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A Becoming Habit

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A BECOMING HABIT: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION OF UNKNOWING

Joseph Zornado

Its almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively.

Flannery O'Connor, *Habit* 144

Much of Flannery O'Connor's fiction undermines the notion that her texts, or any text for that matter, offers the reader a chance at fixed comprehensibility. In fact, O'Connor's fiction often clears itself away as a meaning-bearing icon in order to introduce the reader to something other, to the mystery latent and invisible in the manners. O'Connor remains remarkable as an avowed Catholic and as a writer because she resisted spelling out that mystery though her Catholic faith offered much in the way of dogma that might have sufficed. Even so, there is an indissoluble link between the writer and the Catholic that critics have recognized since the publication of her first novel, *Wise Blood* in 1952.

From *Wise Blood* to her final story, "Parker's Back," O'Connor wrestles with the tension between her faith and her art.¹ Baptism in O'Connor's work serves as a cursor by which we observe her attempts to address the limits of fiction as a sacramental ritual — or if fiction should even be considered in these terms. Yet, for O'Connor, there existed a relationship between the sacramental and mundane, the religious and secular, however strained the relationship. It was across this gap she wrote, and it is through examining her handling of the baptismal ritual that we can trace the evolution of her thought. In a way, the nature of baptism and of the short story occupy similar ground. The baptismal ritual, as St. Augustine and St. Thomas argue, is somehow a "sign for an inward thing," and at the same

moment, “the inward thing itself” (Aquinas 358). How can the text be the inward thing itself? The outward thing, that is, the self-consuming, provisional, metaphoric, unstable, and paradoxical qualities of the text share similar qualities with the inward thing, and hence, the inward thing can be known only through its paradoxical relationship with the outward, but there remains (at least) one caveat: the outward thing can in no way embody the inward thing. How then can the inward thing be known if the outward thing can only fail in its representation of the inward? In O’Connor’s work, the answer is simple: by its failure to hold.²

For some readers and critics of O’Connor problematizing the ritual of baptism — and the ritual of reading for that matter — constitutes a violation of her fiction that, ultimately, threatens to erode a critical consensus some think exists about the relationship between her faith and fiction. For these critics the outer ritual of baptism and the inner transformation are one for O’Connor. This position, however, ignores the evidence in O’Connor’s life, letters and art that she held a far more complicated, mysterious notion of Orthodoxy than this monolithic perspective can accommodate. Further, it ignores entirely thirty years of literary theory in favor of a kind of tyrannical authorial intention that, to my mind, does little to enhance the fiction or O’Connor’s reputation as artist.

In her correspondence, O’Connor reveals a cautious curiosity about Thomas Merton’s response to her latest work, *The Violent Bear It Away*, presuming of course he would have the opportunity to read it.³ In a letter to Robert Giroux she coyly comments that, “if Fr. Louis [Merton] reads it, I’d like to know what he thinks,” revealing that, for some reason, O’Connor felt uncomfortable with the idea of sending Merton her work directly. Yet if Giroux sent it along, she intimated, Merton’s response to her second novel would be a theologically informed, impartial assessment from a man who shared her faith. Her letters and essays show clearly that O’Connor recognized in her own work what she hoped educated Catholics would also recognize — and if Merton failed to appreciate O’Connor’s seemingly perverse form of Catholicism, who would? What Merton thought of the book, or if he ever received a copy from Giroux, remains uncertain. What remains certain, though, is Merton’s *Prose Elegy* on O’Connor after her untimely, though not unexpected, death. He praises O’Connor unequivocally. O’Connor’s work is “Humorous,” Merton writes, “yes, but also uncanny, inexplicable, demonic, so you could never laugh at it as if you understood. Because if you pretended to understand, you, too, would find yourself among her demons practicing contempt.... The only way to be saved was to stay out of it, not to think, not to speak” (Friedman 70). Merton, a literate and literary figure in his own right, deeply respected

O'Connor's peculiar vision of the world, frightening and unsettling as it was. And as a mystic, Merton intuitively knew that one must silence the mind and voice if one wanted to be saved from the world O'Connor fictionalized.

At a more profound level, O'Connor and Merton share another literary/theological concern. Though O'Connor and Merton never worked through the literary and theological implications of their shared vocations as writers the spiritual and literary nexus joining them reveals a fascinating and altogether challenging perspective on O'Connor's work, casting it in an unfamiliar, though powerful, Catholic and literary tradition. O'Connor's interest in the desert fathers, though less overt than Merton's, nonetheless influenced her writing. In her letters O'Connor addresses Dr. Spivey regarding *Violent*, and offers an explanation for the novel's strange, esoteric title. "This is the violence of love," she explains in a typically paradoxical statement familiar to O'Connor's readers. "I had never paid much attention to that verse either until I read that it was one of the Eastern fathers' favorite passages... those desert fathers interest me very much" (*Habit* 82). Like the aphorisms of the desert fathers, O'Connor's fiction revels in the paradoxical, the contradictory, the clash of opposite notions that the human mind cannot reconcile: Hazel Motes's self-mutilation as a quality of his Christian faith, Tarwater's drowning of Bishop as testimony to his acceptance of the role of prophet. And throughout the short fiction, O'Connor dramatizes violence as a prelude to moments of unknowing, as with Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," Joy/Hulga in "Good Country People," or the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

Though O'Connor's strategy has grown familiar as she has grown in popularity, her fiction has moments that continue to strike us as radically un-reasonable. The unsettling effects of un-reasonableness are not only trademark O'Connor, but they are also a primary quality of the sayings of the desert fathers. Merton captured this perplexing quality in his translations of the *Verba Seniorum*, the sayings of fourth-century Christian monks who sought out a hermetic existence in Near Eastern deserts. Selecting and translating these aphorisms, Merton revealed his affinity for the kind of impact produced by the Zen mondo. For similar theological reasons, it seems, Merton and O'Connor found themselves attracted to the unsettling tension inherent in an unresolvable paradox.

For Merton, this paradox manifests itself in the lives and writings of contemplative monks. Through a process of meditation similar to Eastern Zen practices, the contemplative monk meditated on koan-like aphorisms providing enlightenment, not by way of intellectual reasoning, but through the quieting of the mind, and of the voice. A typical example from *The*

Wisdom of the Desert reads at first as a deceptively simple lesson for the aspiring monk to dwell on and incorporate into his life. "One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor" (37). There is, of course, perfect sense in selling the book which directs that we sell all and give to the poor. What can be more meaningful than for a monk to sacrifice a beloved possession — his biblical text? But on further reflection, difference — like a fault line — begins to manifest itself in the aphorism's logic. How can I sell the book that teaches me about charity? How will I learn about charity without a text to teach me? But how can I not sell the book that commands me to sell all and give all if I am sincere in my desire to become a true monk? Like a mobius strip, there is no end and no beginning to the riddle — only a logical, reasonable text that curls around on itself, leading at its end to its beginning. For a monk, this is an exercise in contemplation. Significantly, it is an exercise in contemplating difference: The aphorism thrusts to the fore the gap between intellectual solutions and silence, text and no-text, owning and selling, and ultimately, knowing and unknowing.

Still, even to frame the issue as a decision between paradoxical polar opposites, that is, to sell or to not sell, reduces the aphorism from a perplexing mystery to a simplistic puzzle with a didactic lesson. Merton's attraction to the desert monks, and to O'Connor's fiction, intersect here. The aphorism provides the ultimate two-part challenge to the human mind: as a physical text, it challenges the reader to abandon it — to let go of the intellectual safety net the physical text, the physical icon represents — and accept that the aphorism is an unreliable narrative guide for the terrain it introduces to the contemplative. To accept that the text provides only questions, only gaps, with no reasonable answers leads to the second part of the challenge, and the most difficult: the contemplative must remain in a state of decided unknowing. The aphorism reveals the limits of reason, and in almost violent manner, draws the contemplative's mind to the edge of reason and invites him to look into an absolute silence that cannot be known, only acquiesced to. If the contemplative returns to the text and fails to silence his mind, in one sense he has failed. Desiring only union with God, the contemplative must remain in a decided state of intellectual darkness and maintain an absence of knowledge by a massive force of will. Like a kind of intellectual prison house, there is no "outside" to the aphorism.⁴

I am interested in the similarities between Merton and O'Connor's literary sensibilities because they reveal how, independently of one another, both writers recognized the power — and the definitive limits — of

text. As a result of this recognition, O'Connor and Merton use their audience's desire for a readily consumed aphorism or short story, and frustrate it. I believe that O'Connor's short, pithy, quickly-read fiction clearly deconstructs and fails to deliver implicitly promised positive, consumable knowledge. Instead, O'Connor, like Merton's desert fathers, communicates mystery negatively.

