

**Flannery O'Connor's Letters and Fiction:
A Corresponding Identity**

Submitted by

Bernadette Rosbrook, B.A. (Hons)

A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Philosophy

**School of Arts and Sciences, McAuley Campus
Faculty of Arts and Sciences**

**Australian Catholic University
Office of Research
412 Mt Alexander Road
Ascot Vale, Victoria 3032
Australia**

14 May 1998

Statement of sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.



Bernadette Rosbrook

14 May, 1998

Note on the use of O'Connor's letters

As stated in the introduction, this thesis constitutes a study of Flannery O'Connor's letters, as selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald in The Habit of Being. It is acknowledged that additional letters of O'Connor's have been published in other books and journals. Most significant in this regard is The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys, edited by C. Ralph Woods. This volume, and other sources of O'Connor's letters, have been consulted and are used where appropriate to support the argument of this thesis. It is apparent however that The Habit of Being remains the most comprehensive and important collection of O'Connor's letters published to date and there is justification for focusing on this collection for the purposes of scholarly inquiry.

Abstract

This thesis attempts to demonstrate the way in which Flannery O'Connor uses the personal letter as vehicle for negotiating her involvement with the world. It begins by examining the way in which O'Connor's letters function as a form of self-writing. Discussing her letters as an autobiographical text highlights the significance of detachment in the creation of a self-identity responsive to "cultural" and "essential" impulses simultaneously. This leads inevitably to the identification of the ways in which O'Connor, in her letters, repeatedly adopts perspectives that facilitate her disengagement from immediate surroundings. It is evident that her experience of the world is mediated through her use of two responses - comedy and resoluteness. O'Connor's **comic** sense allows her an individual, complex response to the discursive cultural influences in her life. Her use of comedy in her letters foreshadows the function of humor in her stories: in her fiction, O'Connor develops further the possibilities of a comic engagement with life. O'Connor's **resoluteness** testifies to her involvement in something "essential". It is an integral part of her religious consciousness and reflects the long-range, expansive dimensions of her personal vision. In that it allows her to disengage with irrelevant or distracting considerations, resoluteness becomes invaluable for ensuring the integrity of O'Connor's vocation as a writer. It is evident that resoluteness describes **both** O'Connor's own response to life and the operation of truth in her stories. The detachment intrinsic to communication by letter fosters the detachment that, for O'Connor, becomes the means for an intense engagement with life and a positive self-construction. This is crucial for the maintenance of an individual, authentic perspective and is therefore essential both for O'Connor's personal autonomy and for her success as an artist.

Contents

	Introduction	1
1	Writing the self into existence	6
	Letters as personal texts	6
	The self and the world: letters as “cultural act”	13
	The self and the (O)ther: letters and the possibilities of relationship	24
2	Maintaining a critical distance: O’Connor’s comic sense	36
	<u>Part A</u> : Comedy in O’Connor’s letters	36
	<u>Part B</u> : The function of comedy in O’Connor’s fiction	51
3	Maintaining a critical distance: resoluteness and O’Connor’s religious consciousness	75
	<u>Part A</u> : Religious understanding in O’Connor’s letters	75
	<u>Part B</u> : Expressions of resoluteness in O’Connor’s fiction	94
	Conclusion: Reading O’Connor’s letters as “fictions”	115
	Bibliography	118

Introduction

Since the publication in 1979 of a comprehensive collection of Flannery O'Connor's letters, selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald in a volume entitled The Habit of Being, critics have repeatedly drawn from the correspondence reflective, instructive and outrageous comments intended both to illuminate O'Connor's fiction and illustrate the eccentricities of her unique, forceful personality. The overwhelming number of books and articles on O'Connor that have appeared subsequent to the publication of The Habit of Being include some mention of her letters. Critics repeatedly note the way in which they complement the fiction: O'Connor's blunt candour and the stark religious vision that she repeatedly communicates describe both the essence of her character as revealed in her letters and the hallmark traits of her stories. However, the mass of critical output on O'Connor's life and work has produced only a handful of studies in which the letters **themselves** constitute the focus of the analysis. It is worth outlining briefly the direction of some of these discussions. In his article, "Consistency of Voice and Vision: O'Connor as Self-Critic", James Lindroth examines the voice that emerges in O'Connor's letters. He discusses the way in which this resembles the narrative voice of O'Connor's fiction, and is distinguishable from the voices of her "most malevolent" fictional characters (58). Lindroth uses the letters to comment on O'Connor's artistic strategies, but he does not respond to the subtleties of her rhetoric; he does not examine the way in which the letters convey the uniqueness of her voice or the parameters of her vision. Heidi Holfeltz's treatment of O'Connor's letters, entitled "A Self-Portrait in Words", is concerned primarily with

conveying the nature of the personality that comes through the correspondence. Holfeltz's article contains little analysis of the tone and content of O'Connor's letters; in effect, it constitutes a third-person retelling of O'Connor's reflections on the major influences in her life. Louise Westling's article - "Flannery O'Connor's Revelations to 'A'" - focuses on the epistolary debates between O'Connor and her most intimate correspondent, a woman who wished to remain unnamed and is known throughout the correspondence only as "A". Westling's study provides insight into the way in which "A" challenges O'Connor's understanding of the feminine and femininity, and influences O'Connor's treatment of her female characters. However, Westling confines her analysis to one particular relationship, and to one aspect of the relationship, so that her treatment of O'Connor's letters is necessarily limited. Like Louise Westling, Peter Hawkins focuses on one feature of O'Connor's correspondence - her "extraordinary gift for taking other people's religious life seriously" (91). However, Hawkins' article, "Faith and Doubt First Class: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor", is unique in that it allows the **letters** to determine and direct the nature of the inquiry into the writer and her work. Most importantly, Hawkins directs the reader's attention to O'Connor's conception of "relationship" and the extent to which this is influenced by the exigencies of communication by letter. In so doing, he asks penetrating questions which resonate beyond the scope of his study and provide guidelines for the subsequent treatment of O'Connor's letters.

The present study takes up some of the points raised by Hawkins in an attempt to conduct a comprehensive analysis of The Habit of Being which explores the value of the letters as **letters**. Given the acknowledged importance of The Habit of Being to O'Connor scholarship, and the way in which its treatment to date has been limited by

either the intention or the scope of previous studies, there is justification for a work which responds to the effects of the letters as a complete, self-contained text. In a 1978 article on Jane Austen's letters, Joseph Kestner argues for the need to study letters "of themselves" (249). Kestner highlights the importance of letters as dialogue, as "words reacting on words" (Volosinov qtd in Kestner 262). He maintains that in this way, the letter constitutes a "paradigm of human development" (267). An analysis of O'Connor's letters "of themselves" attests to an integral relationship between the letters and the life of the writer.

"Of themselves", Flannery O'Connor's letters function as a vital form of self-writing. After establishing an appropriate theoretical background for the study of personal letters, this work proceeds to discuss the importance of letters as a vehicle for mediating O'Connor's world-involvement. Taking into account **both** the "measure of control" **and** "the freedom and risk" made possible by the distance which letters demand (Hawkins 98), it is argued that the letter genre allows O'Connor to develop the detachment possible to enable the construction of a self responsive to "worldly" and "otherworldly" impulses simultaneously. O'Connor uses this detachment to negotiate her engagement with various cultural institutions. She also uses it to develop a penetrating, clear-eyed gaze. In his article, Hawkins comments on O'Connor's ability to convey to her correspondent the "sure realization that one had been paid a singular attention, that one's life . . . was of ultimate importance" (103). Detachment enables O'Connor to recognize and appreciate the essential worth of the other person.

Having provided a rationale which establishes detachment as a defining concept in understanding O'Connor's relationship to the world, this study then takes up detachment as a mode of inquiry into her preoccupations and intentions as a writer.

From her letters it is clear that O'Connor repeatedly uses two responses - comedy and what can most usefully be referred to as "resoluteness" - in order to give herself the appropriate perspective for understanding the human condition and rendering this authentically in her art. These responses indicate that detachment, somewhat paradoxically, heightens O'Connor's engagement with life. Comedy reflects the intensity of O'Connor's world-involvement, at the same time providing her with a critical tool for social analysis and comment. Resoluteness represents her determined commitment to the demands of rigorous artistic endeavor and at the same time describes her detachment from circumstances and concerns extraneous to her vocation as a writer. The Habit of Being reveals that resoluteness is a function of O'Connor's religious consciousness and is integrally linked to the concept of "truth" which she uses continually, and without clarification, throughout her correspondence.

While this study is concerned with O'Connor's letters "of themselves", it will become clear that the comedy and resoluteness that reverberate throughout the letters can inform a reading of some of O'Connor's stories. Examining the links between the letters and the fiction allows insight into O'Connor's understanding of the religious orthodoxy which is clearly a dominating influence in her life. On several occasions, in her letters, O'Connor aligns herself with the orthodox Christian position. However, the understanding that she displays in her discussions, the manner of her approach to religious dialogue and debate, and the resolutions that she achieves in her stories indicate that, for her, orthodoxy is not limited to fixed belief systems or the acceptance of Church authority. The Habit of Being attests to O'Connor's participation in a religious dialogue which is "inquiring rather than dogmatic" (Tinder 2). Glenn Tinder maintains that the "spirit of Christianity" is expressed in the biblical injunction, "Come

now, let us reason together" (qtd in Tinder 2). This injunction accurately describes the dominant tone of The Habit of Being. The reverence for dogma which O'Connor, on several occasions, promulgates is not the same as an unquestioning acceptance, but indicates rather her appreciation of a complex symbolic structure that allows her to understand the progress of humanity, a structure which also resonates with spectacular metaphoric potential. O'Connor's conception of the value of dogma - its relationship to "truth" and to the way in which her fiction operates - to some extent resembles Hannah Arendt's speculations on truth and thought. Arendt writes: "The chief fallacy is to believe that Truth is a result which comes at the end of a thought process. Truth, on the contrary, is always the beginning of thought . . . *Thinking starts after an experience of Truth has struck home*, so to speak" (qtd in Ryckmans 6-7). For O'Connor, dogma is not an "inflexible embodiment of the truth" (Tinder 2), but rather provides her with a brief, intense, experience of insight which sets her on the path of sustained inquiry. The detachment intrinsic to communication by letter complements the detachment that translates to an ability to maintain an open, questioning mind. The Habit of Being reflects a grappling with intellectual, aesthetic and religious concerns which O'Connor tests, develops and - in some cases - perfects in her stories.

1 Writing the self into existence

Flannery O'Connor's letters are valuable for both the quality of their discourse and for what they reveal about her personal preoccupations. O'Connor displays a passionate interest in ideas: she is conversant with the dogma and history of her own religious tradition, while at the same time maintaining a keen interest in philosophy and theology from a variety of ideological backgrounds. She is well-read in classical and modern fiction, and is enthusiastic in her discussions about contemporary American writing. From her home in rural Georgia, O'Connor uses letters to develop and pursue intellectual interests - to become what Philip Adams has described in another context as "a hunter and gatherer of ideas" ("Rethinking Australia"). Her letters are charged with the "*activity*" of her thinking (Brightman xv): her articulateness enables the reader to follow the development of her thought, and in the intimacy of the genre it is possible to discern the depth of her commitment to and satisfaction in discoveries of truth. O'Connor perceives that "truth" is distorted by excessive pathos or sentiment. In her fiction, she subjects herself to rigorous discipline in order to perfect a technique which is "organic", and the standards that she enforces in her stories and novels are also evident in her correspondence. As a result, her letters are characterized by a "strong clear style" (Fitzgerald xiii) that renders her concerns readily accessible.

Letters as personal texts

Confined by a series of cultural, physical and geographical barriers; often diminished by reductive interpretations of her work, O'Connor uses letters to, in effect,

write herself into existence. They attest to her complexity as an individual, revealing an increasingly expansive web of personal and professional relationships integrally linked to her intellectual and emotional development. At the same time, letters allow O'Connor a degree of detachment - in the act of "bridging" distance, they offer the potential for reflection and understanding. The subsequent chapters in this thesis will go on to examine the expression of O'Connor's religious and cultural sensibilities in the space provided by her letters and the importance of this for her work as a writer. However, the significance of her preoccupations and insights cannot be fully appreciated without inquiry into the way in which her letters function as a mode of self-writing. O'Connor's letters reflect the strongly defined and often divergent cultural influences in her life, at the same time allowing the emergence of something innate and unchanging in her character. They textualize both her participation in multiple discourses **and** the singularity of her mode of perception. From her letters, it is possible to identify a radical involvement with the temporal **and** the timeless. In many ways, O'Connor's letters demonstrate Martin Buber's precept, "that which is essential is lived in the present" (Buber 64), and testify to her commitment to the dialogic mode of discovery. In the relational context nurtured by letters, concepts of "truth" become inseparable from processes of inquiry.

