiritually negligent: "In real life, the reader, who now wears the grandmother's shoes, cannot plead innocence. If he had not been shocked into knowledge before he read the story, then the story should be his education" (Currie 154). *The Misfit* is also an edifying exemplar of divine chastening: "The agony of *The Misfit's* entanglement in the maze of life should bring the reader to an understanding based on faith in the love of God for man, faith in the manhood of Christ and the resurrection of His body" (Carlson 256).
- 7 Oddly muted in the prolific commentary is the hostile or indifferent response O'Connor expected. The chorus of praise suggests grace may be more abundant than she thought.
- 8 Had O'Connor conceived *The Misfit* as nothing more than a wry bumpkin in the Faulknerian mode, some bad seed in a Bundren-like clan, one could, with spirit unperturbed, savor his countrified black humor ("Lady, there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip"), terse lethality ("She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life"), and aw-shucks candor ("Nome, I ain't a good man, but I ain't the worst in the world neither.") In reality, O'Connor imagined her felonious rube gifted with the high perception, contemptuous finally of the low enjoying power. She considered him superior to the educated "Liberal"³ because *The Misfit* has no interest in humanistic or even humane schemes of salvation. Not only is he indifferent to sociopolitical forms of remediation but, more importantly for O'Connor, he broods on Jesus Christ. In O'Connor's fictive domain, compulsive angst concerning Jesus, even when, or especially when, it begets indignation and violence, signals heroic integrity⁴. She, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, likes a man man enough to be damned. She had no use for

what Stephen Crane called "obvious" Christians, all patter and simpering complaisance. She preferred point-blank ferocity--fierceness being equated, in her mind, with spiritual profundity. In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James says "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it." What does O'Connor make of The Misfit? Does he, in James' word, "fructify"?

- 9 In a sense, yes. At the dramatic center of the story is the grandmother, an obvious Christian who, before her encounter with The Misfit, has proceeded on the assumption that the examined life is not worth living. Through his stark delineation of the moral rigors that devolve on disciples of Christ ("it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him") and his untender mercies to her family, The Misfit teases the grandmother into thought. After momentary skepticism--"Maybe He didn't raise the dead"-- she is primed for her moment of grace⁵, connects with The Misfit, and dies redeemed.⁶ Viewed as a catalyst for the grandmother's epiphany, The Misfit is a fruitful device.
- 10 He is considerably less fructifying when approached as a reflective agnostic or a rebuke to infidels. Many commentators have deemed The Misfit a logician of no mean wit. He is invoked as a modern Pascal who wagers wrong (Cobb), a rigorously empirical doubting Thomas (Scouten 63), a mental "thoroughbred with a curious and active nose" (Currie 149), an instinctive scholar plumbing "the nature of reality" (Jones 837), a thinker "recalling age-old debates about theodicy" (Johansen 38), a rationalist who "has to know 'why'" (Feeley 75), one whose course of violence is pursued with steadfast "lucidity" (Gossett 81), his existential philosophy sharply etched (Feeley 73). O'Connor herself seems to have fancied him a thinking-man's skeptic. The grandmother's "wits are no match," she said, "for the Misfit's" (M&M 111).
- 11 The Misfit, argues Robert Brinkmeyer, constituted a therapeutic self-examination for O'Connor :

... The Misfit tests O'Connor's religious faith by forcing her to work through the challenges that his rebellion poses. O'Connor faces her religious doubts and questionings in her interplay with The Misfit. ... The Misfit's religious doubts, which are extensions of O'Connor's own, are those that she must not only acknowledge, but also respond to, and in the interchange learn and grow. (162)
- 12 If Brinkmeyer is right, O'Connor's inner agnostic seems to have been an intellectual cream puff. A sophisticated skeptic can marshal evidence against Christian theism undreamt of in The Misfit's callow philosophy. His philosophy is in fact rather muddled. At times, he seems to lose track of his discourse and to wander into a quagmire of contradiction. The reader's own tracking is hampered by O'Connor's penchant for allegorical methods. Some of The Misfit's comments work better on the anagogic level than the literal--for example, his inability to remember why he was imprisoned⁷, his seeing neither cloud nor sun in daytime (127), and his homogenizing all crimes (130-31). Still, beneath the anagogic elements, as through a glass darkly, one can descry a real toad in the allegorical garden. While The Misfit has been associated with postlapsarian Man, doing time in penal-colony Earth (Marks; Montgomery; Eggenschwiler), the link will not bear much strain. The Misfit, as his father told him, is a different breed of dog from [his] brothers and sisters" (128).
- 13 The putative breed is Faustian seeker: "... it's some," his father said, "that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything" (128-29). The paternal