Merton's aphorisms and O'Connor's short stories work negatively in that they operate as a didactic one-two punch to the intellect. The first blow strikes at the mind's ferocious desire to cognitively master the world. This desire is questioned, even comically mocked both by the strikingly simple form of the aphorism, and in O'Connor, the anonymous, presumably objective presentation of the text; the mind is taught to unlearn what it knows. The second blow levels the notion that wisdom and faith result from positive intellectual mastery over text. Instead, Merton and O'Connor's texts suggest, a moment of *aporia* opens up like a gap between vehicle and tenor, and more profoundly, between signifier and signified, destabilizing the relationship between conventional categories of knowing and unknowing.

What this has to do with O'Connor is this: Both writers independently manifest an interest and an indebtedness to a long philosophical, theological tradition with its inchoate beginnings in Paul's epistles, and before that in the Hebraic writing thought to have influenced them. This tradition of negativity continues in the fourth-century desert fathers, and is taken up and developed by what some have called the father of the *via negativa*, the sixth-century Syrian Monk Pseudo-Dionysius. Medieval and later mystics, such as St. John of the Cross, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart, and others continued the discussion. And the twentieth century continues to explore the *negative way*, including the writings of the French evolutionist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton and, most importantly for this study, O'Connor. Further, the writings of Barthes and Derrida, two apparently atheistic French post-structuralists, suggest yet another incarnation — though not at all explicitly Christological — of the *via negativa*, or apophatic thought.

According to O'Connor's stated intentions, she wanted to bring "the Word" to her readers, and "the Word," as she noted in her essay "Novelist and Believer," often manifests itself as a "stumbling block.... The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man's encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience — which is both natural and supernatural — understandable, and credible, to his reader. In any age this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a well-nigh insurmountable one"

(*Mystery* 161). O'Connor believed that a Roman Catholic writing in a predominantly Protestant South might confound an audience that, for the most part, had adopted Christianity primarily as a cultural rather than a spiritual force. Whether ignorant, or simply uninterested in spiritual concerns, recent scholarship locates O'Connor's literary achievement on a kind of literary desert island. Seemingly off the main trade routes, her work betrays a terrifying, unruly domain that critical missionaries attempt to civilize with a more accessible kind of Christianity, while the greatest explorers consider the island either too wild, or already tamed. A few intrepid post-structuralist explorers have ventured into O'Connor's territory, recognizing that, "though there is much that is disturbing and even ambiguous about O'Connor's world," as Frederick Crews writes, "critics who seek to justify her in post-modern terms would do well to cease evading her intellectual and emotional loyalty to a single value system" (51).

O'Connor's oft-professed "single value system," as Crews puts it, has in many ways severely limited the methodological approaches scholars entertain when considering her work. Further, short glosses of O'Connor's religious beliefs have reaffirmed O'Connor's "single value system," reading the theological underpinnings of O'Connor's thought as religious faith grounded on "knowing," that is, on the positive philosophical grid Catholicism provided. This, I think, vastly underestimates Catholicism, O'Connor and O'Connor's work. James Grimshaw's *The Flannery O'Connor Companion* represents a type of O'Connor scholarship that is, to my mind, unsatisfying and not uncommon. Grimshaw spends merely two pages discussing the topic of religion. His discussion is actually only a gloss, introducing the subjects of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and their somewhat ambiguous relationship to the fiction. Grimshaw's common approach results in what might be called a static conception of religion and his attempt to map out its significance ultimately leaves the reader unclear about religion's role — if it has any — in O'Connor's fiction. His synopsis suggests that the religion in the stories can be raked out, identified, and explained. As he states it, "a special knowledge of religions is not necessary to enjoy her fiction... [though] religion does play an underlying role which when recognized enhances meaning and appreciation" (13). True enough. Unfortunately, the brevity with which he addresses the topic leaves one wondering just where the religion occurs in her fiction and how one will be able to recognize it. O'Connor would have undoubtedly bristled at this dismembering of what she believed to be an entirely organic art form that could not survive any thematic dismemberment.

The interpretive results of O'Connor's work that follow from Grimshaw's methodology result in what O'Connor would call allegorical, or tropological readings, but not anagogical. O'Connor writes,

the Medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literary level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities. (*Mystery* 72)

I cite this quote at length because it demonstrates that O'Connor's use of the term anagogical clearly anticipates what Barthes calls the "writerly" approach to text. Both approaches share a philosophic skepticism, O'Connor's strongly influenced by negative theology, and Barthes's influenced by the philosophic skepticism of deconstruction.

O'Connor's letters and occasional prose reveal a literary sensibility well aware of the levels of reading that the Church developed for interpreting scripture, and also reveal her keen intellect, her interest in Thomas Aquinas. The "participation in the divine" for medieval commentators on Scripture, and for O'Connor, remained the most crucial, necessary element in the interpretive process. O'Connor demonstrates her awareness, and acceptance, of the role the reader's response plays in the creation of meaning during the reading process. The materials that provoke the reader's response, for example, the formalistic qualities of the text itself, the intellectual ideas that it contains, which include the literary, historical, cultural, economic, philosophic, and theological influence, fall under the rubric of manners.



The sacramental elements combining to create the best of O'Connor's work operate both in the shorter fiction and the novels with differing degrees of success. In *The Violent Bear It Away* the entire novel bends — almost breaks — around the thorny problem of documenting the mystery of baptism. O'Connor suggests her frustration in a letter to "A" where she wonders how a text can possibly "document the sacrament of baptism?" (*Habit* 171) Determined to try, O'Connor attempted this "documentation" first in a short story, "The River" and later in her second novella, *The Violent Bear It Away*. Young Tarwater undeniably fails. In his attempt to

distance himself from Old Tarwater's call, he succumbs, yet in his succumbing he baptizes Bishop, yet drowns him in the process. In Young Tarwater's failure goes the novel's inability to document the sacrament. Yet, in this failure resonates a kind of negative of success: O'Connor indirectly preserves mystery because metaphor cannot contain it.⁵

As an exploration of this question, O'Connor's second novel seeks to provide an altogether unstable experience of baptism. Like Zen koans, O'Connor's works exist not so much to be answers as to be experienced in all their peculiarity. *The Violent Bear It Away* resists easy intellectual appropriation from either a secular or Orthodox perspective. In fact, the novel undermines any notion that Orthodoxy exists to explain mystery. With this in mind, Tarwater's baptism/drowning of Bishop obscures, and even undermines, traditional Orthodox definitions of baptism and dogmatic explanations that might be applied in order to make sense of it. This is not to say that the novel rejects orthodox notions of baptism. This is to say that O'Connor attempts to reinvest notions of baptism with something other than the pious, superficial understanding she often witnessed around her. O'Connor's difficult notion of baptism — like Robert Frost's notion of poetry — consumes itself and in the process of consumption points to mystery. Baptism, like Frost's notion of poetry, "rides on its own melting" (Frost 4).⁶

"The River," first published in 1953 and later included in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* marks O'Connor's first attempt to handle a narrative with baptism at its "center."⁷ Though the short story is less sure than the later novel in its handling of the problem of baptism, "The River" remains an early example of O'Connor's power as a writer. In the story O'Connor weaves a narrative that draws its energy from the combination of her theological sensibility and her philosophic skepticism. The result is a short story dense in its weave of biblical allusions, Protestant Southern Baptist traditions and life and death imagery. The story represents what might be considered a "stress test" of the relationship between vehicle and tenor: Harry/Bevel's desire for baptism also reads as a desire for death and Harry/Bevel's death reads as a desire for peace, relief, love. Is he baptized? Or did he drown himself inadvertently? The ending of the story challenges both Protestant and Roman Catholic definitions of baptism that remain external to the narrative, and at the same time leaves Harry/Bevel's fate so over-determined as to make it seem almost ambiguous. "The River" exemplifies the tense relationship in O'Connor's own literary sensibility between the notions of art as positive incarnation and her intuitive suspicion that mystery could only be communicated negatively. O'Connor says

as much in a letter when she writes, "Its almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively" (*Habit* 144).

The gap in O'Connor's work between vehicle and tenor, between her desire to document baptism and at the same time preserve its mystery, reveals how O'Connor's own comments about her work found in her essays and personal letters discuss the indirectness of the artistic process, the paradoxical nature of Orthodoxy and the ambiguous mystery of faith and its relationship to her work. On the other hand, and often at the same time, she writes as if her fiction represents a successful form of positive incarnation that speaks directly to the redemptive qualities of the sacraments operating in her characters' lives and deaths.⁸ For instance, in a letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey in *The Habit of Being*, O'Connor writes about the symbols in *The Violent Bear It Away* and tries to explain their sacramental significance for her. "This book is a very minor hymn to the Eucharist. Water is a symbol of purification and fire is another. Water, it seems to me, is a symbol of the kind of purification that God gives irrespective of our efforts or worthiness, and fire is the kind of purification we bring on ourselves — as in Purgatory. It is our evil which is naturally burnt away when it comes anywhere near God" (387).