Over the past ten years, there has been an increase in critical interest in writers' letters. Much research has been published which takes, as its focus, a writer's collected correspondence. Surveying the literature in this area, it becomes apparent that personal letters are considered to be most valuable for the way in which they provide unmediated experience of a writer's life. The reader is propelled to proximity through a

writer's letters - a new experience of immediacy charges the intellectual involvement. For example, Mary Reynolds contends that the letters of James Joyce are important primarily as "a spontaneous record of his life", conveying to the reader a valuable sense of "the personality that supported [his] compulsive, concentrated genius" (67). Catharine Stimpson, discussing Virginia Woolf's letters, states that as Woolf developed as a writer, the letter became "an act within, and of, the moment" (168), an "intimate and honest" expression of the self (169). Jill Ker Conway, researching the lives of women of the Progressive Era, finds that "a wholly different voice" comes through in their letters, which express "ambitions and struggles" not conveyed in the "flatness" of the traditional autobiographical narrative (qtd in Heilbrun 70). According to Janet Malcolm, letters are "the great fixative of experience . . . the fossils of feeling . . . Everything else the biographer touches is stale, hashed over, told and retold, dubious, inauthentic, suspect" (qtd in Charters Jack Kerouac Selected Letters xxi).

It is evident that a strong sense of personal presence dominates the reader's experience of letters. Much of their value comes from their place within a "private genre" of writing (Kaplan 212). Personal letters are written for an intended audience and are characterized by an intimacy based on mutual interest and shared knowledge. In her discussion of the letter as interpretable object, Barbara Herrnstein Smith aligns letters with spoken discourse: "personal letters . . . are not records or descriptions of utterances, but constitute utterances themselves, only in written rather than vocal form" (20). The presence of an audience other than the self distinguishes letters from other forms of private writing - in particular, diaries and journals. Smith goes on to

outline the stylistic demands that the letter is subject to as a medium of communication:

What makes a letter particularly interesting as an utterance is the fact that, since it lacks the supplementary information usually conveyed to the listener by intonation and gestures as well as by shared physical contexts, this sort of information will commonly be supplied by the writer in other ways: by explicit allusions . . . by graphic substitutes for intonation (for example, underlining, punctuation, spacing), and by more subtle modifications of the language itself (diction, syntax, turns of phrasing, and metaphor). (23)

The letter-writer's attention to the reader's involvement heightens the intensity of the engagement between writer and reader, so that the reader is placed in the privileged position of experiencing the intensity of the writer's preoccupations.

The significance of this experience can be best ascertained within the context of a critical tradition which recognizes value in personal texts. Recent studies of writers' letters appear to be incorporated into the practice of autobiographical criticism¹. It is clear, however, that the inclusion of letters in this genre is contentious. There exists a strong tradition of critical scepticism regarding the status of letters as a form of autobiography. Friedrich von Blanckenburg, an eighteenth century German theorist of the novel, maintained that because a collected correspondence was narrated by persons "in the midst of an action", it could not develop the "broad and objective narrative perspective" necessary for autobiography (qtd in Goodman 318). In his 1956 essay, "The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", Georges Gusdorf states that, in autobiography, the writer "recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (Gusdorf

38). Shari Benstock comments on the implications of Gusdorf's definition - letters are no more than a **source** for autobiography; they belong in a separate, prior category (15). More recently, it has been claimed that letters are an inferior form of life-writing: their potential to "reveal the nature of their keeper" is dubious because "the mere fact of the other person's presence conditions what is being said" (Cavaliero 157). It is the absence of an autonomous *autos* or self that problematizes the status of letters as autobiographical text. This point of contention identifies the most important consideration in the discussion of personal letters. It marks a point of departure for recent feminist critics, who assign **value** to the ability of letters to reflect a disunified, interrupted life. For these critics, the problematic *autos* is compelling at the same time as it is distracting: it invites inquiry into the possibilities for "different constructions of experience" (Goodman 311), and so facilitates the discovery of a more authentic self. The multiple narrative voices that emerge in a collected correspondence textualize the complex relationship between the self and the world. According to Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, "being *between two covers* with somebody else" provides a mode of resisting "reification and essentialism" (11). It allows the experience of self as "fragmented, partial, segmented, and different" (Benstock 12) and so reflects rather than denies "the alienating world order" (15).

In an essay entitled "Autobiography and the Historical Consciousness", Karl Weintraub argues that "the dominant autobiographic truth is . . . the vision of the pattern and meaning of life which the autobiographer has at the moment of writing his autobiography" (827). It is this relationship between the self and the pattern of a life which points towards what many critics have recognized as the special aptness of

personal letters in rendering female experience: in particular, letters textualize the “dominant autobiographic truth” that the “pattern and meaning” of a woman’s life is determined by other people. This has fostered what Carolyn Heilbrun refers to as “a condition of storylessness” (68); it has traditionally impeded women’s ability to construct cohesive autobiographical narratives. Recognizing the analogy between women’s texts and the “fragmented, interrupted . . . nature” of their lives (Jelinek 19) opens up the possibility for insightful critical readings. In her ground-breaking essay on women’s autobiography, Mary Mason argues that “the disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’ ” - the “grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other . . . seems to enable women to write openly about themselves” (210). It is clear that personal letters are an ideal medium for this process of self-realization: they delineate an interaction and textualize the development of both individuality and connectedness. Suzanne Juhasz, in her discussion of Jane Austen’s letters, maintains that the letter “defines and perpetuates” the relationship between “the self and the other”; and thus projects linguistically “[a] self defined by social relationship” (87). Patricia Meyer Spacks describes this as “evasive self-definition” [emphasis added] (Spacks Female Rhetorics 178), arguing that female correspondence allows women to “work out ways of understanding themselves” at the same time as avoiding “the troubling threat of egotism” (178). Feminist autobiographical criticism associates egotism with “the (masculine) tradition of autobiography” (Brodzki and Schenck 1), in which the male autobiographer creates a “masculine representative self”, a “mirror of his era” (2). This finds expression in “the chronological, linear narrative” in which autobiographers “consciously shape the events of their life into a

coherent whole” (Jelinek 17). Shari Benstock notes that the male autobiographer uses the ego as a “bulwark against disintegration” (15). She recognizes, in women’s texts, a strong tendency to reflect the “*discord* that gives lie to a unified identifiable, coterminous self” and to avoid the artifice of “fusion and homogeneity in the construction of a ‘self’” (12).

Applying the concerns of recent critics of female autobiography to The Habit of Being, it is possible to identify two major ways in which her letters allow her to write herself into the world. The frequency of her letters and her reliability as a correspondent reflects their crucial role as “life-line” from forced isolation in rural Georgia. Their essential format - their very disconnectedness - enables O’Connor to transgress the oppressive boundaries that threaten to limit her aesthetic and emotional development. They allow the construction of a “dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses” (Bergland 134). They thus attest to O’Connor’s “world-involvement” and textualize her presence as a **cultural self** (Gunn 9). At the same time, O’Connor’s letters enable her to set up intimate contexts in which engagement with another person gives her the opportunity to “sift through” her own life for “explanation and understanding” (Jelinek 15). As well as attesting to her “temporality” in the “lived world” (Gunn 9), O’Connor’s letters also allow the emergence of what may be called an **essential self**. They reveal her participation in what Martin Buber refers to as an “I-Thou” way of seeing, and show a self affirmed and developed by a “dialectic of love, understanding, work and communion” (Merton 120). Catharine Stimpson’s description of Virginia Woolf’s letters as forming “an autobiography of the self with others” (168) can be

applied with equal validity to the letters of Flannery O'Connor. Her textual interactions reflect her ideas on the relationship between the self and the world; further, they delineate an engagement with the "other" which resolves, in O'Connor's case, into an encounter with God².

The self and the world: letters as "cultural act"

In her discussion of the theory of autobiography, Janet Varner Gunn argues that the autobiographical text proceeds from a "cultural act" rather than a "private act" (8). She maintains that when the writer brings a life "to language", he or she "always adumbrates a perspective from somewhere" (9). This observation offers valuable insight into the relationship between letters and self-identity. Inscribed with a specific location and date, letters are always rooted in time and space - they are always "from somewhere". The overwhelming majority of O'Connor's letters collected in The Habit of Being are written from her home at her mother's farm, at "Andalusia" outside of Milledgeville in Georgia. In her letters then, O'Connor cannot avoid confronting the truth about her particular involvement in the world. Her letters continually ground her in the reality of her "exile". At the same time, the perspective that O'Connor displays in her letters - the "somewhere" that she is "from" - is not defined solely by her immediate present. As Gunn notes, perspective in autobiographical writing involves "a certain mode of self-placing in relation to the [writer's] past and from a particular standpoint in his or her present" (Gunn 16). O'Connor's letters do more than "issue a report" on where she has been and what she has done (Gunn 16), they are an exercise in interpretation - they resound with her attempt to discover "the structure of meaning

in [an] experience” (15). They therefore display the depth of O’Connor’s lived experience by testifying to a variety of different modes of understanding. In this way, O’Connor’s letters allow a unique understanding of her particular displacement. As a female Catholic writer living in the rural South, O’Connor became “estranged in important ways from both American literature in general and [her] native Southern culture in particular” (Russello 446). She may be described then as several times displaced: from the traditional occupations of Southern country women, from the recognized literary hubs of America, from the major centers of Catholic interest. As well as outlining the conflicting boundaries in O’Connor’s cultural affiliations, her letters provide some insight into the meaning of her displacement. The major disruptive force in O’Connor’s life was her ongoing illness and subsequent disability. Her letters are a clear indication of the way in which sickness can interrupt and severely hinder the career of a young, unmarried woman. Although O’Connor does not elaborate on her precarious health, the frustration of genius is keenly felt in a life “cabin’d and cribb’d in limited and limiting letters” (Marcus qtd in Stimpson 171). Their disconnectedness is analogous to the “brokenness” of her debilitation. The brevity of many of the letters is indicative of the effort required, and of her struggle to conserve energy for writing fiction. In addition to revealing the extent of her displacement, O’Connor’s letters set up a context which enables her to find, in her displaced state, a unique identity. There is a sense in which the pattern of O’Connor’s friendships overlays the cultural boundaries that define her world, enabling her to be transgressive as she negotiates the peripheries of Catholic orthodox culture, Southern intellectual culture, female literary culture. The ways in which these “institutions” organize and produce sense, meaning

and consciousness are often contradictory. O'Connor lives these contradictions without attempting to resolve them. In her study of Jane Austen's letters, Deborah Kaplan identifies this as an "intermingling of discourses" (Kaplan 216). She maintains that Austen's letters are able to convey the true "contradictory nature of her cultural experience" (225) because "the private genre of letter-writing has no intrinsic censoring feature which would suppress or resolve cultural contradictions" (Kaplan 212).