prognostication, as it turned out, was hyperbolic. Although in his wanderlust The Misfit sees much and does much, he does not learn as much as he thinks. He remains a lapsed Fundamentalist locked into incarnational models of deity. Had he been into Biblical scholarship, he might have mulled observations like the following, broached centuries ago: "The doctrine that Jesus had been God in human form was not finalized until the fourth century," and "Jesus himself certainly never claimed to be God" (Armstrong 81). Had The Misfit known that "detailed theories about the crucifixion as an atonement for some 'original sin' of Adam did not emerge until the fourth century" (Armstrong 87), he might have concluded that his imprisonment for a crime he could not remember was a mistake after all. He might have pondered an "allegedly loving Father" who "pretended to love his mortal children while preparing for them a hell sadistic beyond belief; who ordained all things in advance, yet held humans entirely responsible for the errors he knew they would make, who talked of love and ruled by fear" (Walker 8). Had he whiffed the writings of Symeon, a medieval abbot, he might have ruminated on the observation that "God [is] not an external, objective fact but an essentially subjective and personal enlightenment" (Armstrong 224). Gnostic authors like Monoimus would have told him the same: "Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. ... [Y]ou will find him in yourself" (Pagels xix-xx). While from such sources, he might not have learned why it is, he would have learned what it is. He might have begun to suspect he had been theologically shortchanged by a reactionary author who thought the times were out of joint because people were sloughing off ancient superstitions.

- 14 As it is, The Misfit remains shrouded in them. His conception of God is circumscribed by a primitive mindset: He thinks deity is authenticated by magic feats. Like Hazel Motes, his cousin in eschatological literalism, he thinks the theological crux is whether "what's dead stays that way." What impresses him about Christ is that he could raise the dead. Had The Misfit, granted his wish (132), been contemporaneous with Jesus, the Prince of Peace might have reviled him with other vipers who would not believe without a sign (Matthew 12:38-39). Notwithstanding his "scholarly look," The Misfit's professed affinity with Christ ("It was the same with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime" [131]) has not, it seems, impelled him to scrutinize the gospels or to seek out commentary. True to his boast, he needs no help: In his cultural milieu, the wisdom of the wise is foolishness. A thaumaturgic bent, fine as a characterizing device, becomes suspect when it subserves an authorial vision of universal Truth.
- 15 Reports of The Misfit's skepticism have been greatly exaggerated. Belief is the dominant gene, doubt recessive, almost nil. He acknowledges the miraculous efficacy of prayer while disavowing any need for it :
- "If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."
 "That's right," The Misfit said.
 "Well then, why don't you pray?..."
 "I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself." (130)
- 16 In response to the grandmother's mindless imploration "Jesus, Jesus," he tacitly affirms his belief in the historicity of an immaculate Christ. "Yes'm," he mused, "Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same with him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime..." (131).
- 17 His reputedly agnostic sentiments are problematic since they are appended to an unequivocal declaration of belief :

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead." The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." (132)

18 Since The Misfit is a devout practitioner of meanness, the alleged inexorable consequent of a mendacious Jesus, one might suppose--many have--that he has wagered against the existence of a wonder-working Jesus. If so, he is hedging his bet. Since his apologia begins with a querulous assertion of belief (Jesus did what he should not have done), his either-or proposition⁸ sounds like a rhetorical contrivance to justify his obdurate criminality. Like Hazel Motes, The Misfit wants to believe "Jesus is a liar," but cannot. He is fettered to a literalistic paradigm.

19 The ambiguity extends to his peroration. His words can mean either he wishes he had proof Jesus raised the dead, the usual interpretation, or the obverse: he wishes he had evidence Jesus did *not* :

"Maybe He didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled...

"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there" he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." (132)

20 In the infernal reading, The Misfit wishes to persist in a life of crime without fear of divine retribution. O'Connor characterized The Misfit's shooting of the grandmother, when she touches him and calls him one of her "babies," as "a recoil, a horror at her humanness" (*HB* 389). He may be recoiling even more from his own humanness. The murder is perhaps a vicarious attempt at self-slaughter: He seeks to destroy his compulsion to believe because, in his moral computations, belief cannot be squared with pleasure.