O'Connor's statements on her own texts often shift from one letter to the next, depending on her intended audience. When writing John Hawkes, an insightful if not entirely sympathetic reader, O'Connor generously accepted his evaluation and critical remarks about her fiction, especially *The Violent Bear It Away*. Though she disagreed with Hawkes's reading, she accepted a literary kinship with him though he was himself irreligious. O'Connor writes, "as you say, your vision, though it doesn't come by way of theology, is the same as mine. You arrive at it by your own perception and sensitivity, but I have had it given me whole by faith because I couldn't possibly have arrived at it by my own powers. This perhaps creates a gap that I have to get over somehow or other" (*Habit* 352-53).

Though O'Connor indicates regularly that her literary sensibility springs directly from her theological perspective, she recognizes Hawkes's grotesque literary vision as authentic, sensitive, and not theological. Further, this passage includes a rare admission for O'Connor, that the one-to-one correspondence between her faith and her artistic perception may have its limitations, as with Rayber, a character with a modern (and irreligious) sensibility. This, she says, caused her to struggle with her second novel for seven years. In the same letter, having confessed her fears that Rayber perhaps represents a mere caricature rather than a round character im-

bued with the modern mindset, she explicitly reveals the gap in her literary and theological sensibility mentioned earlier in the letter: "People are always asking me if I am a Catholic writer and I am afraid that I sometimes say no and sometimes say yes, depending on who the visitor is" (*Habit* 353). This gap, it seems, manifested itself differently depending on O'Connor's audience.

Much contemporary criticism of "The River," excepting critics like Schenck, tends to accept O'Connor's scriptural reading of the story. They rely on O'Connor's assurances that the story is one of redemption, renewal, and hope. O'Connor and most commentators call it "a story of baptism" (Giannone 72). Baumgartner says that its story presents "sacrament — the outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace — in its most profound form... whether or not the preacher [in the story] realizes it, he is a sacramentalist" (90). According to Giannone, "The River" is best understood if approached from O'Connor's scriptural reading of the story. "Since her faithless readers would not know that Jesus' death makes any difference, O'Connor shows how the tragic destruction of a child of our time participates in a death that bestows the newness of life" (72), and Schenck finds that only O'Connor's belief in the Catholic doctrine of the innocence of children "can turn this story into one of salvation, and that belief is surely not shared by all readers. Even believers might question Harry's innocence... he resembles most O'Connor characters who... dupe themselves by creating a new identity based on a false understanding of language" (133).

When critics sympathetic to O'Connor's own reading of her work approach these stories, they have claimed that the ceremonial imagery operates as positive signifiers that directly represent, in a mysterious form of spiritual regeneration, the mysteries of the redemptive power of Christ. However, as O'Connor well knew, the ceremonial imagery, the religious sign systems employed in the text do not and cannot embody the sacraments. The literary representation of baptism functions (or, as I argue, actually fails to function) as an outward literary sign (the vehicle) of an outward ceremonial sign (another vehicle) meant to embody the invisible inward workings of grace (the tenor). What this means is this: The reader's experience of O'Connor's attempt to "document" baptism is not unlike entering a hall of mirrors. Which is the real one and which the simulacrum? That is, even when I experience baptism in the flesh, the ritual proper is nevertheless once removed from my own senses because it (and its result: grace) exists as a visible ritual meant to communicate invisible things. I receive grace by faith. Next, a textual embodiment of the ritual proper

represents the second remove, and because young Tarwater's understanding of baptism is not O'Connor's, his version of baptism reflects the third remove. My approach to the text might constitute a fourth remove, and depending on one's acceptance of reader-response theory, I approach and experience the text differently each time I read it. Like the pitfalls of reading a foreign literature in English, something is lost in the translation.

Whatever is lost in the intellectual translation regarding baptism's significance for Harry/Bevel and young Tarwater, this loss functions as a kind of emotional block that prevents both of them from achieving an illuminating experience of grace. The contradiction between known imagery and unknown mystery can lead to any number of extreme theological views, from spiritless materialism, to a kind of bodiless gnosticism. Harry/Bevel's failure to penetrate the metaphoric sign system employed acts as a kind of warning to the reader, like the Grandmother's story in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Beware, the young Preacher warns the audience at "The River." If you've come for a miracle show, "you might as well go home if that's what you come for" (40). Nevertheless, Harry/Bevel's failure to understand the sacrament of baptism is not O'Connor's failure. The failure belongs to Mrs. Connin, to the young Preacher, Harry/Bevel, and most important, to Harry/Bevel's self-involved parents. Reading the story solely as a misfiring of O'Connor's talent obscures something vital about it; whether O'Connor intended it, Harry/Bevel's story is a self-consuming tale about tales that consume themselves. It is a story without a definitive moral center; it is a story about the failure of moral centers to hold and provide relief; it is a story about the mystery of death. It bears repeating that the literary sacrament of baptism-as-insufficient-sign-system negatively emblemizes the mystery of spiritual transcendence. As St. Augustine wrote in the tenth book of *The City of God*, "A Sacrament is a sacred thing," while also stating that it is "the sign of a sacred thing." St. Thomas reasons along this rhetorical fault line, considering baptism as a sacred event in and of itself, and in a subtle, though crucial difference, he also suggests, like St. Augustine, that baptism is a visible sign of a sacred, invisible event. This is crucial because the tension between O'Connor's professed Catholicism and her Protestant subject matter falls squarely along these doctrinal lines. Because her Protestant subjects have no sacramental dogma, but only a dramatic sense of faith, her literary and theological concerns focus on the gap between Catholic and Protestant.

St. Thomas's arguments on the baptism of children are crucial. The theological issue becomes the central literary concern in O'Connor's second novel, and as a literary problem, her solution leads to her greatest

literary achievement — “Parker’s Back” — in her second collection of short fiction. St. Thomas writes that, “even in the Old Law there were certain sacraments, that is, signs of a sacred thing — for example, the paschal lamb and other legal sacred signs of sacraments which, however, did not cause grace but only signified or indicated the grace of Christ.” He continues that “the Sacraments of the New Law, on the other hand, both contain grace and confer it. A sacrament of the New Law is a visible form of invisible grace. Thus, the exterior washing which takes place when the water is poured in Baptism represents that interior cleansing which takes away sin by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism.” (358). For St. Thomas, then, the New Law, that is, the New Covenant of Christ provides the sacraments, and in and of themselves a minister can confer grace as he would draw water from a well: grace exists and the sacraments are the tools by which he draws it forth.

Later, though, Thomas discusses the baptism of children (a constant concern for O’Connor) and reasons that child baptism is necessary, even though the child has not committed any sin, and remains without his or her full use of reason. Nevertheless, because scripture commands that one must be “born of water and spirit,” Thomas determines a child must be baptized or risk the loss of heaven. Though children are protected by their parents, safe in the spiritual womb they provide, scripture commands that all must be baptized to enter heaven. Hence, it follows that, though a child may not have committed any sin, he or she must instead be infected with original sin. And because the Church and the Scripture are infallible, this justifies the baptism of children (St. Thomas 342).

Though O’Connor unequivocally accepts the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church on the baptism of children, many of the Southern Protestants in her fiction do not. For example, Baptists refuse to baptize children simply because, as St. Thomas points out, children must decide whether they want to enter into “God’s Kingdom” and as children they do not have the full use of their reason. The differences between these baptismal doctrines represent a fascinating rift that O’Connor’s two baptismal stories implicitly explore. If a child’s will has nothing to do with it, as St. Thomas reasons, the literal act of baptism becomes of paramount concern, that is,

the Sacraments are made holy and have the power of sanctifying through the words which accompany the action.... Now, the words by which the Sacraments are sanctified are called the *form* of the Sacraments; and the things which are sanctified are called the *matter* of the Sacraments.... In each Sacrament there is required a *minister*, who confers the Sacrament with the intention of doing that which the Church intends. If any one of these three requirements is lacking, the

Sacrament is not brought into being, viz, if there is lacking the due *form* of the words, or if the *matter* is not present, or if the *minister* does not intend to confer the Sacrament. (360)

St. Thomas stresses that the letter of the law must be observed. The ritual — and its required symbols — must all be present and in place or else the conferring of the Sacrament may be impeded.

St. Thomas continues that “the effect of the Sacrament is likewise impeded through the fault of the recipient, for example, if one feigns to receive it and with a heart unprepared to receive worthily.” However, he problematizes the entire argument over the “letter of the law,” making it a moot point by indicating that “there are some who never even receive sacramentally, yet would receive the effect of the Sacrament because of their devotion towards the Sacrament, which they may have in desire or in a vow” (361). St. Thomas makes abundantly clear that, though the *form*, *matter*, and *minister* may not be present, grace can still be conferred if the recipient has fulfilled the spirit of the law. O’Connor’s anxiety about how to document baptism remains the significant point here: Does the performative act — the *form*, the *matter* and the *minister* constitute the baptismal setting? This reading of St. Thomas is meant to suggest something of the Protestant in this Catholic Saint: The Sacraments represent a sign of an outward truth, not absolutely essential in and of themselves to confer grace; rather, grace is conferred in a far more mysterious manner, just as O’Connor’s Protestant neighbors believed. Though there remain possibilities between these two positions, they remain in their basic forms the essential dialogue of the ritual’s mystery and manners.