A postmodern inquiry into autobiography also recognizes the "contradictions in the discourses of self-representation" (Gilmore 8). O'Connor's letters show her participation in the postmodern challenge to the notion of a "sovereign self" (Brodzki and Schenck 14), of an omnipotent "I" behind an autobiographical work which "shapes and determines" its nature, and without which the work would "collapse into mere insignificance" (Olney 21). They exemplify the recognition of self in a variety of divergent cultural contexts. This is most clearly demonstrated in O'Connor's letters to "A" and to Maryat Lee. Her constant communication with these two women forms a comprehensive but intimate dialogue, marked by openness and mutual respect. With both "A" and Lee, she shares aspects of her cultural identity. All three women can be described as "Southern" - although Lee has rejected the South and resides in New York City. All three are writers - but "A" is an unpublished amateur and Lee a minor playwright. Both O'Connor and "A" are Catholic - but "A" is a convert who rejects Catholicism after six years. Lee is a political activist; she mocks orthodoxy and all "institutional" religion. The similarity and difference that mark O'Connor's engagement with these two women allows a juxtapositioning which summarizes the map of her

displacement. At the same time, a strong sense of relationship accommodates the difference, and gives O'Connor leave to speak/write across cultural boundaries. For example, in the following extract O'Connor makes no attempt to disguise her own Catholicism in making a very serious point to the irreligious, irreverent Lee about a subject of deep and mutual significance - the development of artistic sensibility:

Everything has to be diluted with time and with matter, even that love of yours which has to come down on many of us to be able to come down on one. It is grace and it is the blood of Christ and I thought, after I had seen you once, that you were full of it and didn't know what to do it with it or perhaps even what it was. In the play that some New England man wrote there is a line: "Pity the man who loves what death can touch." I don't know the play, only the line. But it is what we are to be pitied and praised for that we do, must, love what death can touch. Well, be busy about it and do not be afraid to be busy about it in the South. (HB 224-5)

The context of this discussion is Lee's impending return to the South, and the significance of this for her work as a writer. O'Connor's "intermingling of discourses" (Kaplan 216) reveals the extent to which her Southernness, her religious consciousness and her literariness all work in the same way: they each offer a rich series of symbols or images which operate creatively to penetrate the heart of human experience. It must be noted though that these symbols resist synthesis - each forms part of a tradition which offers a different perspective on reality. O'Connor's relationship to the world then is deeply textured and impossible to categorize, as she herself comes to recognize:

After the interview with the Time man I am very much aware of how hard you have to try to escape labels. He wanted me to characterize myself so he would have something to write down. Are you a Southern writer? What kind of Catholic are you? etc. I asked him what kind of Catholics there were. Liberal or conservative, says he. All I did for an hour was stammer and stutter and all night I was awake answering his questions with the necessary qualifications and reservations. (HB 374)

The letters exchanged between O'Connor and "A" at the beginning of their friendship also contain numerous references to Catholicism, literature, political ideology and the art of the writer. The experiences that O'Connor conveys and the debates that she engages in project a life in which generic classifications are forced to give way to the insights offered by different interpretations of meaning. In the following extract, O'Connor describes a "literary" dinner party she attended at which, it is implied, she was assigned to two cultural roles - "young prodigy" and "resident Catholic":

I was once, five or six years ago, taken by some friends to have dinner with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr Broadwater. (She just wrote that book, A Charmed Life). She departed the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual. We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing for me in such company to say. The people who took me were Robert Lowell and his now wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was

obviously supposed to defend. Mrs Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the "most portable" person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable. (HB 124-5)

As a committed Catholic, the displacement that O'Connor experiences in such circles is obvious. It prevents her from rising to the occasion and "performing" in the expected role of intelligent young writer. However, when she is offered the chance to put forward her Catholic defense, she refrains from displaying her considerable theological knowledge: instead of engaging in reasoned argument, she gives a blunt one-line reply. In so doing, O'Connor shows her lack of regard for cultural conventions: not only does she refuse to defer to McCarthy's stature as an older, more established writer, she even refuses to engage with her on accepted "intellectual" terms. In this way, O'Connor succeeds in disrupting the intellectual balance at the dinner-table - flooring McCarthy, the "Big Intellectual", by answering her cerebral reflections with a vehement, emotional response. In this letter, there is a strong sense in which the context that O'Connor describes contributes to the reply that she makes - that in a literary/intellectual context, the meaning of a religious principle can be seen with greater clarity. O'Connor's emotional responsiveness reflects her openness to enlightenment - her willingness to be surprised by the revelation of a new perspective. To this extent, it reveals her concept

of "truth" as something that can be best ascertained and appreciated through the process of inquiry.

This point is reinforced by the way in which O'Connor demonstrates her capacity for critical assessment. In the letter to Lee quoted above, she indicates that the revelation of the moment continues to resonate in her life, and that the passage of time creates a space for more insightful understanding of experience. In her earlier letter to Lee about writing in the South, she also comments on the importance of perspective and the benefits of admitting a certain amount of distance in order to allow meaning to become apparent. She confesses to Lee that she struggled against her forced return to Georgia, thinking that it would be "the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me" (HB 224). As she attempts to interpret the events of her life retrospectively, however, O'Connor discovers that her return home marked the **beginning** of her most successful creative period. She goes on to observe that "[e]verything has to be diluted with time and with matter, even that love of yours which has to come down on many of us to be able to come down on one" (HB 224), subtly advocating the benefits of a less intense, more detached engagement with circumstance. It is this detachment that enables O'Connor to transcend her displacement: it allows her the space to rearrange the "natural" or known order of the cultural traditions in which she finds herself (Sewell 273). Her willingness to use a variety of cultural images in order to inquire into the human condition leads to insights which reverberate outside of generic boundaries. Her appropriation from different traditions is an act of "control" which defies the disenfranchisement that usually accompanies displacement. Thus the self that O'Connor puts forward in her letters is affirmed rather than disrupted by cultural hybridity.

As mentioned earlier, recent feminist criticism emphasizes the way in which autobiographical texts of women writers reflect the uniqueness of the female experience. There is much discussion of the relationship between genderic and generic difference. This type of comparison illuminates crucial aspects in the evolution of an identity. In many ways, O'Connor's self-construction, discussed above, becomes clearer when it is offset against the self-construction of a **male** writer with comparable concerns, but a very different approach. For a number of reasons, Jack Kerouac is an ideal foil for Flannery O'Connor. Although his life differs from O'Connor's in most aspects, he shares her Catholic background and her penchant for ideas. His letters, like O'Connor's, reflect diverse cultural affiliations - they show him negotiating various cultural boundaries as he attempts to participate, simultaneously, in multiple discourses³. At the same time, Kerouac's letters reflect his overriding concern with, to adapt a phrase from O'Connor, "something larger than the self" (HB 115). Like O'Connor, he displays a highly developed religious sensibility and uses letters as a vehicle for expressing and clarifying his religious concerns and ideas. A comparative discussion of O'Connor and Kerouac highlights the divergent ways in which each writer engages with various images of the self.

Kerouac's letters, like O'Connor's, reflect diverse cultural affiliations, but it is obvious that he encounters more difficulty in negotiating the cultural boundaries that he recognizes in his life. Kerouac oscillates continually in his idealization of different cultures, traversing the American continent several times in an attempt to find a world in which he can live out what he refers to as his "idea of life" (Selected Letters 189-90). His letters are characterized by an endless series of affirmations and rejections of

different lifestyles that arise out of different cultural traditions: the culture of French-Canadian Catholicism, complete with nuns, incense, lighted candles and saints; the culture of New York with his intellectual friends and their attempt to redefine art through beat ideals; the culture of small town America which he idealizes in his continual reminiscence about Lowell, Massachusetts - the place where he grew up; the culture of the West, which he associates with physicality, hard work, and traditional "American values". Kerouac is unable to do what O'Connor does - namely, adopt a middle ground. The following extracts demonstrate his frequent practice of surrendering everything so as to identify fully with a new concept of self; and then, inevitably, rejecting that self-image totally. In April 1947, Kerouac writes to Hal Chase:

[L]ately my interests have been undergoing a startling change . . . My development . . . center[s] around a new interest in things rather than ideas. For instance, all my reading in the past few months has been of a very practical nature. Here's a list: Parkman's "Oregon Trail", another book concerned with that trail . . . a history of the United States, a biography of George Washington . . . and last but not least, I have begun a huge study of the face of America itself, acquiring maps (roadmaps) of every state in the USA . . . I know some people who would regard it as a kind of recidivous childishness. And yet . . . what is the ruling thought in the American temperament if it isn't a purposeful energetic search after useful knowledge? The "livelihood of man" in America instead of the vague and prosy "brotherhood of man" of Europe. (Selected Letters 107)

Kerouac becomes obsessed with his image of America as "a culture of livelihood, purpose, land and natural struggle" (108). After his first novel, Town and Country, is accepted for publication, he moves his family west to Colorado:

Coming towards Denver this afternoon on the plains I had the definite feeling of . . . finding my world at last . . . Come what may, mush or whatever they call it, my idea of life is that it's at least not the way it's lived in the East.

And the East is really effete. When a cowhand got on the bus at Hugo, and smiled at all of us in there, a whole busload of people, I knew that he was more interested in mankind than 10,000,000 New School and Columbia professors and academicians. Say anything you want, I like my people joy-hearted. It is the sickly-heartedness of the East that has finally driven me away from there. (SL 190)

One month later, Kerouac rejects his dream of a life in the West. He writes to John Clellon Holmes: "[I]n September, I'll come back to New York, where my mother will already have an apartment . . . and become a bloody New Yorker again. But I'm glad. It's my forest of Arden after all, right?" (SL 196). Kerouac plans to follow through this latest commitment to the "brooding" qualities of the "effete" (SL 190) East with a trip to "prosy" (SL 107) Europe:

I want to speak Italian like Joyce, and visit his Trieste . . . I want to dig European culture with real seriousness (language & museums & myths.) . . . What would I do there? Just catch up on my sleep, eat, love, & write. . . . [I]t's much more sensible to go someplace like Italy as a "student" than be "beat" in American cities (SL 215)

Kerouac's continual repositioning of himself is motivated by his desire for authenticity, summed up in the preamble to the "full confession of [his] life" which he writes to Neal Cassady in 1950: "God, God how I'm haunted by the feeling that I am false"(SL 247). His reactions to the discursive effects that surround him resound with the complexity of the world in which he lives. To some extent, they operate in the same way as his theory of spontaneous prose: they provide the "great appending rhythm to a thought" (qtd. in Charters Portable Jack Kerouac 485). The central thought - the realization that the modern world is predisposed towards the fragmentation of the individual - is conveyed by Kerouac in a letter to John Clellon Holmes. In his book The Time Being, contemporary philosopher Don Cupitt argues that the "self" has become "an effect of culture . . . a flux of images on a screen" (103). Kerouac also recognizes that the screen image is a powerful metaphor for thinking about the concept of "identity":

It seems there's a huge class of Western mad-people out here to go the Class C Westerns just to hear Tex Ritter and Roy Rogers sing "Twilight on the Prairie" and to watch the horses and gunplay. In their conversation they continually make allusions to "Roy" and "Dale Evans" (his leading lady) and "Trigger" (his horse) just as we make allusions to Dostoevsky and Whittaker Chambers . . . Everybody believes in Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. It's very beautiful. Then I start thinking about the mad beret-characters who actually make these movies in crazy California (the tea-head Mitchums, the horn-rimmed directors, the bag-eyed leading ladies who lead dissolute lives in motels . . .) - it's crazy. I have come to believe now that life is not essentially but completely irrational. (SL 197)

The above passage shows Kerouac's understanding of problem of illusory identity. The insight he displays is indicative less of his capacity for analysis than of his own participation in the irrationality he describes. Kerouac is continually seduced by the images that confront him - their ceaseless progression undermines his attempt to place himself **definitively** in relation to the world. His life "on the road" is propelled by the pull and push of opposing forces.

This extended reference to Kerouac enables a fuller appreciation of the significance of O'Connor's position in relation to conflicting cultural traditions. Offset against Kerouac, it becomes clear that O'Connor draws on different cultural influences in a way that strengthens and broadens her own unique position vis-à-vis the world. Like Kerouac, she draws on a variety of traditions in order to develop her "idea of life" (SL 189-90), but her awareness of the powerful processes of cultural seduction extends to an ability to retain the capacity for critical and dispassionate judgment. Displacement for O'Connor allows space for dialogue. Through the medium of the letter, she is able to transcend physical distance, at the same time engaging in an ongoing inquiry which rejects the possibility of conclusive outcomes, and therefore refuses to be limited by cultural incongruency.