21 Given The Misfit's confusing (and confused) protestations, the question irresistibly arises: Was O'Connor, notwithstanding her disavowals (Hawkes 400), on the side of the devil without knowing it? Instead of strengthening her faith by surmounting challenges to it, in the way that Brinkmeyer outlines above, was she, rather, through an unholy alliance with The Misfit, venting a pleasurable meanness of her own? Throughout her fiction, notes John Hawkes, one of her frequent correspondents, "there are numerous examples to indicate that the author's view of 'everybody else' is exactly the same as her devil's view" (403). In a provocative psycho-sketch, Josephine Hendin portrays O'Connor as a prisoner of Southern womanhood, a resentful Miss Manners, outwardly accommodating and benign, inwardly smoldering, who loosed her retaliatory rage on fictional surrogates for her mother, the proximate deputy of etiquette, custom, and constraint. Hendin concludes :

If [O'Connor] set out to make morals, to praise the old values, she ended by engulfing all of them in an icy violence. If she began by mocking or damning her murderous heroes, she ended by exalting them. Flannery O'Connor became more and more the pure poet of the Misfit, the damaged daughter, the psychic cripple--of all of those who are martyred by silent fury and redeemed through violence." (155)

22 While the analysis is speculative, it is as illuminating as the standard model, constructed by O'Connor herself. According to it, her prophet-freak Misfits are scourges of God, unwitting ministers of grace whose violent visitations shock the hypocritically

complacent into recognition of their black and grainéd souls and thus mediate their redemption. Her emissaries of violence, in O'Connor's words, lay "a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (M&M 117). In the devil's version, the grace is subordinated to the violent groundwork. Grace emerges as more convenient than prevenient, a ruse to validate the obliteration of Yahoos.⁹ O'Connor's letters provide copious hints that she was not predisposed to be edified by charity. Offended, she could sting like a wicked wasp of Milledgeville. The letters are sprinkled with animadversions on "lousy" reviewers, "moronic" critics, "stupid" magazines, literary "dopes," "bearded intellectual delinquents," "tiresome" and "pompous" students, "lunatic" fans--a litany of crankiness.¹⁰ Her cameos of her "maw" depict an obtuse boor :

"Who is this Kafka?" she says. "People ask me." A German Jew, I says... He wrote a book about a man that turns into a roach. "Well, I can't tell people that," she says. "Who is this Evalin Wow [Evelyn Waugh]." (HB 33)

My mamma asked me the other day if I knew Shakespeare was an Irishman. I said no I didn't. She said well it's right there in the Savannah paper. (HB 58)

I reckon my mother is now convinced that a child can be born in Europe. I think she thought forin [sic] children could but not regular children. (HB 80)

SHE: "Mobby Dick..."

ME: "Mow-by Dick."

SHE: "Mow-by Dick. *The Idiot*. You would get something called *Idiot*. What's it about?"

ME: "An idiot." (HB 56)

- 23 Though couched in a tone of jocular indulgence, such vignettes hint at bottled acrimony. They are at best patronizing.
- 24 Psychoanalysis aside, O'Connor's rearguard vindication of Fundamentalism lacks cogency. The Misfit's sniveling befuddlement and skewed ethics need not attend the abandonment of Mystery. When The Misfit pontificates that "the crime don't matter," that tire theft is neither better nor worse than murder (130-31), he is anagogically enunciating O'Connor's belief that a sin is a sin is a sin. Historically, the view has been used to justify the most heinous cruelties.
- 25 O'Connor was by temper an obscurantist, disdainful of empirical modes of verification and rules of evidence. She preferred the evidence of things unseen to the seen, the inexplicable to the explicable. She thought Christ's words on the cross superior to those of Oedipus at Colonus because, while the sentiments are similar, "Oedipus' words represent the known while Christ's represent the unknown and can only be a mystery" (HB 212). As her letters show, no argument, however logical--no evocation of fact, no psychoanalyzing of motive, could shake her. She was impregnably ensconced in what she called Mystery and the unbeliever calls dogmatism. She seems never fully to have grasped that opposition to Mystery can be principled and courageous rather than vain, froward, and evasive. "That which Agnostics deny and repudiate as immoral," said Thomas Huxley--anticipating Camus, Sartre, Russell, and other twentieth-century humanists--is "that there are propositions which men ought to believe, without logically satisfactory evidence, and that reprobation ought to attach" to disbelief. Words of that sort O'Connor put into the mouths of her educated fools, like Rayber, the neurotic schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*, or Joy-Hulga, the snide, insecure Ph.D. in "Good Country People."
- 26 The truth," O'Connor once remarked, "does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally" (HB 100). To that pungent aphorism, one must assent.