Neither “The River” or *The Violent Bear It Away* fulfills either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant letter of the law on baptism. Rather, she trains her literary vision on gaps within the intellectual efforts made to “explain” mystery. In other words, she could write a story of murder, of a farmer’s wife, of boys in the field, and still attempt to reveal the grace she believed could be conferred from the gaps inherent in her metaphors. Her toughest challenge was to explore how baptism remains a sign of a sacred thing, but the sacred thing to human senses — and sensibility — remains the gap between the visible ritual and the invisible thing. The only visible signs of the experience of baptism are the trace elements that fly off in every direction, like some kind of sub-atomic experiment watched under an electron microscope. We cannot actually see atoms, only their traces. Only by watching the trails of escaping atomic particles can we be sure something happens on the sub-atomic level. O’Connor’s fiction might be thought of as violent traces of invisible things, and only the emotional and intellec-

tual effects — the literary traces if you will — on character and reader alike suggest that something has happened. But what?

O'Connor's baptismal narratives reveal their provisional condition as text, while at the same moment, they celebrate the provisional condition of the baptismal ritual. Only by drawing attention to the metaphoric play of *differance* can she open the baptismal theme to a reading that directs interpretations away from a static view of Orthodoxy and toward a view of baptism as a sign that "all matter is henceforth incarnate." Not in rare moments, but in every moment, God has "poured [his] superabundant vigor into the Sacrament of the world" (de Chardin 239).

O'Connor presents baptism in both "The River" and *The Violent Bear It Away* as a performative act — a ritual invested with meaning by those who participate in it. Yet, like St. Thomas's argument, Harry/Bevel's dramatic self-baptism/drowning at the end of the story manages to skirt — even obscure — the letter of the Law as St. Thomas presents it. Harry/Bevel is neither a child nor an infant — he falls somewhere in between. At the age of "four or five," he has committed sin — he steals a book belonging to Mrs. Connin, knowing that it belongs to her and that she prizes it. Unlike an infant corrupted only by Adam's original sin, Harry/Bevel requires an adult baptism for the remission of sins, though he cannot understand the abstract significance of the ceremony. According to St. Thomas's definition of the baptismal rite, the sacrament of baptism may or may not have been conferred on Harry/Bevel.

Hence, citing Harry/Bevel's drowning as his first step toward the Kingdom of God provides too neat a package, relying on an interpretive angle the story simply does not support. For example, the story does not include exposition or characterization that might clarify baptismal doctrine and allow his death to be viewed as a hopeful event; rather, the story's dramatic effect depends on an obscured presentation of baptism to avoid any too-neat packaging of the child's confusion. As a result, Harry/Bevel's struggle with the baptism ceremony does not offer "an apocalyptic and conclusive revelation but a disorienting experience" (Foster 261) which challenges the assumed relationship between sign, signifier and signified, leaving only a sense of ambiguous loss, a perplexing question mark at the end of the story, a sense of mystery in place of an absent, positive ending.

In "The River" baptism functions as the center to the story which can be known only through its absence, for after all, though the River is the Preacher's metaphor, he is also quick to point out that this is not the actual River, only a metaphorical river of blood. O'Connor depicts the manners commonly associated with some Protestant forms of baptism. But this

depiction leads to no sense of grace or atonement, but rather, to a sense of unknowing with no theological center to explain or justify the consequences. The child Harry/Bevel exemplifies an aspect common to O'Connor's fiction: He lives along a symbolic rift lost somewhere between his two distracted parents, falling through the emotional cracks for so long that, in a sense, he becomes a narrative null-space. He is neither Harry nor is his real name Bevel. In an attempt to shuck off his old identity, he steals the name Bevel, yet he truly is neither Harry nor Bevel. He rejects the first and cannot steal the second. His behavior does not suggest an innocent's, nor do Mrs. Connin's children behave as innocents. Indeed, the Connin children are sly, cunning and bent on persecuting an outsider without provocation. Harry/Bevel's habitual thievery may suggest a child in desperate emotional need. However, he understands the value of the book he steals, revealed in his concealing Mrs. Connin's property inside his coat. Clearly, Harry/Bevel understands certain things, like the subtle difference between ashtrays accidentally and deliberately spilt. He cleverly estimates exactly how many he needs to tip over, then carefully and vengefully rubs the ashes into the carpet.

Mrs. Connin and Harry/Bevel meet at a crucial moment in the young boy's life. The Ashfields have hired a new babysitter to watch their young boy so his mother can recover from her hangover. "He ain't fixed right' a loud voice said from the hall" (O'Connor 30), and Mrs. Connin proceeds to take Harry/Bevel to the river and have him fixed. Afterward, Harry/Bevel is aware that in his parent's house he doesn't count. He is forced to forage for his own breakfast among the crackers and anchovy leftovers from last night's party. Hating the emotional ambivalence of the house and his parents, "he got up and wandered around the room... he decided he would empty a few of the ashtrays on the floor. If he only emptied a few, she would think they had fallen. He emptied two, rubbing the ashes carefully into the rug with this finger" (50). Here the carpet becomes a symbol for the young boy's life. As he rubs the ashes in with his finger, echoing the Christian ritual performed on Ash Wednesday, he foreshadows an imminent death: his own.

Though Harry/Bevel remains the central concern of the story, O'Connor's characterization of every other figure — including Harry/Bevel — can best be described as deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence leaves it difficult to determine whether there is a moral center in this story. Without a moral center, an evaluation (or an explanation) of the story's end becomes almost impossible, nor does the story offer an absolute fixed point by which we can measure Harry/Bevel's understanding of baptism.

Some might argue that the preacher in the river stands as a moral center. Yet even the preacher is marked by ambiguity. His heightened metaphoric rhetorical style leaves even his adult audience unclear whether he can actually heal them. Oddly enough, he refuses to be placed at the center of the text, refusing the role of spiritual authority audience and text clearly need. When the young preacher reminds his audience at the river that he is merely an outward sign of inward spiritual things, he deflects their attempts to locate a discrete spiritual power in him.

The preacher, the other characters and in a way the story itself resists offering moral explanatory centers. At one turn Mrs. Connin seems endowed with an insight into the Ashfield home suggesting she might in some way save Harry/Bevel from his fate. Yet her misunderstanding of Harry/Bevel's parents and her benign negligence as a babysitter suggest she is not wholly free from responsibility regarding that fate. After all, she brought the young boy to the river expecting him to understand what baptism means yet was not sophisticated enough to realize that he may misunderstand.

Further, to suggest that his baptism provides a hopeful conclusion to "The River" reveals more of a particular reader's perspective on baptism than the story actually provides. For example, the death imagery surrounding Mrs. Connin, the river, the preacher, and baptism itself undermine any possible reading that Harry/Bevel "has gone to a better place." O'Connor was one of the first to suggest this reading of the final baptism. Certainly, from a New Testament perspective, baptism represents a literal death of the old self and a rebirth of one's spiritual existence. This might help explain the plentiful death imagery that wends its way through the story, and by contrast, the lack of any substantive life imagery at the story's end. For instance, though Mrs. Connin clearly has more sympathy for Harry/Bevel's needs as a child, she is also associated with death. After picking him up, almost saving him from the dead cigarette butts and leftover debris from his parents' house, Mrs. Connin takes him to her house, providing food and some quasi-mothering. Nevertheless, the ease with which he deceives her reveals a simple yet fundamental oversight. She does not know his name. Later, on the bus, "she lay her head back and as he watched, gradually her eyes closed and her mouth fell open to show a few long scattered teeth, some gold and some darker than her face; she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton" (O'Connor 33). Mrs. Connin's catering takes on a decidedly superficial aspect, suggesting negligence, but of the kind she had grown cleverly accustomed to, situating the child in such a way that she could catch up on her sleep, never considering

that her fatigue might encroach on her ability to care for him. Her inattention here suggests yet another moment of abandonment the child has suffered, first from his parents, now by her. In a sense, she asks the child to take care of himself, to not leave her lap, while she blows like a comic, smiling prefigurement of his death.

Later, at her house, her own children casually, but with conviction, again loosely associate Mrs. Connin with death when they confess “she’d kills us” if Harry/Bevel wound up in the hogpen. Of course, Harry/Bevel’s potential to misread baptism based on his book knowledge rather than experience is fully manifest in his visit to her place. “Bevel had never seen a real pig but he had seen a pig in a book and knew they were small fat pink animals with curly tails and round grinning faces and bow ties. He leaned forward and pulled eagerly at the board,” to release the hog when, “another face, gray, wet and sour, was pushing into his, knocking him down and back as it scraped out under the plank. Something snorted over him and charged back again, rolling him over and pushing him up from behind and then sending him forward, screaming through the yellow field, while it bounded behind” (36). Consequently, the child continued to scream from fright and shock caused by an actual pig, with deathly gray — rather than rosy pink — skin.