The self and the (O)ther: letters and the possibilities of relationship

The "cultural self" that emerges in O'Connor's letters may also be described as the "displayed self", the self who "lives in time" (Gunn 9). This self attests to O'Connor's world-involvement and resists the imposition of a false synthesis which would undermine the intensity of her engagement with the lived present. At the same

time, the reader of O'Connor's letters cannot mistake the presence of a certain quality of timelessness. There is a strong sense in which each letter that she writes contains something essential - that remains untouched by external influences. Whereas Kerouac tends to alter his persona according to the identity of his correspondent, the interactions in O'Connor's letters are characterized by an impression of constancy, which is conveyed less by what she says than by how she goes about saying it. It is O'Connor's ability to be entirely present to each of her correspondents that allows the emergence of what may be called her "essential self". This self does not contradict O'Connor's cultural self, but rather evolves from her engagement with the world. This may be best explained by reference to O'Connor's discussion of the "modern consciousness". In her letters, O'Connor repeatedly emphasizes the importance of possessing a modern consciousness. Writing to "A", she attempts to explain what this entails: "[t]o possess [a modern consciousness] . . . is to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level" (HB 90); it is to be "conscious in a general way of the world's present historical position" (HB 103). What O'Connor argues is that the world's "historical" position is actually "unhistorical" (HB 103). Don Cupitt comments on the implications of this for the individual: a self which is ahistorical may also be described as "asocial", as "a thinking spirit which builds up a whole system of truth all by itself" (104). O'Connor's modern consciousness enables her to recognize and reject the inadequacies of what she refers to as the modern "vaporization" of truth (HB 511). In a letter to Alfred Corn, she accuses contemporary society of "mak[ing] truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative" (HB 479). O'Connor's sensitivity to the modern condition compels her to value that which is concrete and tangible. In her

letters, O'Connor maintains that she approaches truth through "matter" rather than "directly" - in effect, by "dipping into life" (HB 304). For O'Connor therefore, human interactions therefore take on a special significance. Through her letters, and the relationships that they foster, O'Connor becomes vitally engaged with life and liveliness. The deep respect that she always shows for the "humanness" of other people - her repeated tendency to pause before the complexity and the contradictions of the individual - invests her letters with a sense of mystery. This gives rise to the impression of something "essential", without removing O'Connor from "the category of life" (Greene qtd in Gunn 10). In this way, her letters textualize a world-involvement that also incorporates the otherworldly. They exemplify the way in which her "modern" consciousness is related to what may be termed her "God" consciousness, her sense of the encompassing presence of "something larger than the self" (HB 115)⁴. Thomas Merton, a contemporary of O'Connor and an admirer of her work, was also preoccupied with finding a relationship between the worldly and the otherworldly, with discovering religious "truth" in the context of humanity. Merton grounds this process of discovery in the primal relationship between the world and the self. His discussions in the area illuminate some of O'Connor's key ideas:

We are the world. In the deepest ground of our being we remain in metaphysical contact with the whole of that creation in which we are only small parts. Through our sense and our minds, our loves, needs, and desires, we are implicated, without possibility of evasion, in this world of matter and of men, of things and of persons, which not only affect us and change our lives but are also affected and changed by us. (Merton 120)

Merton recognizes in each individual something inherent which places them in communion with "the whole of creation". This essential and common spirit however is contained within a tangible, temporal existence. O'Connor's letters attest to the principle that Merton explicates clearly in his essays: access to the otherworldly is predicated on the self's fully conscious and "concrete" involvement in this world. Merton refers to the influence of Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy on this way of thinking: Buber's "I-Thou" spirituality describes the relationship that the self and the world grow towards and resolve into. Buber conceives of relation and association between all beings and things in the created world as embodied in an "I-Thou" way of seeing, speaking and communicating. He believes that every particular Thou is "a glimpse through to the eternal. God is the eternal Thou encountered in everyday life and within the soul" (Bullock & Woodings 109).

The I-Thou dialogue provides insight into the significance of O'Connor's way of relating to others. It relies on validating the relationship between the self and the world: giving it "a fully honest and human significance" (Merton 120). In his writings Buber uses "encounter" as a key word to describe the way in which the "I" realizes his or her full humanity:

The basic word I-You⁵ can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.

All actual life is encounter. (Buber 62)

The “I-You” dialogue conveys a strong impression of expansiveness as the self and the other merge into relation. O’Connor’s letters demonstrate Buber’s principle that wholeness of self is perfected in relationship. Her letters are often framed by comments which imply that her humanity has in some way been “added to” or enlarged by the presence of the other person. She conveys this impression repeatedly in her replies to people who have written to express their appreciation of her fiction. For example, she begins a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in the following way: “You were very kind to write me and it means considerable to me to know that you have read and liked my stories” (HB 197). More explicitly, in a letter to “A” written soon after the completion of her second novel The Violent Bear it Away, O’Connor states: “Thank you for what you say about the novel. Your appreciation always adds something to my own” (HB 342). In other letters, O’Connor uses language which indicates her recognition of an intermingling of existence, giving rise to a more acute experience of living, of “actuality”: “Whoever stands in relation, participates in an actuality; that is, in a being that is neither merely a part of him nor merely outside him. All actuality is an activity in which I participate without being able to **appropriate** it” (Buber 113). Writing to “A” on Christmas Day 1959, O’Connor closes her letter in the following way: “[K]now the terrific pleasure these books are going to give me; and that your presence in my existence gives me all the time” (HB 367). On New Year’s Eve 1964, she writes to Janet McKane: “A real happy new year and many thanks for everything, mostly for being” (HB 555). In this way, O’Connor implies that her relationships are not predicated on appropriation or control, but reflect a reverence for the “presentness” (Buber 63) of the other person. Her manner of address indicates a scope for

abandonment and a boundlessness which anticipates the address of an eternal You:

“The purpose of relation is the relation itself - **touching** the You. For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life” (Buber 113).

It is possible to equate the "essential" self that emerges in O'Connor's letters with the innate You" that Buber refers to in his speculations. The “I” and the “You” achieve fundamental, total communication when the “drive for contact” is aimed at “reciprocity, at tenderness” (Buber 78). O'Connor's willingness to exist in reciprocity is conveyed through her empathetic understanding of the other person's position, and her capacity to be changed in some way by the other person's suffering. A strong sense of relationship compels and directs her attempt to “sift through” her own life for “explanation and understanding” (Jelinek 15). Often in her letters, O'Connor includes a brief comment, indicating that she has reflected on and been enlightened by something in the other's experience. In the following extract from a letter to Louise Abbot, O'Connor's empathy is foreshadowed by her denouncement of a role that would place her in binary opposition to the other: “I don't set myself up to give spiritual advice but all I would like you to know is that I sympathize and I suffer this way myself. When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on” (HB 354). In dialogue with Alfred Corn, O'Connor again draws on her own experiences - demonstrating a willingness to give of herself in a spirit of sharing rather than instruction:

I don't know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living in the 20th century can be at all if it is not grounded in this experience that you are having right now of unbelief . . . The intellectual difficulties have to be met . . . and you will be meeting them for the rest of your life. When you get a reasonable hold

on one, another will come to take its place. At one time, the clash of the different world religions was a difficulty for me . . . The reason this clash doesn't bother me any longer is because I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. (HB 476-7)

The way in which O'Connor closes her letter to Corn illustrates further the extent to which she is willing to commit herself to others: "I don't know if this is the kind of answer that can help you, but any time you care to write me, I can try to do better" (HB 478). In a different tone, O'Connor's letters to Dr T.R. Spivey imply that even in the context of strong religious differences, she is still receptive to criticism offered in a spirit of friendship and mutual concern:

About hiding in the Church. I suppose you mean by this that I am hiding in the Church from, not in, Christ. This is to accuse me of some pretty repulsive qualities and I hope you are wrong. It is certainly possible to hide from spiritual reality in the Church. I know a few who succeed at it, but for me to do so would at least be against the currents of all I feel and hope for. Anyway, it is something to be alert against. (HB 360-1)

O'Connor's letters testify to her recognition that there is no meaningful self independent of another. O'Connor's self addresses her relationship to the other in the fluid, expansive terms of an "I-You" approach to being. Her ongoing dialogues suggest an openness - an encompassing acceptance and perception which is conducive to the embracing of mystery. Throughout her letters, O'Connor states explicitly, on several

occasions, her acceptance of the mystery of faith. What O'Connor **tells** the reader about these experiences are important and crucial to understanding the way in which a religious sensibility operates in her life. However, the mode of perception discernible in her letters **also** has a crucial role in textualizing this mystery. What her letters ultimately and resoundingly articulate is the presence of an "essential self" which emerges through her relationships with others; dependent, in the same way as her "cultural self", on the temporal and the sanctity of the moment, but pointing - at the same time - towards a context of mystery and the presence of an **eternal** Other.

It is evident then that in delineating interaction, O'Connor's letters textualize the development of both individuality and connectedness. As in Buber's "I-You" dialogue, there is implied in this mode of communication both an in-dwelling presence and an infinite interconnectedness of being. This sets up the possibility for an engagement with the world which can, for O'Connor, resolve into an encounter with God.

Once again, Kerouac's letters provide a useful point of comparison. The significance of O'Connor's practice of relating to others becomes more readily apparent when it is offset against the practice of Kerouac. It is readily apparent that Kerouac's letters do not foster the same sense of relationship conveyed by O'Connor. This is impeded by an air of distractedness that pervades his correspondence. The following extract from Kerouac's letter to one of his teachers, Elbert Lenrow, exemplifies Kerouac's inability to be totally present to his correspondents:

At this moment I can just feel Allen Ginsberg leaning over my shoulder and saying, "You have never sounded more pompous." I don't know why.

Actually, as I type this, I'm listening simultaneously to a baseball game and carrying on a desultory conversation with others in the house. So I hope you'll pardon me, Mr. Lenrow. I've yet to develop a "style" for *you*. (SL 203)

Kerouac's letters give the overwhelming impression that his central preoccupation is always himself. He is obsessed with revealing himself to be "the greatest writer of [his] generation" (SL 390) and his belief in his own genius consumes him to such an extent that he is often incapable of interaction. This is expressed in different ways. In his letters to Allen Ginsberg, for example, Kerouac discusses himself at length: his writing, his dilemmas, his beliefs, his ideas, his talent. He "terminates" his friendship with Ginsberg on several occasions, usually as a result of a comment or a criticism from Ginsberg which undermines Kerouac's vision of himself. For example, in 1952 he writes to Ginsberg:

[Y]ou sit there and look me in the eye and tell me the On the Road I wrote at Neal's is "imperfect" as though anything you ever did or anybody was perfect? . . . and don't lift a finger or say a word for it . . . do you think I don't realize how jealous you are and how you and Holmes and Solomon all would give your right arm to be able to write like the writing in On the Road . . . [Holmes'] book stinks, and your book is only mediocre, and you all know it, and my book is great and will never be published. (SL 377-9)

Kerouac's letters to Neal Cassady reveal a sincere affection, but again it is always Kerouac's ego that gives the correspondence momentum: either he is attempting to find a place for himself in what he perceives to be the Neal Cassady "legend"; or he is attempting to draw Cassady into his world, offering advice on writing, lifestyle or

belief systems. Kerouac's relationship to other people, as revealed in his letters, is characterized by objectification and definition. A consideration of Kerouac's position highlights the significance of O'Connor's mode of relating. O'Connor's letters can be seen as participating in Buber's "I-You" dialogue, whereas Kerouac's letters reflect what Buber describes as the "I-It" relationship. This relationship fosters a world perspective which is primarily functional and predicated on seeing difference. In an early letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac singles himself out from amongst his friends: "The thing that makes me different from all of you is the vast inner life I have, an inner life concerned with, of all things, externals . . . The bigger and deeper this inner life grows, the less anyone of you will understand me" (SL 97-8). In distinguishing between the self and the rest of the world, Kerouac fails to acknowledge the mystery of "subjective identity", which creates space for dialogue (Merton 120). He believes himself unable to be, in Buber's terms, "touched" and "thawed" by the emergence of a "You" (111). By refusing to participate in true interaction which affirms a sense of human sameness - the pursuit of individuality notwithstanding - and risks the possibility of change, Kerouac faces alienation in a world that is "hostile", "incomprehensible" and "totally devouring" (Merton 120).

In contrast it is possible to recognize Flannery O'Connor's letters as an essential tool for strengthening her position in the world. Although, like Kerouac's letters, they testify to a displaced state - they literally "write" her marginalization from established centers of intellectual interest and reflect the disorder and lack of autonomy that plagues a life subjected to unmanageable illness - it is *also* evident that they constitute something of a forum. O'Connor's letters give her a voice, provide her with

a place of entry into a variety of cultural contexts, and allow her the space to reflect on and consolidate her own unique perspective. O'Connor uses the enforced detachment of the letter genre to write herself into existence: to orchestrate her engagement with the traditions in which she finds herself and so to allow the emergence of a cultural self affirmed in diversity. Detachment also sets up the conditions necessary to facilitate relationship. From her removed position, O'Connor is compelled to a new appreciation of the other person; her letters thus give rise to a strongly relational experience of existence. They repeatedly communicate a mode of perception which testifies to her recognition of the value of the other person - a value that is accentuated by the complexity of the human condition, and thus by the participation in mystery that is achieved in relationship. The world-involvement that is afforded to O'Connor through her letters becomes then an occasion for involvement in the otherworldly.