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NOTES

1. *Habit of Being*, p. 92. Hereafter referred to as *HB*.
2. *Mystery and Manners*, p. 161. Hereafter referred to as *M&M*.
3. In O'Connor's lexicon, a Liberal is anyone who thinks "that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts" and who thinks evil "is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc. and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up" (*HB* 302-03).
4. cf. O'Connor's comment on Hazel Motes: "That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to" (Preface to *Wise Blood*).
5. For O'Connor, as Baumgaertner observes, disbelief was "the necessary starting point of faith" (12). O'Connor reminded one of her correspondents that the founder of the Church, Peter, had "denied Christ three times" (*HB* 307). In another letter, O'Connor says "all good stories are about conversion" (*HB* 275).
6. Several commentators think the grandmother's conversion is implausible because it happens without adequate preparation. Ochshorn believes the grandmother dies "without comprehension" (116). Vipond goes further: "There has been no sudden insight, no wisdom learned; she remains a manipulator to the very end, more concerned with her own survival than the fate of her children and grandchildren" (9). (See also Bandy; Bonney; Carlson). Modernist

O'Connor critics have readily accommodated Pauline grace to profane standards of credibility. The grandmother's sudden tenderness toward *The Misfit* is described as "quite within the purview of rationalistic psychology" (Jones 841). The grandmother's epiphany "can be read with no sacrifice of resonance as the dramatization of one of the basic themes of modern literature"--namely, that people want "to connect" (Renner 131). To O'Connor, grace was not foreshadowed by a causal sequence of events because, by its nature, it was an unearned, unmerited, and inexplicable mystery.

7. *The Complete Stories*, p. 130. Subsequent references to the collection are indicated by page number alone.

8. The "stark polarities" in O'Connor's fiction Michael Bellamy attributes to a Protestant strain, which, he contends, is counterpoised by the *via media* of her Catholicism (124).

9. Marshall Bruce Gentry, with the assistance of Mikhail Bakhtin, tries to save O'Connor from herself by pitting her characters against her authoritarian narrators, who represent a debased religiosity. In the internecine combat, the characters emerge victorious, psyches liberated, secular redemption secured.

10. O'Connor was intermittently repentant of her imperfections. She told her correspondent confessor "A" that "Smugginess is the Great Catholic Sin. I find it in myself and don't dislike it any less" (HB 131). O'Connor confessed also to "garden variety" sins: "pride, gluttony, envy, sloth" (HB 92).

RÉSUMÉS

Flannery O'Connor regretta tout au long de sa carrière de devoir écrire pour un public laïcisé et indifférent au Mystère chrétien. Eut-elle vécu plus longtemps, elle aurait alors dû réévaluer la sensibilité de son lectorat, car celui-ci, ou du moins sa composante universitaire, a fait preuve d'une réceptivité croissante à l'égard de ses "Monstres Prophètes". Leur réaction à *l'Inadapté*, le meurtrier et prophète dilettante de "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" ("De la difficulté de trouver un homme bon") est à-propos. On le considère souvent comme un logicien de bonne volonté, un libre penseur. En fait, son raisonnement est inconsistant, brouillon et relève du sophisme. Un scepticisme réfléchi peut rassembler des preuves contre le théisme que la philosophie de *l'Inadapté* ne conçoit même pas. Si l'on considère la façon ambiguë dont O'Connor traite *l'Inadapté*, il semble qu'elle se fasse l'avocat du Diable sans en avoir conscience. En effet, ses lettres nous fournissent de nombreux indices laissant à penser qu'elle n'était pas prédisposée à être édifiée par la charité. Toute considération psychanalytique mise à part, sa défense d'arrière-garde du fondamentaliste religieux manque de force : la confusion larmoyante de même que l'éthique inversée de *l'Inadapté* ne servent en rien l'abandon du Mystère. O'Connor ne semble pas avoir appréhendé dans sa totalité le fait que la réticence à la Révélation puisse être courageuse et émaner de principes plutôt que défensive et synonyme de fuite. (Traduit de l'anglais par Jérôme ARNOUX)

AUTEURS

GARY SLOAN

Professeur au département d'Anglais à l'Université de Louisiana Tech à Ruston (Louisiane). Il a publié des articles sur le style et l'écriture dans les revues telles que *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, et *English journal*. Il est également l'auteur de publications sur la littérature américaine parues dans *Studies in the Novel*, *Studies in short fiction*, *the Explicator*, *Notes on Contemporary literature*.