Rather than contrast the death imagery with its counterpart, the text links the destructive forces in Harry/Bevel’s life with what appear to be redemptive forces. O’Connor’s narrative associates parents and pigs along with Jesus and baptism. Here all are a kind of misinterpreted joke. Harry/Bevel’s preconceived bookish notions are constantly disrupted by the reality of the gray, wet and sour experience of the real thing. Unable to navigate his parents’ blasphemy and Mrs. Connin’s condescending catechism, he learns that Jesus Christ is not merely an oath, like “damn,” but a carpenter who made him. The text clearly associates Harry/Bevel’s superficial, ingenuous misunderstanding of pigs with a similar misunderstanding of Jesus in books “for readers under twelve.”

O’Connor juxtaposes the death imagery of the narrative against the broader allusions to John the Baptist and Christ’s own baptism. For example, Mrs. Connin, Harry/Bevel and the rest of her children walk to the river, looking “like the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway,” again prefiguring Harry/Bevel’s death. But to read the story as a sympathetic recasting of the New Testament story is to fall prey to Harry/Bevel’s level of reading. As the preacher in the river continually explains to his audience, the “rich red river of Jesus’ Blood” does not flow like some kind of magic potion in the

river before them. Rather, O'Connor inverts *the* crucial image in Christ's baptism, that of the dove descending, and instead uses another image associated with death. "While he preached, Bevel's eyes followed drowsily the slow circles of two silent birds revolving high in the air.... The birds revolved downward and dropped lightly in the top of the highest pine and sat hunch-shouldered as if they were supporting the sky" (41). The holy spirit fails to descend in the shape of a dove as a sign of life, regeneration and God's grace, and instead two buzzard-like birds circle, waiting for the carrion that will wash downstream.

The death imagery in the story provides a built-in resistance to reading the river and the baptism as a moral or theological center from which a narrowly-exegetical Christian happy ending can be extracted. Furthering this theme of centerlessness, while at the same time undermining traditional Christian imagery, the text associates Mr. Paradise with pigs, clearly a "demonic" allusion drawn from the New Testament, while at the same time he remains the only character to enter the river free of any self-interest, diving in at story's end not to save himself, but to save the boy. Though described as an "ancient water monster" coming out of the water "empty-handed," Mr. Paradise is neither the harbinger of hell nor an angel from heaven. Though he scoffs at the preacher's reputation as a healer, his characterization remains too thin to determine whether his name amounts to heavy-handed irony or, rather, a subtle naming of the gap his character might represent. This story is rife with such characters: Mr. Paradise, Harry/Bevel, Mrs. Connin, the Preacher, and the parents all lack essential qualities that might direct our sympathies and help us navigate.

By the end, "The River" leaves the reader bewildered, beating against a thematic current flowing in two contradictory directions at once: We are pulled by our own preconceptions of baptism — encouraged in part by O'Connor's own authorial comments suggesting the efficacious release baptism offers, which leaves the reader with a reductive conclusion: Harry/Bevel is better off dead. At the same time our moral and theological compass spins out of control by the simple, bare fact of Harry Ashfield's death-by-misunderstanding. How can the story support, thematically or otherwise, that Harry's death is a benefit to him? Yet can a Christian dare to presume otherwise? At the end only Mr. Paradise remains, waterlogged and empty-handed. Though he is not the central character, he stands for the story's central issue: intellectual skepticism, (not to be confused with theological skepticism). O'Connor's attempt at a sacramental narrative dramatizes his struggle — and our own — between intellectual knowledge

and the ineffable mystery found only through experience. If the story succeeds at all, it does so as a kind of aphorism: The story demands a misreading of the manners of baptism, and cautions the reader at the same time against such an endeavor. O'Connor begins her second novel where "The River" ends in an attempt to document the mystery of baptism negatively.



The Violent Bear It Away received a good deal of attention when published some of it insightful, though none of it filled with the puzzlement her first novel encountered.⁹ And with the publication of O'Connor's letters in 1979, her intentions as a Catholic author became clearer, and what appeared as a decidedly Catholic, partisan voice, gradually increased its authority over the fiction and the manner in which it since has been approached ever since. Interpretive problems arise, or worse, are ignored, when O'Connor provides religious interpretations of her own work. When those interpretations have been accepted, for the most part, any counter-interpretations may seem to border on the heretical. "Such are the risks for critics attempting to discuss how the fiction of Flannery O'Connor creates meaning in addition to or in contrast with what she herself said about her work" (Schenck 125). Asals writes of O'Connor's self-assessment: "At one pole, she can be taken as the final and definitive authority on her own writing; at the other, she can be viewed as so unaware of what she was up to as to be irrelevant if not positively misleading" (4-5).

O'Connor's second novel is no exception to this critical dilemma. Though ostensibly about baptism, *The Violent Bear It Away* grapples ferociously with the sacrament in a bizarre and off-putting manner. Tarwater's understanding of baptism, like all of his religious training, has been imbued with the maniacal zeal of his great-uncle complemented by a storybook literalness. Throughout the novel Tarwater fears that the Lord will finally make his presence felt physically, his anger palpable, his Judgment sure and painful. In one sense, then, Harry/Bevel has grown up in Tarwater, his religious education has kept pace, but his literal-mindedness has not changed from the first moment on "The River." The invasive memory of his recently-deceased great-uncle only serves to exacerbate Tarwater's egocentric, perverted literalness:

"If by the time I die," he had said to Tarwater, "I haven't got him baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission the Lord sends you." The boy doubted very much that his first mission would be to baptize a dim-witted child. "Oh no it won't

be," he said. "He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me." And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit. "It's not part of your job to think for the Lord," his great-uncle said. "Judgment may rack your bones." (*Violent* 128-29).

The ferocity of Young Tarwater's quest, or the ferocious rejection of his quest, is matched only by O'Connor's own drive to communicate its significance — a significance that the final aporia of "The River" does not deliver. "I don't set out to be more drastic" O'Connor wrote in a letter about her second novel, "but this happens automatically." In *The Violent Bear it Away*, the "central action is a baptism, I know that for the larger percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent as I see them both the mystery and the fact" (*Habit* 401).¹⁰

Tarwater's misunderstanding of how signs operate, or indeed, if God even uses positive signs, parallels the text's own subversive impulse to undermine positive meaning-bearing metaphor. O'Connor's text implicitly asserts itself as a kind of icon, a symbol, a central theme, an image, a narrative filled with positive meaning, as all texts do. Old Tarwater, sympathetically embraced by O'Connor in her letters, teaches that the symbol means everything. He fears that without a cross on his grave, he may miss the Day of Resurrection. Symbols have a powerful effect in the world of Old Tarwater, powerful enough to override a life spent in prophecy, a life spent in wrestling with the mystery of God's terrible mercy. Without a cross, and without an intact corpse, he may miss his chance at Paradise. Nevertheless, O'Connor's narrative so over-determines the notion of the reliable positive icon (that is, baptism), that the analogy between the icon-in-the-text and the text-as-icon the novel implicitly offers collapses and leads to philosophical skepticism. This, of course, is the point. This is not to say the text's iconic collapse leads to nihilism or existentialism or atheism, but rather, philosophic skepticism, which should also be distinguished from religious skepticism. O'Connor was not a religious skeptic.

Baptism, then, stands as singularly emblematic of a broader spiritual life the great-uncle trained into both Rayber and Young Tarwater. Though the great-uncle was equally concerned with his grave, with a proper marking, with a properly prepared body for the Resurrection, Rayber and Tarwater both focus specifically on the sacrament of baptism as the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual battleground. If the compulsion to baptize, as Rayber calls it, can be overcome, the great-uncle's teaching can

be overcome. For Young Tarwater, giving in to baptism will lead to baptizing the whole world, like some Old Testament Prophet sent as a scourge to God's people, excoriating in his indictments, inflexible in his judgments, harsh in his pronouncements, promising God's mercy as a form of quick but thorough destruction.

In Part One, Old Tarwater does not concern himself over the sacrament of baptism so much as with the concrete embodiments that, for him, mark his life and death in Christ. He remains fixed on concrete, performative metaphors, including his grave, which should be at least ten feet deep and marked by a proper sign of his Savior. Chapter two recounts Old Tarwater's arrival at his nephew's house in the City, and how both men in turn baptize the infant Tarwater. In an angry repudiation of Rayber's blasphemy, Old Tarwater steals the baby and raises it as a prophet "to burn Rayber's eyes clean."

Rayber, on the other hand, fears that giving into his great-uncle's teaching will draw out the mystical love he feels for his dim-witted son, Bishop, and lead him to love the whole world unconditionally as "his idiot child." Rayber fears the macrocosm, not like Tarwater, as a harsh prophet, but as the servant, loving all because, like Bishop, all are dim-witted and need spiritual and emotional guidance. Through an act of will, an act of reason, Rayber desperately struggles to control the overwhelming feelings of love that would crush his intellectual, knowing self. Like a Southern Henry Adams, Rayber the intellectual, with his "guts in his head," has been fitted with an education ill-suited for the world he now lives in.