A discussion of the way in which O'Connor's letters operate to textualize the uniqueness of her experience is a necessary precursor to an analysis of that experience itself. Discussing her letters as an autobiographical text highlights the crucial position of the self, and in particular the significance of detachment in the creation of a self-identity responsive to "cultural" and "essential" impulses simultaneously. O'Connor's letters attest to lived experience and to her full participation in the moment. They also indicate the presence of "a writer in touch with her self" (Spacks "Selves in Hiding" 130) and reveal the extent of her ability to find meaning both in her own life and in the lives of others. The discernment that she displays may be best described as an empathetic detachment: in relation to her self and in relation to others, O'Connor permits a distance which heightens her capacity for recognition, criticism and

understanding. The following chapters go on to identify different ways in which O'Connor sustains the degree of perspective vital for the development of her artistic sensibility. Her "comic vision" (HB 400) and her strong religious consciousness are clearly recognizable as essential tools for her detachment.

¹ Catharine Stimpson's "The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's Letters" which is included in The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century and Deborah Kaplan's "Representing Two Cultures - Jane Austen's Letters", included in The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing are obvious examples of the identification of letters with the autobiographical genre. Although it deals with a fictional correspondence, the inclusion of Katherine R. Goodman's "Elizabeth to Meta: Epistolary Autobiography and the Postulation of the Self" in the volume Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography may also be significant in this regard.

² James Mellard in his article "Flannery O'Connor's *Others*: Freud, Lacan and the Unconscious" interprets O'Connor's concept of "the other" in Lacanian terms. Although Mellard's psychoanalytic understanding of O'Connor yields vastly different insights from the reading of her letters offered by the present work, it is interesting to note that he reaches similar conclusions regarding the nature of O'Connor's concept of "otherness". Mellard recognizes that O'Connor's "other" involves two forms, operating in "two different registers". One form is "the figure of mirror-state identification . . . lurking in [O'Connor's] fiction and commentary everywhere". The second form is God - the "prescribed authoritative Other/*Autre* toward which O'Connor consciously directs her thought and work"(627).

³ To date, only the first volume of Kerouac's letters have been published, which cover the period from 1940 - 1956.

⁴ Brian Wyatt ("The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O'Connor: Everything that Rises Must Converge") describes O'Connor's "modern consciousness" and her desire to feel the contemporary world at an "ultimate level" (HB 90) as an "ethos riven with ambivalence" (Wyatt 77). He refers to her "constraining love for the thing despised" and her "cherishing of a world beyond endurance" (77). The reading of O'Connor's letters offered by the present work attempts to take the observations of Wyatt and others one step further. While not denying or ignoring the struggle and frustration associated with O'Connor's "living out" of her religious sensibility, this thesis argues that, in her letters, O'Connor achieves a synthesis between an authentically spiritual and a fully social existence.

⁵ Quotations of Buber's I and Thou are from the edition translated by Walter Kaufmann. It is noted that Kaufmann chooses to substitute "You" for "Thou" in his translation of Buber's text. As Kaufmann is the primary source of Buber's writings used in this work, it is appropriate to adopt the conventions of his translation in all subsequent references to Buber.

2 Maintaining a critical distance: O'Connor's comic sense

Part A: Comedy in O'Connor's letters

Reading O'Connor's letters as a form of autobiography, it is impossible to ignore an undisguised intensity that dominates her interactions and defines the nature of her engagement with life. O'Connor's letters reverberate with repeated attempts to negotiate a concrete involvement with the world. Their liveliness penetrates boundaries and limits to get to the heart of the human condition. Ironically, this **insight** that O'Connor achieves is made possible by her capacity to adopt an "**outward** focus" in relation to self and others. O'Connor consistently externalizes in order to describe and understand, so that detachment is not associated with removal and passivity, but becomes an occasion for more intense and empathetic involvement. From her letters, it is evident that O'Connor's experience of the world is mediated through her comic sense and her strong sense of resoluteness.

The nature of O'Connor's engagement with life may be consistently described as comic. Comedy resonates throughout her letters, dominating the reader's immediate experience of her personality. It is apparent that O'Connor is attuned to the humorous side of almost every aspect of life: from her work as a writer, to her illness, friends, family and neighbors. It is possible to identify two main sources for the humor in her letters: herself, and the immediate environment in which she finds herself, the rural South. O'Connor's writing is often identified with the fiction of the grotesque and the absurd. The comic effects that she employs in her letters are also associated with grotesque humor: O'Connor provokes laughter through use of exaggeration, distortion

and derision. An examination of these devices enables deeper appreciation of the significance of humor in O'Connor's life.

Uses of the vernacular: positioning and repositioning within a social context

Much of the laughter in O'Connor's letters is provoked by the arrangement of incompatible perspectives - the "clash of perspectives" that Robert Brinkmeyer maintains is a distinguishing aspect of Middle Georgia humor (46). Brinkmeyer identifies these perspectives as "genteel" ("theoretical, learned and cultivated"), and "vernacular" ("lacking sophistication . . . pragmatic, commonsensical, and realistic") (46). In her letters, O'Connor moves between the two, maintaining an elusiveness which prevents cultural stereotyping. The distinction between genteel and vernacular is not always clearly marked. Often, O'Connor as narrator displays an active involvement in vernacular tradition at the same time as she proves her capacity for removed, "genteel" observation. In these instances, O'Connor's humor becomes more complex and its reverberations more widely felt. This discord between the genteel and the vernacular summarizes O'Connor's comic effect but it does not indicate the extent of her comic intention. Brinkmeyer notes: "as a Catholic writer in the twentieth century, O'Connor was not merely writing Middle Georgia humor - she was aiming at a good deal more" (50). Humor allows O'Connor to disengage from self and others, and the significance of this disengagement becomes apparent when her comic conventions are examined in greater detail.

The most prevalent and discernible instances of comedy in O'Connor's letters take the form of humorous anecdotes in which she invites her correspondent/reader to take up the position (alongside herself) of amused spectator of local antics:

Our colored man, Jack, has had all his teeth pulled and is about ready now to get his new teeth. The dentist asked him what kind he wanted and he said he wanted “pearly white teeth.” The dentist asked what kind of pearly white teeth and he said, “You know, like on the handle of a gun.” He also wants some gold ones scattered through the plate. Regina has been trying to talk him out of this but he says he ain’t going to spend his money for no ordinary-looking teeth.

(HB 257)

[A workman’s cousin] is going to the army and wanted to sell his car and [he] tried to sell it to us - he said, “It’s so pretty that when you’re in it, it’s just like being in a funerl [sic] parlor. It was red & white. We didn’t get it. (HB 293)

Mr. G. [farm help] is gone and one Mr. F. is installed. Mr. F.’s family consists of himself, wife, two babies, mother and daddy, whose name is Buster.

According to Mr. F., “There ain’t a thang wrong with daddy but two thangs, heart trouble and asmer.” And Mr F. says he has heart trouble hissself [sic], that sometimes he gets down and don’t have the heart to get up. (HB 207)

Every Wednesday for the last four weeks somebody has had to take Shot [African American worker] in to try to get him a driver’s license. He can drive but he can’t pass the test. The first time he got 38. My mother did the writing and read him the questions.

“What is the speed limit in Georgia, Shot?” she says.

“Mr Louis say I ain’t to drive no more than 55.”

“Well, I think it’s a little more than that in the daytime, Shot.”

“Yes’m, it’s 40 in the daytime.” (HB 211)

This type of humor locates O'Connor clearly within the Middle Georgia tradition - "a rough-and-tumble fiction that portrays the escapades and antics of country folk of modest means who, though lacking sophistication, usually possess a zest for life . . ." (Brinkmeyer 46). This is also expressed in O'Connor's relish for details of grotesque excesses, such as the attendance of Roy Roger's horse at a church service, and the following Mother's Day "poem" broadcast over the local radio station which she cannot resist sharing with Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick: "I had a mother. I had to have. I lover [sic] whether she's good or bad. I lover whether she's live or dead. Whether she's an angel or a old dope head" (HB 57). There are many other examples of such anecdotes in O'Connor's letters. In this form, her humor is straightforward and easily discernible. It has the effect of imparting a quality of lightness or mirth - deflecting attention away from grim matters such as her life-threatening illness or providing comic relief after sensitive religious discussions. Elizabeth Sewell's comments about the effects of O'Connor's "little language" - her "frequent comic spellings and distortions of words" (275-6) - can be applied with equal validity to O'Connor's use of humorous anecdotes: "[they constitute] a brave attempt to draw all of these areas out of the realm of feeling and into that of the comic, which is to say the realm of **mind**. Appeal to intellect and not emotion is a defining characteristic of . . . comedy" (278). O'Connor's use of anecdotal humor allows her to maintain rapport with her correspondent, at the same time as providing a diversion which enables the distancing of emotion or sentiment¹.

Sewell's comments on the link between comedy and the intellect point towards wider, social reverberations of O'Connor's comic sense. Robert Brinkmeyer discusses the way in which O'Connor, in her stories, "adapts the conventions of Middle Georgia

humor . . . manipulating the dichotomies of the genteel and vernacular to set up comic contrasts and to reveal pretense” (50). This reworking of convention is evident in her letters also; it occurs most frequently when O’Connor steps from the position of removed observer of the vernacular to that of “genuine local” steeped in vernacular tradition. The reader is made aware of this shifting perspective by changes in O’Connor’s use of language: a different voice emerges and this usually signifies a certain attitude on the part of the writer which locates her in opposition to the “theoretical” and the “learned”. At times, O’Connor’s participation in the vernacular is blatantly obvious, as in the following extract from a letter to Fr J.H. McKown in which she adopts a tone of provincialism and suspicion to disassociate herself from university culture: “Pray for me that I will get to and from Chicago whole and unscathed by the city interleckchuls. They are paying me well and unfortunately I have to earn me bread” (HB 313). Taken in the context of her letters as a whole, it becomes obvious that O’Connor is aiming at more than establishing a comic contrast between “cultured intellectual” and “backwoods writer”². Throughout her letters, O’Connor conveys her disregard for academic attempts to categorize and contain fiction. This takes its most vehement expression in her response to a letter from the faculty and students of a university English department who had written to her outlining their interpretation of her story “A Good Man is Hard to Find”. O’Connor replies:

The interpretation of your ninety students and three teachers is fantastic and about as far from my intentions as it could get to be . . . The meaning of a story should go on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it, but meaning cannot be captured in an interpretation. Too much interpretation is certainly

worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it (HB 437).

O'Connor's appropriation of a vernacular perspective allows her to highlight the centralization of intellectual power and the danger that it poses to the integrity of fiction; it also provides O'Connor with an alternative culture with which she can identify. O'Connor's comedy of exaggeration enables her to convey her concern about the vulnerability of fiction at the hands of intellectuals. Of course, the passionate interest in ideas that O'Connor displays in her letters also indicates her admiration of intellectuals and her own involvement in intellectual pursuits. Comedy, by allowing her to be self-critical, prevents cultural categorization. In this way, it complements the detachment provided by the letter genre: letters provide a means of conducting serious criticism, but their informality and their place outside academic writing precludes the necessity for sustained or serious ideological allegiance.

O'Connor's alignment of herself with vernacular ideas is not always clearly marked by her use of the local idiom. Throughout her correspondence there are also more subtle indications of a perspective which sets itself up in contrast to prevalent trends. Regina Barreca applies the term "comedy" to texts which "refuses to take seriously the supposedly serious matters of the cultures in which they take place" (4). In her letters, O'Connor's inclusion of a comic undertone in her discussions of sensitive social issues, such as race relations or new versions of spirituality, indicates her resistance to received ways of thinking amongst intellectuals. In the following extract from a letter to Maryat Lee, O'Connor describes her encounter with an African American woman:

I sat down next to a colored woman in the waiting room at the Dearborn Street station in Chicago once. She was eating grapes and asked me to have some but I declined. She was very talkative and kept talking and eating grapes. Finally she asked me where I was from and I said, "Georgia," and she spit a mouthful of grape seeds out on the floor and said, "My God" and got up and left. (HB 392-3)

The comedy of the scene arises from O'Connor's style of narration: she juxtaposes the language of straightforward reportage with her "country-talk" grammar, undermining the seriousness of the civil rights debate by contriving a "matter-of-fact" style of discourse which resembles the vernacular narrative structure. The incident, as O'Connor tells it, makes a wryly humorous comment on the race issue: there is a sense of ironic reversal as O'Connor, an "inoffensive" white Southerner, is physically shunned by an African American on grounds of *her* "race" or attachment to a particular region and culture. Elsewhere in her letters, O'Connor indicates that this complaint of "inverse" racial inequality is a common response amongst the white community in the South. In January 1953 she writes to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell: "I am real glad to hear you have a hale automobile. My mother says every nigger she knows has a better looking car than she does" (HB 65). By associating herself with this attitude O'Connor reveals the extent of her involvement in vernacular culture. This participation becomes more evident when the immediate context of the comment is taken into account. O'Connor's correspondent and close friend - Maryat Lee - is a civil rights activist and a Kentuckian who has abandoned the South for New York City. In many ways she is O'Connor's antithesis and their letters are an intentional play on the vernacular/genteel dichotomy. Their acknowledgment of this is evident in the way

in which they “cast each other” (Fitzgerald 194) into the roles of two characters from O’Connor’s novel The Violent Bear it Away: Tarwater, who represents the uneducated country hick, and Rayber, who represents the cultivated city intellectual. The nature of the relationship between O’Connor and Lee suggests that O’Connor’s subtly comic treatment of the race issue is a necessary part of her function as “devil’s advocate” (Lee qtd in Fitzgerald 193) to Lee’s passionate activism. However, the depth of her commitment to local lore on matters of racial equality is evident in another letter to Lee which contains an uncharacteristically serious tone:

No I can’t see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on - its only fair.

Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia.

(HB 329)

Humor is an indicator of O’Connor’s participation in, and her parody of, local attitudes towards African Americans. The subtle comic undertones and the energetic comic interplay both mark and mask the ambivalence of her personal response. They may be interpreted as a reflection of O’Connor’s appreciation of the complexity of the race debate, and at the same time, of her disinclination for any kind of involvement in “large social issues” (Fitzgerald xviii).

When discussing matters which evoke from her a strong personal response - such as the state of the modern religious sensibility - O’Connor directs her comic sense with greater precision. This is evident in her frequent debates on the nature of religious truth and its “distortion” at the hands of liberal theology. In these instances, O’Connor’s comedy of exaggeration complements her incisive wit, as in the following

extract in which she describes to Cecil Dawkins the effects of her friend “A”’s departure from the Catholic Church:

I’ll tell you what’s with “A,” why all the exhilaration. She has left the Church. Those are the signs of release. She’s high as a kite and all on pure air. This conversion was achieved by Miss Iris Murdoch, . . . [She] now sees through everything and loves everything and is a bundle of feelings of empathy for everything. She doesn’t believe any longer that Christ is God and so she has found that he is “beautiful beautiful!” Everything is in the eeeek eek eureka stage. The effect of all this on me is pretty sick-making but I manage to keep my mouth shut. I have restrained myself from telling her that if Christ wasn’t God he was merely pathetic, not beautiful . . . She thinks she’s at last discovered how to be herself and has at last accepted herself. She says she’s always tried to be somebody else because she hated herself but now she can be herself. It’s as plain as the nose on her face that now she’s being Iris Murdoch, but its only plain to me, not her. (HB 459-60)

O’Connor’s acerbic wit is made possible by her ability to objectify the behavior of her friend; her skeptical assessment of “A”’s current state is based on a standard of judgment reminiscent of local attitudes to non-traditional spirituality. However, O’Connor’s participation in the vernacular is deceptively simple. Her complaint against “A” is couched in fundamentalist terms - “If Christ wasn’t God he was merely pathetic, not beautiful”; to this extent she is utilizing the voice of conventional Southern suspicion and even aggression towards religion which denies the authority of the Bible and the tangibility of God’s involvement with creation. That this voice is authentic and not appropriated is evident from the context of her comments: she is clearly distressed

at the position her friend has decided to take. The bitter sarcasm which characterizes O'Connor's response to "A" points to the co-existence of two perspectives: O'Connor takes the framework of vernacular Protestant-fundamentalism as a structural support for her Orthodox Catholicism in a reaction against what she sees as a kind of spiritual atheism. Robert Brinkmeyer explains how this interplay of perspectives operates in O'Connor's fiction: "a Yahwist vision is the fulcrum of her stories, and this vision, without a Catholic perspective, is out of context and thus leads to grotesque characters and situations" (63). In her letters, these perspectives interact differently. O'Connor, on several occasions, discusses the **similarities** between Catholicism and fundamentalism, and often pits them together against what she sees as a far greater problem than Southern evangelism - the modern spiritual malaise in which religion has been turned into "poetry and therapy", truth has become "vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative", individuals have come to depend on "feeling instead of thought", and there is a pervasive sense that "God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so" (HB 479). O'Connor's comic description of "A"'s behavior is her attempt to illustrate the manifestations of this kind of spirituality - "A"'s actions, as O'Connor describes them, represent an exaggerated, distorted, and therefore "grotesque" variant on a true religious sensibility: "The real religious person will accept the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but not one who is no more than psychic energy" (HB 382). In this instance then, O'Connor's religious consciousness works with her humor. Her dogmatic stance - comic in its vehemence - may be seen as a means of dramatic demarcation, as O'Connor attempts to alert her correspondent to the significance of the issue at stake.

O'Connor's immediate environment can therefore be seen as a major source of the humor in her letters. She takes advantage of her provincialism, provoking laughter through comic descriptions of the "antics" of typical Southern "characters". At the same time and on a more complex level, O'Connor uses comedy in her letters to mark her alignment with vernacular culture. The South then becomes an invaluable tool: O'Connor associates herself with local ideas not out of any sentimental, nostalgic belief in tradition, but in order to register her distance from other perspectives which she finds dubious or untenable. O'Connor's "Southernness" provides her with rich material for a comedy of exaggeration, which she uses to highlight and comment upon serious issues.

Defining and controlling images of the self

In addition to the South, the other main focus of O'Connor's humor is herself. Throughout her letters, O'Connor's discussion of herself inevitably dissolves into self-caricature: she uses herself as a source of laughter and transforms herself into an object of ridicule. The tone for her self-mockery is set early in her correspondence. In a 1955 letter to "A", she provides a comic description of her experiences as a disabled person:

I have decided that I must be a pretty pathetic sight with these crutches. I was in Atlanta the other day in Davison's. An old lady got on the elevator behind me and as soon as I turned around she fixed me with a moist gleaming eye and said in a loud voice, "Bless you, darling!" . . . I gave her a weakly lethal look, whereupon greatly encouraged, she grabbed my arm and whispered (very loud) in my ear, "Remember what they said to John at the gate, darling!" It was not my floor but I got off and I suppose the old lady was astounded at how quick I

could get away on crutches. I have a one-legged friend and I asked her what they said to John at the gate. She said she reckoned they said, "The lame shall enter first." This may be because the lame will be able to knock everybody else aside with their crutches. (HB 116-7)

Writing to Fanny Cheney, O'Connor again makes fun of her encumbered state: "Since you last heard from me my state of affairs has changed considerably - I am on crutches and will have to be on them a year or two. Right now I feel like the Last Ape. It requires a major decision for me to swing across the room" (Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys 23-4). O'Connor's descriptions are dominated by the sense of an awkward physicality. As is often the case in her fiction, comedy is associated closely with violence - the humor of the situation arising from its violent potential. The above quotations contain allusions to the deadly, the physically abusive and the bestial. In a much later letter to Janet McKane, written about one year before her death, O'Connor makes a gruesomely funny assessment of her appearance in a photograph - this time comparing herself to the image of a corpse: "I hate like sin to have my picture taken and most of them don't look much like me, or maybe they look like I'll look after I've been dead a couple of days" (HB 524-5).

O'Connor's self-derision is almost always motivated by her personal appearance - in particular, her preoccupation with how she is perceived physically by others. This is a continual source of amusement to her, as she expresses in a letter to Robert and Elizabeth Lowell:

I was in Nashville a couple of weeks ago visiting the Cheneys and met a man who looked at me a while and said, "That was a profound book. You don't

look like you wrote it.” I mustered up my squintiest expression and snarled,

“Well I did,” but at the same time I had to recognize he was right. (HB 65)

O’Connor’s delight in the ridiculousness of the situation is tempered by her acknowledgment that the man was justified in his observations. Loxley F. Nichols refers to O’Connor’s ability to “stand outside herself and view the absurdity of a fallen world and her own figure in that world from the vantage point of amused spectator” (18-9). This ability for self-objectification is indicative of a capacity for detachment. Again, it is O’Connor’s detachment which sets up the absurd clash of perspectives that gives rise to humor in these more intimate writings. O’Connor’s closest friends were educated, broad-minded, and therefore more likely to adhere to the “genteel perspective” of Brinkmeyer’s definition. O’Connor, on the other hand, purposely chooses to detach self from self and assumes a *vernacular* tone to describe the self that she sees. The public reader of these letters is not given access to the response from O’Connor’s correspondent; indeed, O’Connor’s comments are usually, perhaps intentionally, made in passing and therefore do not invite response or rebuttal. However the inevitability of a “clash”, or conflict, is readily perceptible: in the context of reasoned argument and cultivated ideas - a context of unspoken tolerance, understanding and camaraderie - the reader is presented with harsh realism conveyed in a tone of brutal vernacular honesty.

Some of O’Connor’s more recent critics have attempted to explain the meaning of her continually severe and heavy-handed treatment of herself. Elizabeth Sewell sees it as central to O’Connor’s particular type of humor, which she associates with “[n]onsense in the classic literary sense” (274). Sewell discusses the different expressions of detachment in O’Connor’s corpus of writing. Most applicable to her

letters is what Sewell terms “*dis*-construction” - which refers to “the rearrangement of natural units or organisms, such as the body, and the emphasis of the artificial over the natural” (284). In her letters, this is evident in O’Connor’s predilection for the more graphic details of her illness: “I won’t see you again as I have to go to the hospital Friday and have a kidney hung on a rib” (HB 20). It is also present in O’Connor’s continual description of her crutches as an integrated part of her physical being: two letters, a few months apart, are signed off with the following comments: “I must be off on my two aluminum legs” (HB 106) and later “[I] get about on crutches now as if I had been born on them” (HB 127). According to Sewell, this kind of humor signifies the author’s attempt to “rearrange and meticulously control the natural and the human world” (273). O’Connor’s descriptions of herself - however absurd and even grotesque - allow her to exercise some control over the reactions of her correspondents. Mark Walters maintains that laughter provides O’Connor with a means of retaliation: he argues that the continual absurdity of her self-images may be interpreted as her response to “the patriarchal emphasis on beauty that women have adopted and maintained with rigor” (190). Walters also argues that O’Connor’s violent humor in her stories functions as an assertion of her “adulthood, and in turn, her sexuality” (186). This may be applicable to her letters also: as Walters points out, O’Connor was aware that the effects of her illness - disability and confinement to the family home - rendered her “the eternal child” in the eyes of the Milledgeville community (186). Her capacity for detached appreciation of the details of her situation takes her out of the sentimental world of childhood and allows her a strong and individual response to her physicality.

O'Connor's humor is clearly dependent on paradox: the laughter she provokes is often uneasy and even unreasonable³. Claire Katz describes it in terms that explain well its double-edged action: "Using the weapon of wit [O'Connor] derides the pretensions of personality in icily-wrought metaphors . . . [W]ith an economy of aggressive strokes, she degrades by unmasking ugliness or weakness (56-7)". Clara Claiborne Park offers a similar interpretation of O'Connor's comic sense, maintaining that laughter is "one of [O'Connor's] chief ways of cherishing the world" (257), at the same time acknowledging that this is "immemorial laughter", the kind of laughter "elicited by kicking a cripple" (254). O'Connor's use of comedy forms a powerful critique of culture and society. It enables her to disengage from her immediate surroundings and conditions, creating a distance conducive to insight. To this end, the comedy in her letters operates in much the same way as the letters themselves - O'Connor adopts a style which complements the detachment of the genre she is working with. Further, O'Connor's comic sense determines her reaction to the discursive cultural influences which dominate her life. It allows her an individual, complex response to various cultural impulses, so that the comedy in her letters is integral to the creation of the "cultural self" made possible by her letters. Thus, O'Connor's selfhood is affirmed through the strong world-involvement and the preoccupation with lived existence to which her sense of humor attests.