Just as Rayber's education fails him, so too Young Tarwater's, though inversely. Unfamiliar with machines, Tarwater cannot operate a telephone or understand the machine-like Rayber. Nevertheless, Both Rayber and Tarwater desperately resist the loss of self Old Tarwater has demanded of them. In his attempt to protect his sense of self, Tarwater flees his great-uncle's property in Powderhead and retreats to his Uncle's place in the City. There he meets Bishop and Tarwater slowly recognizes his calling, the calling his great-uncle has placed on him earlier on in his life. Faced with Bishop — the physical manifestation of his calling, Young Tarwater rejects it. "I won't have anything to do with him!" He clenched his fist and lifted it ... defiant like a challenge hurled in the face of his silent adversary" (179).

In rejecting his adversary, Tarwater rejects, possibly, his great-uncle's memory enjoining him to baptize the child, or possibly the devil's voice that haunts him throughout the entire book, encouraging him to destroy the child, or possibly God's silence, which weighs on Tarwater. What God requires remains a mystery, filled in with Tarwater's adolescent, naive

expectations that God will reveal Himself in a whirlwind, in a burning bush, or that he can command the sun to stand still; Tarwater waits for a positive sign — encouraged by the seductive, friendly voice inside him. All the other prophets had signs, so why not Tarwater? his friend reasonably suggests. Without a positive sign, Tarwater remains in doubt, rejects the cost of losing his self — a battle begun early with his great-uncle and continued after his death.

Tarwater feels a strong kinship with the Old Testament prophets, but his sensibility is still more akin to Harry/Bevel's literary understanding of biblical myth. Raised on the stories of men who knew God and witnessed his presence in a powerful, positive manner, Tarwater expects the same. Because he never receives a sign from God, except those of his own making, Tarwater's ultimate fate remains unclear. He certainly struggles with those that would have him reject his great-uncle's madness. O'Connor is clear that Prophecy in this age can be seen only as a kind of madness by the modern world. Old Tarwater's tenure in an insane asylum remains testimony. Further, the constant barrage of reasonable advice from the Voice, from Meeks, from Rayber reinforce the notion that the modern world doesn't provide signs, just Reason. Ironically, the destructive, sterile, mechanical world of Reason acts as a sign to the reader — and hopefully to Tarwater — where his true calling lies: in the stinking, mad shadow of Jesus. Unfortunately, Tarwater's training makes both lives — the modern and the prophetic — extremely unappealing. Both lives represent a kind of madness: The modern represents the sterile, hopeless existence of a life spent resisting "the terrible speed of mercy," a life shut-down, unfeeling, as Rayber trains his mind to a numb silence, antithetical to the mystical silence of spiritual contemplatives.

Conversely, Old Tarwater represents another, fuller madness. In believing in God's mercy, his presence, Tarwater constantly wrestles with the "rage of vision" in his blood, sure of God's direction, living a life of isolation, shunned by the human community, and in turn he shuns it right back. Further, his knowledge about God, as Chapter one suggests, is regularly shown to be of his own making, as he returns to the woods to receive God's rebuke for presuming. Both are lives of extreme presumption; Rayber presumes that he knows where God is and can therefore avoid him, whereas Old Tarwater presumes he knows where God is and can therefore more readily embrace him. That O'Connor feels sympathy for Old Tarwater merely suggests her respect for his desire to embrace the life of Christ, not in his having achieved anything.

Rayber, though entirely without a positive theological perspective of his own, is familiar with Tarwater's, and is absolutely correct in his assessment

of the situation: Tarwater does feel a deep compulsion to baptize Bishop. Further, Tarwater wrestles with guilt over his great-uncle's final resting place. Rejecting his great-uncle's commands, Tarwater instead gets drunk and burns down the house with his great-uncle's corpse still in it. Again, though the text suggests that baptism versus non-baptism is the central, crucial issue, Barbara Johnson's observations regarding the central role difference plays in generating meaning in text provide an illuminating parallel. In *The Critical Difference* she writes that the interplay of difference in texts

is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences between entities are shown to be based on a repression of differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. But the way in which a text thus differs from itself is never simple: it has a certain rigorous, contradictory logic whose effects can, up to a certain point, be read. (Johnson x-xi)

So too *The Violent Bear It Away* manifests initial differences, foremost the differences between Rayber's humanism and Old Tarwater's Christianity, manifested in their differing perspectives on baptism. This outward difference in fact is based on a "repression of differences" within baptism itself, and within Old Tarwater's theological sensibility, a sensibility that is handed down to both Rayber and Young Tarwater. As inheritors of Old Tarwater's theology, they become fragmented images of Old Tarwater's already fragmented theological sensibility. As the driving engine to the novel, this fragmentation allows the play of differences to be read "up to a certain point." At first it seems that Rayber and Young Tarwater differ, but Young Tarwater differs from himself as well, just as Rayber betrays his own contradictory nature. Finally, and most significantly, the rigorous, contradictory logic within the notion of baptism differs from itself to such a degree that the ritual becomes meaningless as an act of grace, and becomes meaningful only as an act of plot, that is, as an act of murder. So the differences that once separated Rayber and Young Tarwater are no longer meaningful. The repressed differences within baptism itself become paramount — so much so that Young Tarwater must murder Bishop as an attempt to repress the differences. Consequently, baptism's status as a central, stable, determining metaphor no longer functions as a guide to understanding the primary differences of Old and Young Tarwater, Old Tarwater and Rayber, Rayber and Young Tarwater, Young Tarwater and Bishop. By the end of the novel baptism has become a central symbol not of grace, stability, essence, and truth, but of difference, of the gap, the abyss.

Old Tarwater makes absolutely no significant distinction between baptizing Young Tarwater as an infant without reason, and Rayber's baptism as a young, willing child. For Old Tarwater, the ceremony of infant baptism, like the cross Old Tarwater needs to mark his grave, assures one's entry into the Kingdom of God. Though, as an example of his contradictory theology, Old Tarwater, presumably baptized into the Kingdom of God, still fears it may be out of reach unless he receives a proper burial. Nevertheless, Old Tarwater's zeal remains slightly confused between the letter of the law, and the law of grace. His great-nephew, of course, responds to the literal, absolutist qualities of Old Tarwater, expecting the sun to stand still on his command, voices to pierce the noon-day silence, and bushes to erupt spontaneously into flame.

Rayber, on the other hand, utterly rejects Old Tarwater's maniacal religious appeal. Rayber recollects his own baptism at the hands of his uncle, revealing his own complicity regarding his religious upbringing. Unlike Tarwater's inauspicious ceremony as an infant, Rayber accepted, much like Harry/Bevel from "The River," that he counted after baptism. Old Tarwater preaches to Rayber as a child, teaching the child what his life means for four days before baptizing him. However, Old Tarwater's free-wheeling practice of the sacrament of baptism embodies a significant contradiction in the text, a contradiction that St. Thomas similarly suggests in his writings on the same subject. Is there an essence to the performative ritual of baptism? Old Tarwater — a raging Southern prophet — contradicts himself, for he contains a multitude of differing views on baptism.

At one moment, Young Tarwater recalls-his great-uncle retelling the story of his time with Rayber just after Young Tarwater's birth. Rayber discovers that Old Tarwater has quickly baptized his nephew, Francis Marion Tarwater in the crib. "He's been born again and there ain't a thing you can do about it,' Old Tarwater said.... 'If one baptism is good, two will be better,' Rayber said, having recovered from his anger. He turned Tarwater over and poured what was left in the bottle over his bottom and said the words of baptism again. Old Tarwater had stood there, aghast at this blasphemy. 'Now Jesus has a claim on both ends, the nephew said'" (*Violent* 167). Rayber remains bitter and angry, blaming religion, and Old Tarwater, for his condition. Rayber's humanistic, intellectual perspective regards baptism as an essentially meaningless act. Nevertheless, Rayber's doubts about the ritual provide an increasingly important response to Old Tarwater's free-wheeling practice of baptism.

Does Tarwater's reason, or his will, have anything to do with conferring the sacrament of grace while he lies in the crib, baptized on both ends? St.

Thomas certainly believes so, and O'Connor was a Thomist by her own admission. Still, this suggests that the ceremony itself confers the sacrament, just as the crosses that will be gathered on the last day indicate who will be resurrected, as far as Old Tarwater is concerned. Again, if all the elements required for baptism are in place, St. Thomas suggests that the ceremony does indeed have the power to confer grace. That is, if the *form*, the *matter*, and the *minister* are present, so is the sacrament of grace. Still, Rayber's blasphemous response after Old Tarwater baptizes Young Tarwater pushes this logic to the extreme. Does Rayber's unbelief, accompanied by his unholy baptism of the baby's butt nullify Old Tarwater's ceremony? The question remains: do these two competing myths — the religionist and the humanist — cancel each other out?