Part B: The function of comedy in O'Connor's fiction

In her fiction, O'Connor develops further the possibilities of a comic engagement with life. In particular, her stories elaborate on the link between comedy and prophecy. To the extent that her sense of humor in her **letters** is both offensive and confrontational, it is reminiscent of the impact of prophesying. This prophetic function of comedy is made explicit in O'Connor's fiction. Claire Katz notes that "O'Connor as narrator plays the role of scourge" (56). As will become evident, the prophetic message at the heart of O'Connor's comic expressions contributes to the alienating impact of her humor. For O'Connor, the link between comedy and prophecy takes particular expression in the preoccupation with displacement which may be identified as a recurring theme in her fiction. A discussion of her stories in terms of displacement points towards a precarious boundary between comedy and tragedy. It has already been established that the serious use of humor in O'Connor's letters indicates a comic sense which is both complex and complicated. In her fiction, the effects of this comic sense may be more specifically identified as creating conditions of "anarchy" and "dislocation" (Barreca 6). As in her letters, much of this disarming humor that O'Connor creates in her stories is predicated on seeing difference. Traditionally, "difference" characterizes the experience of the prophet – the person who has been "set apart" by God. In her letters, O'Connor gives her correspondent some real experience of distance and displacement by exaggerating the difference between her perspective and their own. The Habit of Being reveals the way in which she consistently uses comedy to highlight social boundaries and map the dimensions of displacement. For O'Connor, difference underpins displacement; it is a precondition

for the prophetic proclamations which, in her fiction, frequently result in personal and social turmoil. Her humor is inflammatory in that it marks difference with laughter, not in an attempt to diffuse the potential for conflict but to emphasize the reality of isolation. It is possible to identify several ways in which O'Connor uses humor in her stories to construct different versions of displacement. Her fictional landscapes allow her the freedom to explore more rigorously the implications of difference and alienation. Most obviously, there is the absolute displacement of O'Connor's freakish characters - the mass murderers and raging prophets. Comedy both marks their alienation and problematizes their aggressively anti-social behaviour. O'Connor's fiction is also populated by many characters who - though not totally ostracized from society - are nevertheless disengaged from their surroundings by virtue of their religious fanaticism. In several stories, O'Connor exploits the comedy of religious excess, and in doing so dramatically highlights the terrible implications of social dysfunction. It is also possible to identify in O'Connor's fiction individuals who initiate their own displacement. A feminist reading of some of O'Connor's strongest female characters reveals the way in which they use comedy to construct a stronghold for themselves - from which they can recognize and expose social pretension. It is these characters who ultimately register the most devastating effects of engagement with the modern world. From their removed positions, O'Connor's displaced characters cultivate a capacity for the detached observation which she herself exemplifies in her letters. Their isolation affords them a perspective which, in a fictional environment, is allowed a violent, often prophetic intensity.

The insanely mad/the intensely rational: comedy and religious truth

The Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and old Tarwater in The Violent Bear it Away consistently negotiate the dangerous boundary between a social and an institutionalised existence, teetering on the edge of reform schools, prisons and mental asylums. In her stories, O’Connor allows them to engage in “normal” interactions. The comedy that results reflects the transgressive possibilities of displacement. The characters engage in a freewheeling through history which violates accepted social boundaries between past, present and future. In these stories, O’Connor explores the effects of temporal displacement. Self-contained by their own construction of history, the Misfit and old Tarwater are afforded an ironic respect. The elaborate justification that they present for their radical alienation is of course absurd; at the same time the comedy of their response to society does not compromise the integrity of their individual beliefs. O’Connor throws open questions of madness and sanity: through their reinvention of temporal boundaries, the Misfit and old Tarwater succeed in penetrating several layers of social and historical interpretation, to rediscover and expose the potency of biblical messages. In this way, O’Connor’s use of comedy in her stories may be recognised as an extension of the action in which she engages in her letters. As discussed in the previous section, The Habit of Being contains several instances in which comedy allows O’Connor an extended, ambivalent response to society. To the extent that her recognition of the comic is broad and indiscriminating, it prevents her from being unequivocally identified with one cultural response or interpretation. Carol Shloss maintains that the “harsh comedy” of O’Connor’s fiction does not arise “from either social anger or love”, but is intended to “wean” the characters from “social particulars” (7)⁴. As author, O’Connor uses comedy to undermine the reader’s ability to formulate definitive interpretations of her stories. As

they push the boundary between the insanely mad and the intensely rational - exemplifying visions that reflect both paranoia and insight - the Misfit and old Tarwater represent extreme versions of the transgression that accompanies displacement.

In her stories, O'Connor locates these characters geographically on the margins of society, "pursuing lives as social and ethical outcasts" (Bonney 347). In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" Bailey's family encounter the Misfit on a deserted dirt road in Georgia. In The Violent Bear it Away, old Tarwater lives in a shack at the end of an overgrown dirt road in a Tennessee backwoods. Both characters are situated just beyond the reach of mainstream authority; in their isolated state, O'Connor allows them sufficient space to construct their own versions of existence. The Misfit identifies himself with the crucified Christ: "It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one" (Complete Stories 131). This places him in a unique position to understand the implications of Christ's actions:

"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 away everything 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 . . .". (CS 132)

In the context of his situation, the Misfit's words take on a resounding logic: his reasoning is portrayed by O'Connor as being entirely rational. As William Bonney notes, although he is a murderer, "the Misfit is the only character in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' with any sense of what it means to ask morally serious questions about

human experience” (347). A strong impression of intellectual integrity is implicit in his passionate commitment to his alternative view of history:

“I wisht I had of been there [when Jesus raised the dead]”, 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.” His voice seemed about to crack (CS 132)

The sense of order and logic which characterizes the Misfit’s world is further endorsed by the many details which reveal him to be a man of careful manners. Throughout the story, O’Connor describes him as deliberately pausing, at crucial moments, to engage in slow, thoughtful actions: drawing on the ground with the butt of his gun while he decides the fate of the family (CS 128), taking off his glasses and cleaning them immediately after murdering the grandmother (CS 132). In the world he has constructed according to his own historical perspective, the Misfit is in control: giving orders to his henchmen and holding the grandmother in a captive audience. He is convincing orator, and brings her to a moment of enlightenment. However, her insight penetrates his self-containment and he kills her in a frenzy that contradicts his former calm behaviour. Although the Misfit is eventually exposed as insanely cruel and violent, his interaction with the grandmother suspends him in a timeless detachment from which he is able to recognise the tragedy of his existence.

It is O’Connor’s use of comedy which allows her to portray the Misfit in this prophesying role. The title of the story and the opening sentences indicate that she is adopting the conventions of Middle Georgia humor, casting the grandmother into the role of typical Southern lady: “The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She

wanted to visit some of her connections in East Tennessee and was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind" (CS 117). The comic sense is carried throughout the story by the grandmother's persistent banter which affirms characteristic vernacular concerns, most clearly expressed in her conversation with Red Sammy, the owner of the filling station:

He and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. (CS 122)

Even the grandmother's conversation with the Misfit contains traces of this style of comic dialogue:

"Listen," the grandmother almost screamed, "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!"

"Yes m'am," [the Misfit] said, "finest people in the world . . . God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold." (CS 127)

The notion of the Misfit as prophet is acceptable only in a comic context; and correspondingly, the absurdity of this role reinforces the comic status of the story. As The Habit of Being indicates, O'Connor believed that the Misfit was, to a certain extent, correct in his interpretation of the meaning of Christ's Incarnation and the dilemma that it presents for the individual conscience. In a letter to John Hawkes, she writes: "the Misfit knows what the choice is - either throw away everything and follow Him or enjoy yourself by doing some meanness to somebody, and in the end there's no

real pleasure in life, not even in meanness” (HB 350). O’Connor thus uses comedy as a tool to deal with the consequences of an unmanageable, dangerous truth. This points towards an important element in her thinking: the recognition that gross exaggeration is required in order to make religious concepts recognizable to a modern audience. In the same letter to Hawkes, she discusses her concern about “the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times” (HB 349). She writes:

There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it would be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not. I can’t allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in some halfway position. (HB 349-50)

Like the Misfit, old Tarwater’s detachment is connected to the realization of his personal destiny. It gives him the autonomy to construct an alternative version of history, implicit in the curriculum that he sets for his great-nephew’s education:

His uncle had taught him figures, reading, writing, and history beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation towards the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment. (*The Violent Bear it Away* 292)

Old Tarwater’s inclusion of American history in a biblical chronology disrupts accepted versions of the past which distinguish “religion” from “social history”. This ability to incorporate everything into a continuous linear perspective is dependent on a clarity of vision telling of the intensity of his faith. This is further expressed in his actions, which show no respect for any authority except for the authority of God. He kidnaps two children, on separate occasions, in order to baptize them and instruct them “in the facts

of [their] Redemption” (VBA 7); he stands outside his sister’s house and shouts for her repentance (VBA 58); he shoots Rayber, the rightful guardian of his great-nephew, when he attempts to take the child back (VBA 7). Old Tarwater acts in accordance with the directions he receives in a “rage of vision” (VBA 6) from God. His extreme behavior, his passionate belief in his status as “elect servant” of the Lord (VBA 17), and his physical appearance - in particular, the two “bulging silver eyes” (VBA 50) - accord with accepted stereotypes of the prophet image to the extent that he becomes a prophet-caricature. O’Connor’s exaggeration of his characteristics renders him a comic figure. This is subtly indicated in the following passage, in which the younger Tarwater describes his great-uncle’s appearance after he has been in the woods for several days “thrash[ing] out his peace with the Lord”:

[W]hen he returned, bedraggled and hungry, he would look the way the boy thought a prophet ought to look. He would look as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe (VBA 8)

However, O’Connor’s comic treatment of old Tarwater is not a form of derision. In The Violent Bear it Away, she includes enough details about his thought processes to indicate that his actions are entirely rational in the context of what he is trying to do. His estrangement from society leaves him “free for the pursuit of wisdom, the companions of his spirit Abel and Enoch and Noah and Job, Abraham and Moses, King David and Solomon and all the prophets” (VBA 17). Moreover, she reveals that he is committed to understanding his vocation, and as with the Misfit, this imparts a certain integrity to his position: “. . . it was saving and not destruction he was seeking. He had

learned enough to hate the destruction that had to come and not all that was going to be destroyed” (VBA 6). While O’Connor portrays old Tarwater in a way that invites a comic response, a comic context allows her the freedom to delineate the full implications of his “mission”. In both “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and The Violent Bear it Away, comedy enables O’Connor to fictionalize the implications of a God-centered consciousness. The comic perspective that she adopts in The Habit of Being is frequently directed towards communicating this same concern. Her letters reveal her understanding of the essential, metaphoric elements of a religious vision which reverberate timelessly and are compromised and distorted by human attempts to impose organization or structure. As she writes to T.R. Spivey:

Any Catholic or Protestant either is defenceless before those who judge his religion by how well his members live up to it or are able to explain it. These things depend on too many entirely human elements . . . God never promised [the Catholic Church] political infallibility or wisdom and sometimes she doesn’t appear to have even elementary good sense. (HB 345-7)

O’Connor expands on this sentiment a few months later in a letter to Cecil Dawkins:

[Y]ou judge [the Catholic Church] strictly by its human element, by unimaginative and half-dead Catholics who would be startled to know the nature of what they defend by formula. The miracle is that the Church’s doctrine is kept pure both by and from such people. Nature is not prodigal of genius and the Church makes do with what nature gives her. At the age of 11, you encounter some old priest who calls you a heretic for inquiring about evolution; at the same time Pere Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. is in China discovering Peking man. (HB 366)

The ambivalence of O'Connor's cultural identifications may be seen as an extension of the inquiry she associates with authentic religious striving. In both her letters and her stories, comedy proves an efficient vehicle for managing the potency of religious truth, enabling her to convey both the resonance of a religious vision, and the contradictions, inconsistencies and inadequacies that accompany religious response.