Rayber the humanist has renounced the life his uncle introduced him to as a child. Only after renouncing his uncle when fourteen does Rayber take up the laborious task of renouncing his uncle's education and entering into the modern world, a world of intellect, will-power, and technology, that is, machines. Rayber blames Old Tarwater for providing him with an education that is obsolete and useless for the modern world. In one sense, Old Tarwater is to blame for Rayber's condition. The hearing aid that "wires his head" is not a result of Rayber's humanism, but of Old Tarwater's maniacal zeal. Though Rayber becomes associated with "machines," nearly a machine himself, Old Tarwater's shotgun — a machine of an earlier age — plays a large part in creating the bitter, angry character of Rayber. Though Rayber at times sounds too much like a whipping boy for atheistic humanism than a fully-drawn, round character, his exaggerated cynicism serves as a significant foil for Old Tarwater.

Rayber's need to free himself from his uncle's teaching, a teaching consummated by Rayber's childhood acceptance of baptism, hides the crucial difference embedded within the varied concept of baptism in the text. The submerged though crucial dilemma of infant and adult baptismal practices clashes beneath the surface narrative. As a child of this debate, Bishop's silence takes on symbolic import. His dimwittedness and childlike intellect become a metaphoric representation of the intellectual gridlock produced by atheistic humanism; Bishop represents the human capacity for Reason and rationality stripped of its power when faced with divine difference. For Rayber, Bishop is the result of divine in-difference.

Bishop is neither infant, nor child. Suffering from Downs syndrome, Bishop's status as an infant corrupted by Adam's sin suddenly becomes suspect, and as a child, Bishop cannot understand the ritual and the question remains whether he requires it for the remission of sins. Further, the name Bishop clearly suggests that he already belongs to the kingdom of

heaven. In this moment of the narrative, the differences between Old Tarwater's theology, Rayber's humanism, and Young Tarwater's initiation are clear as they make Bishop's baptism their central concern.

Old Tarwater's theology at times suggests the extent of his literal-mindedness. He charges his great-nephew with his first mission. This is followed quickly by Old Tarwater's second request, though less crucial, for a decent burial in a grave at least ten feet deep. 'Listen,' the old man said, 'if it ain't feasible to use the box when the time comes, if you can't lift it or whatever, just get me in the hole but I want it deep. I want it ten foot, not just eight, ten. You can roll me to it if nothing else. I'll roll All I'm asking you is to get me in the ground and set up a cross'" (131-32). In rhetoric reminiscent of St. Thomas, post-structuralist notions of language also provide insight into Tarwater's dilemma. Tarwater's understanding of baptism confuses "the sign put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, 'thing' here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present" (Derrida 402).

Old Tarwater needs this grave and cross each for a specific reason. He does not want to be cremated and must be ten feet down because his whole body must remain intact for the day of Resurrection. The dogs might dig him up from a shallow grave and if he's cremated he'll be nothing but ashes, bodiless on the day the Lord calls him up. Further, his grave needs a cross on it so on the Last Day when all the crosses are gathered from all the graves, his, and he, will be among them.

Yet the voice of reason in Young Tarwater's head explains the grandfather's theological sensibility in a seductively rational, objective way reminiscent of Rayber's humanism: "don't you think any cross you set up in the year 1952 would be rotted out by the year the day of judgement comes in?" (O'Connor 144). This voice, the devil's according to O'Connor, argues that Old Tarwater's demand for a grave and cross resembles a kind of literal-minded madness. The voice reveals this for its own purpose, undoubtedly, but nonetheless, the logic remains irrefutable. "What about all those sojers blasted to nothing? What about all those that there's nothing left of to burn or bury?" (144). But Young Tarwater is challenged again by Buford. "He deserves to lie in a grave that fits him,' Buford said. 'He was deep in this life, he was deep in Jesus' misery'.... Buford lifted his hand. 'He needs to be rested'" (151). Buford suggests, like Old Tarwater, that the act of burial in the ground with a cross on the grave is tantamount to being rested. Young Tarwater's struggle with the voice of Reason and the memory of his great-uncle's demands should not be underestimated.

Without recourse to intellectual explanations of the theological significance of bodily resurrection, Young Tarwater, and the reader, are nearly forced to side with the voice in Young Tarwater's head. To reject the voice is to reject Reason altogether, and the text has not prepared Tarwater, or the reader, for that. Yet.

Before Young Tarwater rejects his great uncle's version of the mystery and misery of life, he reveals the extent of Old Tarwater's influence. Young Tarwater waits expectantly — and literally — for the Lord's call. "When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty untouched by any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts. He had expected this to happen as soon as his great-uncle died" (O'Connor 136). Of course, Young Tarwater is disappointed. Young Tarwater's education, though sincerely administered, has encouraged him to rely on traditional signifiers, a biblical parole in an attempt to understand how the world beyond his senses operates. He relies, that is, on concrete images in order to apprehend intellectually that which cannot be apprehended, and unearthly beasts is the best he can do in attempting to imagine the unimaginable. Nevertheless, in an attempt to rid himself of his great-uncle's memory, Tarwater burns the house, along with his great-uncle's body, in a symbolic attempt to erase the literal-minded influence of his great-uncle.¹¹

Yet Young Tarwater moves from the beginning of the novel to the end wrestling with the notion of a reductively theological view of, for him, God. That salvation can be reduced to the ceremony of a proper burial, or the icon of a cross on a grave, or the ceremony of baptism suggests Young Tarwater's misunderstanding of the performative and arbitrary nature of language. These ceremonies act only as insufficient signifiers to some unapprehendable signified. Yet Young Tarwater mistakes them for the thing itself, as if the ceremony, the icon, had some inherent power.

Young Tarwater remains trapped in his great-uncle's sign system. After arriving at Rayber's house and seeing Bishop,

he only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf. (*Violent* 177)

Bishop had become the concrete sign of Young Tarwater's call, "that the old man himself had primed [Bishop] from on high that here was the forced servant of God come to see that he was born again" (178). For Young Tarwater the literal choice is clear: Either baptize Bishop, or deny his great-uncle's God. He chooses the second, rejecting the vision his great-uncle taught him, the vision of heaven where he sits "forever with his great-uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and a multiplied loaf" (O'Connor 160), a vision that equates ceremony itself with the sacrament it confers. Young Tarwater explains his burden to Meeks, the copper flue salesman: "my great-uncle learnt me everything but first I have to find out how much of it is true" (170). Young Tarwater must learn that the baptism, graves and crosses no more contain grace than does the electronic black box Rayber straps to his side contains hearing.

Young Tarwater's re-education reaches its violent climax when, in an attempt to silence the voice and his great-uncle's memory, he drowns Bishop. "'I baptized him,' Young Tarwater explains to the man in lavender after he hitches a ride on the highway. 'It was an accident. I didn't mean to,' he said breathlessly. Then in a calmer voice he said, 'The words just come out of themselves but it don't mean nothing. You can't be born again.... I only meant to drown him,' the boy said. 'You're only born once. They were just some words that run out my mouth an spilled in the water'" (248).

Yet questions remain: Does Bishop need to be baptized? Can someone be baptized accidentally? More important, I think, is O'Connor's intellectual skepticism: As a fallen mortal, who am I to determine absolutely the difference between a murder-by-drowning and a baptism? Baptism is a drowning of sorts, and a spiritual rebirth. Conversely, drowning is a baptism of sorts, and if one believes in heaven, a spiritual rebirth awaits the victim. Young Tarwater attempts to end the intellectual and emotional wrestling match in his mind among the voices of Reason (Rayber), the "devil" voice, Baptism (Old Tarwater) and prophecy. In the process, though, he falls through the gap between the extremes in his head. Young Tarwater fails to recognize that baptizing Bishop constitutes a useless gesture for the child; Bishop's biblical associations and his very name reveal that this baptism constitutes a useless act as in relation to his spiritual condition. Bishop represents a living theological gray area, and his death symbolically drags Young Tarwater (and the reader) into a gray area of unknowing. Young Tarwater violently splits the difference between the two myths in his mind, and falls over the edge and into the abyss he so desperately tries to avoid.

Bishop represents a physical embodiment of the difference hidden within baptism, and as such becomes Tarwater's scapegoat; Tarwater needs to kill what cannot be killed, that is, he needs to reconcile (by annihilation) the paradoxical contradiction, the reminder of what he cannot know about baptism, about his calling, about God. Only by trying to annihilate the abyss in Bishop does Young Tarwater make himself vulnerable to it. Tarwater's vulnerability is authentic, and the individual in the lavender and cream colored car takes advantage of it. Thoroughly stripped of his old sense of self, introduced to his own corruption as a member of Adam's race, Tarwater returns to Powderhead, to his great-uncle's grave prepared by a Christ-like Buford, riding on a donkey. Having felt the blood of Abel rising in his own, he remembers the mark of Cain, and smears a handful of dirt from his great-uncle's grave onto his forehead. Only now, caught between innocence and guilt, grace and sin, baptism and drowning, Old Tarwater and Rayber, can Young Tarwater stand in the gap and set off toward the dark city, unknown and unknowing (267).

If "The River" questioned Harry/Bevel's literal interpretation of baptism, *The Violent Bear It Away* takes it much further. The novel does not merely question baptism, it attempts to rewrite it. O'Connor succeeds in creating a self-consuming artifact, or novel, that reflects the self-consuming ritual baptism itself represents. The success of the book, and the success of O'Connor's attempt to document baptism depends entirely on her refusal to do so in a positive manner. Through the intense, though subdued thematic pressure the novel brings to bear on the ritual of baptism, the positive term baptism suffers a crisis — and transformation — in its meaning, and reveals itself as a signifier rife with repressed differences the text does not attempt to reconcile so much as reveal. As the methodical, relentless intensity of the story progresses, baptism as a positive theological concept reveals its status as a concept of differences rather than of positive signification; it is a signifier not to be looked at, but to be looked through.

A negative reading of baptism at first is a difficult prospect simply because O'Connor's texts rely on a steady use of metaphor, striking imagery, biblical allusions and allegorical effects in order to give substance to the abstract ideas she explores in her fiction. However, the ritual of baptism as the central symbol in the novel functions as an allegorical representation of the storyteller's use of symbols. The meaning-bearing symbols in *The Violent Bear It Away* — baptism, graves, crosses — function as stumbling blocks to both character and reader because they resist the definitions text and characters place on them. Young Tarwater's literal-minded interpretation of baptism, and the extremes it takes him to con-

trasts violently with the coolly rationalistic Voice of Reason. The negative space, a vague sense of unknowing, a kind of symbolic vacuum, opens up at the end of the novel, like the pit in Tarwater's stomach.¹²

Even a provisional understanding of O'Connor's interest in "documenting baptism" — over-determined by the characters in the text and sometimes by O'Connor herself in her letters and essays — remains particularly difficult because of the literary moment in which she is now read. One can easily overlook O'Connor's seemingly unintended manipulation of meaning that paradoxically suggests a subversive, unorthodox reading, while at the same time seeming to support a traditional, static, narrowly-exegetical interpretation. Most important, a subversive reading of *The Violent Bear It Away* provides the realization that there exists no definite meaning to baptism in the text, or the text as symbol — and that kind of symbolic self-consuming action is what baptism enacts and celebrates. Tarwater's experience of baptism in one sense stands analogously for the reader's experience of the text. *The Violent Bear It Away* and "The River" are themselves forms of ceremony, an icon, a performative act using a system of signs that, ultimately, remain insufficient as metaphors of mystery.

As a performative ritual, the act of reading engages the audience not only in the story of Tarwater's actions, but also in the story of Tarwater's intellectual crisis. Tarwater's understanding of Christian ritual, and hence reality, is challenged and finally shattered as the narrative progresses. Just so, the text — as a collection of metaphors we engage rather than as plot describing Tarwater's actions — methodically undermines the central metaphor of baptism and reveals not a solid, meaning-bearing ritual that delivers a definable theme or meaning, but instead an interplay of contradictions, circular reasonings and differences for the reader just as it does for Tarwater. Baptism, it seems, does not explain Orthodoxy, or sacramentalism, but rather, it guards these mysterious metaphysical notions from too-easy explanations. From this "negative" literary sensibility, the gaps, fissures and differences that characterize O'Connor's second novel and so much of her fiction should not be read as accidents or omissions, but rather, as an attempt to articulate the inarticulable, as an expression of O'Connor's philosophic skepticism and as an expression of her devout religious faith.

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NOTES

1. It has been argued that “Judgement Day” was O’Connor’s last story because she completed it already having finished “Parker’s Back.” However, because “Judgement Day” is a revision, though a drastic one, of an earlier story, “The Geranium,” I take “Parker’s Back” to be the last story O’Connor wrote. See James J. Napier who sees “Revelation” as O’Connor’s central story through which her other stories should be read. I disagree.

2. Evelyn Underhill, Jill Rait, Walter Holden Capps, Cuthbert Butler, William Johnston and Julia Gatta all provide fascinating insights into the western mystical tradition, its relationship to Catholicism, Zen, and its relationship to the Positive Way and Negative Way Theologies. Old Testament Hebraic thought offers a fascinating look at what we might call today a contemporary distrust of language’s ability to communicate “presence,” and a healthy respect for negativity. The Ten Commandments — six out of ten — are stated in the negative, that is, what one *should not* do. And Moses destroyed the “texts” soon after their inscription.

3. Flannery O’Connor’s correspondence mentions Thomas Merton only briefly; even so, she had a profound respect for Merton and the personal dedication required by the monastic life. Both artists shared not only their Roman Catholic faith but also a similar literary sensibility in expressing their Catholicism. Certainly Merton’s ascetic life in the Conyers monastery proved attractive to O’Connor, as did all dedicated lives. Oddly enough, O’Connor’s own life suggested a kind of monastic asceticism after she was forced to withdrawal to Milledgeville by a crippling and ultimately fatal disease, lupus.

4. Paul’s letter to the Phillipians addresses the mystery of Christ’s kenosis. In chapter two, verses 5-8 Paul writes, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” The kenosis, or “self-emptying” suggests the paradox of Christ, for he claims to be both God and man, yet is neither, yet is both. In one important sense for my argument, the kenosis remains the central mystery of the Christian myth, suggesting that the physical life of Christ — having emptied himself of his divine state — represents an absence where a presence should be. Consider the desert fathers who display a ferocious distrust of the icon — of the *via affirmativa* — and embrace the silence that follows when the intellect exhausts itself. Merton’s desert fathers, like the Catholic mystics that followed them dramatize the limits of the kataphatic, or positive theology. Also known as the *via affirmativa*, this way “is based most fundamentally upon the belief that God has revealed himself, and uses creatures for his self-disclosure” (Gatta 92). I would add that, for this study, the *via affirmativa* also uses language and metaphor as positive, meaning-bearing vehicles. On the other hand, the *via negativa* complements the *via affirmativa* in Christian theology, arguing that God cannot be known, much less embodied, in language or metaphor.

5. Metaphor is used loosely here, as elsewhere, to suggest the limits of not only metaphoric language, but the rituals that grow out of our understanding of metaphor and the limits of language itself to bear sacramental weight.

6. This is also a useful way to approach O’Connor’s fiction. Her first collection of short fiction is marked by stories that “ride on their own melting.” “Good Country People,” “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The River” and others represent narratives that, in the telling, consume themselves — that is, the terms, characters, and plot points by

which we usually measure meaning are swallowed up, murdered, or erased by the end of a typical O'Connor story. For a discussion of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," see Joseph Zornado.

7. I place "center" in quotations marks because it is exactly this notion that the story crumbles around. Does baptism have a center? If not, does metaphor? Does a short story?

8. O'Connor's remarks about "The Artificial Nigger" are a case in point. *The Habit of Being* contains substantial information on the drafting of completion of this story, a story O'Connor considers one of her best while many critics, I among them, disagree. The question regarding "The Artificial Nigger" is not unlike the question I am asking in this discussion. Does the metaphor, that is, the image of the artificial nigger take on sacramental meaning — or "gain altitude" as she says in her letters — by the end of the story as she says it does?

9. For early, perceptive reviews of the novel see Albert Duhamel and Frank J. Wanke.

10. O'Connor's first collection of short stories explores issues related to epistemology, or how we know what we know and how a knowledge of God (or lack thereof) impacts on how we know and what we know. As a Roman Catholic, O'Connor accepted Biblical text as the Word of God, while at the same time she felt deeply that human reasoning was a limited and highly untrustworthy authority. The paradoxical relationship here is obvious, and for some troubling. O'Connor's version of Orthodoxy remained, for her, crucial to a life of faith; and a part of her Orthodoxy was a deep respect for unknowing, that is, for mystery. As she put it, "I believe in Christian Orthodoxy." Though these things are difficult to understand, "a God you understood would be less than yourself" (*Habit* 354).

11. Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics — antecedent to post-structural linguistics — provides a useful theoretical paradigm through which to read Young Tarwater's dilemma. Saussure writes that, "language is a system of signs that express ideas and is thus comparable to the system of writing, to the alphabet of deaf-mutes, to symbolic rituals, to forms of etiquette, to military signals, etc. It is but the most important of these systems" (cited in Culler 97). Saussure goes on to distinguish between *langue* and *parole*. As Culler explains, "it is essentially a distinction between institution and event, between the underlying system which makes possible various types of behavior and actual instances of such behavior" (27). That is, *langue*, the system of language, makes possible *parole*, the actual speech act.

12. Static ritual and the mystery of baptism have a complicated relationship, O'Connor suggests. The essence of ritual lies in paradox: ritual celebrates its own inability to embody itself. In other words, ritual celebrates the faith required to celebrate ritual. It follows, then, that the provisional nature of Orthodox ritual does not explain mystery, but rather, it guards it. O'Connor intuited — along with Teilhard de Chardin and Merton and countless other mystics — that God does not live exclusively as a positive presence in the sign, but rather, somewhere in the gap between the *via affirmativa* and the *via negativa* (between the signifier and the signified) can Orthodoxy be "understood" to offer the mystery of God's difference as a presence, "nameless and impalpable and indwelling in all things" (Teilhard 239).

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