Exposing “individualism”: comedy and the tragedy of social dysfunction

Because of their radical detachment from society, the violence of the Misfit and old Tarwater is played out in something of a vacuum. Their absurd actions are contained by the historical precedents that they set for themselves, and this diminishes the tragic potential of their behavior. The actions of other characters in O'Connor's stories who are not radically alienated from society but, in different ways, disengaged from their surroundings, have more poignant implications. In O'Connor's terms, these characters participate in the “religious individualism” which she recognizes as prevalent in the “Protestant South” (Sturma 109). In a letter to John Hawkes, she describes its operation:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. (HB 109)

Rufus Johnson in “The Lame Shall Enter First”, Mrs Greenleaf in “Greenleaf” and Thomas' mother in “The Comforts of Home” all engage in this “dramatic working out”. These characters are set apart by their ostentatious “Christian” actions. Their

absurd behavior invites a comic response; but they interact in a more social environment than the Misfit and old Tarwater. They are close to human frailty, and ridicule becomes dangerous in this vulnerable context. In these stories, O'Connor takes advantage of the relationship between comedy and tragedy. She demonstrates the way in which humor can disrupt and dislocate, creating confusion and disorder - conditions conducive to tragic outcomes. O'Connor's letters foreshadow this use of comedy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, in relation to contemporary society, O'Connor's comic perspective reflects her understanding of the complexities of the issue at hand. As a detached observer, the comic undertone of her commentary renders it intentionally ambiguous. It reflects her recognition of both the legitimacy of different points of view, and the danger of the confusion that this may lead to. In this way, it forms part of what William Bonney refers to as the "moral ambiguity" (350) that pervades the world as O'Connor sees it. In her fiction, she is able to trace and describe the full effects of this ambiguity. Her stories are surrounded by "a perpetual and ethical wasteland" in which "moral uncertainty grows ever more extreme" (Bonney 350). In "The Lame Shall Enter First", "Greenleaf" and "The Comforts of Home", O'Connor uses comedy to contribute to the ambivalence that surrounds the integrity of the characters' actions and motivations. The juvenile delinquent Rufus goes to excessive lengths to prove to the disdainful Sheppard that he is not "too intelligent" for religion:

"I believe it!" Johnson said breathlessly. "I'll show you I believe it!" He opened the [Bible] in his lap and tore out a page of it and thrust it into his mouth. He fixed his eyes on Sheppard. His jaws worked furiously and the paper crackled as he chewed it.

"Stop this," Sheppard said in a dry, burnt-out voice. "Stop it."

The boy raised the Bible and tore out a page with his teeth and began grinding it in his mouth, his eyes burning . . .

Johnson swallowed what was in his mouth. His eyes widened as if a vision of splendor were opening up before him. "I've eaten it!" he breathed. "I've eaten it like Ezekiel and it was honey to my mouth!" ("The Lame Shall Enter First" CS 477)

Mrs Greenleaf, who takes on "prayer healing" as her "preoccupation" ("Greenleaf" CS 315), also participates in the comedy of religious excess:

Every day [Mrs Greenleaf] cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper- the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars. She took these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them and then she fell on the ground over them and mumbled and groaned for an hour of so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again . . . "Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (CS 316-17)

In "The Comforts of Home", Thomas' mother demonstrates "the radical Christian virtue of loving thy neighbor as thyself, of holding even strangers in no less esteem than one's own kin" (Wyatt 81). She is portrayed as comic in her excessive charity towards Star Drake/ Sarah Ham, the wayward girl who has just tried to seduce her son:

"That's just another way she's unfortunate," [Thomas'] mother said. "So awful, so awful. She told me the name of it but I forget what it is but it's something she can't help. Something she was born with. . . . [Her] eyes,

intimate but untouchable, were the blue of great distances after sunset.

“Nimpermaniac”, she murmured. (CS 384-5)

The behavior of Johnson, Mrs Greenleaf and Thomas’ mother take on an added intensity when offset against the rational attitudes of other characters in the stories. O’Connor’s inclusion of perspectives contemptuous of demonstrations of excess problematizes the nature of her comic intent. The absurdity of the characters’ behavior renders their actions ridiculous, but the humor is undermined by the intensity of their religious feeling which invests them with an integrity similar to that of the Misfit and old Tarwater. In these stories, religious excess is pitted against the religious cynicism of the three characters’ antagonists to create a climate of uncertainty, leading to chaos and violence. O’Connor thus sets up a clash of perspectives reminiscent of her letters. As in her letters, conflict takes place in the context of human vulnerability and misinterpretation. However, although O’Connor uses humor in The Habit of Being to expose and denounce social, intellectual and religious pretensions, she also uses it to diffuse potentially volatile situations - often turning her wit on herself to temper the intensity of a comment that has caused undue controversy or unintended offense. In the stories discussed above, O’Connor is able to follow through the implications of conflict, to test the potency of faith in a climate of disbelief and religious ignorance. She makes no allowances - as she must in her letters - for the lack of development of intellectual faculties to support religious understanding. Norton in “The Lame Shall Enter First”, Mrs May in “Greenleaf” and Thomas in “The Comforts of Home” fail to understand the intensity of the belief that motivates the actions they witness. This conflict between opposing perspectives contributes to the humor, but in each story it is eventually resolved tragically. These characters imitate the “do-it-yourself” principle

behind the religious excess that they witness, with fatal results. In his article “Stabbing the Heart: *Catanyxis* and *Penthos* in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf’”, Richard Giannone makes several observations about Mrs May’s reciprocating of Mrs Greenleaf’s actions which can be applied with equal validity to “The Lame Shall Enter First” and “The Comforts of Home”. Mrs Greenleaf, Rufus Johnson and Thomas’ mother each “catch the essence” of authentic religious response, and “revitalize” spirituality in [ways] suitable to [their own] time, place and disposition” (Giannone 335). Something of their actions “touch a nerve, speak to an unanswered need” (335) in Mrs May, Norton and Thomas. However, as they seize and embrace the impulses that they witness, “disordered passions” (340) are set into play. Norton is mesmerized by the religion Rufus presents to him. Influenced by the older boy’s fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, he believes that death will unite him with his mother in heaven - and so suicides. Mrs May, who clings to financial self-sufficiency and puts all her faith in the power of the property owner, proves to be as obsessive as Mrs Greenleaf.

Whereas Mrs Greenleaf “struggles to conquer suffering, evil, death and the loss of salvation, Mrs May campaigns against the weather, the wrong seeds in the grain drill, government taxes, her sons’s failures, her neighbour’s successes, her self-esteem, Mrs Greenleaf’s very existence (Giannone 338)

Distracted by pride, Mrs May unwittingly finds herself in a vulnerable position, and is gored to death by a bull. Thomas is astounded by his mother’s “excess of virtue” (CS 385). He reacts violently to the new determination she begins to display, and seeks to counter her actions by engaging in uncharacteristically criminal behavior. However, in his inept hands petty crime quickly escalates into murder. The moral ambiguity

suggested by the comic tone of O'Connor's letters is explored, exposed but not resolved in her stories. As Bonney notes, O'Connor's fallen fictional world "permits no final clarity, no ethical resolutions consequent upon a resolute clash between two well-defined, morally opposed beings" (353).

Female choice and response: a socially subversive comedy

O'Connor's use of humor in her stories is intentionally abrasive; it is characterized by the same paradox that describes the often violent comedy of her letters. The complexity of the world-involvement that is evident in her letters points towards a need to search for a critical discourse which does justice to a discussion of O'Connor's ambiguous comic sense and provides a framework for understanding the social and cultural implications of her audacious laughter which, according to Michel Gresset, "is like a gun that stalks a moving target" (103). In recent years, feminist literary theory has initiated critical discussion on women and comedy that highlights its irreverence and defiance. Although comedy has always been recognized for its "subversive and revolutionary" potential, the contribution that women have made to this genre of writing has been acknowledged only as a result of attempts by feminist critics to define a "woman's tradition" in literature (Little 19). Feminist criticism offers a critical discourse which acknowledges the "unique relationship between women and comedy" (Barreca Last Laughs 10). As Mark Walters notes, there has been very little critical writing about the feminist perspectives of O'Connor's work (185). However, criticism which explores the comedy of *other* women writers more conducive to feminist interpretation (for example, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Muriel Spark) raises some generalizations which have valid applicability to O'Connor.

O'Connor's use of humor in The Habit of Being clearly highlights her association with that group of writers who blatantly defy "traditional" definitions of women's humor. Regina Barreca quotes J.B. Priestly as an example of the traditional critical position. Priestly asserts that: "the sort of humor essentially feminine in nature" is that characterized by "soft laughter and smiles" which "soon dissolve into tears" (qtd Barreca Last Laughs 4). In contrast, O'Connor, in her letters, continually provokes a laughter which is often defiant in the face of opposing forces such as illness, social norms, or intellectual trends. In its distortions of self and disordering of society, O'Connor's humor is recognizable as disturbing and anarchic. Further, her refusal to take serious matters seriously in her letters associates her with women writers who break "cultural and ideological" frames (Barreca New Perspectives 6). Judith Wilt recognizes the danger inherent in this practice; she sees the humor of women writers as approaching a "boundary [beyond] which comedy ceases to cheer and succor and becomes violent, destructive, murderous" (174). This contradicts traditional definitions, which identify comedy as a "deeply conservative" force able to "absorb and defuse emotions that threaten fertility and community" (Wilt 177). "Fertility" and "community" describe the "happy endings" of conventional comedy, but Wilt (179) and Barreca (New Perspectives 4) both recognize that this constitutes an ambiguous ending for women. Feminist critics then identify comedy as an integral tool in dealing with female choice and response. The Habit of Being indicates O'Connor's willingness to use comedy in this way: as a control mechanism which enables her to manage a world-involvement made precarious by different versions of displacement. This refusal to associate humor only with affirmation and consolation is clearly illustrated in her fiction. Feminist criticism's predictions for women's comedy are realized in several of

O'Connor's stories, in which the harsh and disarming laughter evident in her letters is allowed to resonate unrestrained.

Joy/Hulga in "Good Country People" and Mary Grace in "Revelation" are both women who violently reject nurturing roles. Specifically, they refuse to respect the unwritten laws of civility which require them to concur with, reaffirm and reassure their "neighbor". According to Sheldon Currie, O'Connor's characters are "ludicrous figures" because something is "profoundly wrong; they have willingly abandoned what makes them human" (137). Currie's discussion relates specifically to Hulga and the character Mr Shiftlet from O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own".

However, the comments made apply with equal validity to Mary Grace:

[These characters] are no longer social, no longer involved in the network of relationships we call society, but rather have stepped beside it, are alone, cold intellectual observers. In effect they have become disincarnate, existing as minds rather than bodies (137)

Mary Grace will not take part in the inane conversation taking place around her in the doctor's waiting room: she scowls silently and blatantly refuses to answer questions, thereby fostering not ease and comfort, but embarrassment and tension. Hulga is more subtle, manipulating her neighbor in order to create her own private joke:

"[Harvey Hill] ast [Glynese] to marry him before the Ordinary," Mrs Freeman went on, "and she tole him she wasn't going to be married in no *office* . . .

Carramae said when her and Lyman was married Lyman said it sure felt sacred to him. She said he said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars for being married by a preacher."

"How much would he take?" [Hulga] asked from the stove.

“He said he wouldn’t take five hundred dollars,” Mrs Freeman repeated . . .
[Mrs Freeman] said [Harvey Hill] owned a ’55 Mercury but that Glynese said she would rather marry a man with only a ’36 Plymouth who would be married by a preacher. [Hulga] asked what if he had a ’32 Plymouth and Mrs Freeman said what Glynese had said was a ’36 Plymouth. (“Good Country People” CS 281-2)

Both Hulga and Mary Grace are portrayed as comic in their resistance to the feminine conventions of their mothers⁵. Mary Grace is described as “a fat girl of eighteen or nineteen” with a face “blue with acne” (“Revelation” CS 490); she wears “Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks” (CS 491) and “never says a kind word to anyone” (CS 499). The “large hulking” Hulga (“GCP” CS 273) stumps around on her wooden leg wearing “a six-year old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it” (CS 276), looking for possibilities to wound through “direct attack . . . positive leer, [or] blatant ugliness” (CS 274). In the characters of Mary Grace and Hulga, comedy and anger are present as “interlocking forces” - a hallmark of feminist humor (Barreca Last Laughs 6). In these stories, comedy does not diffuse but rather incites rage: the self-righteous, self-satisfied but good-natured Mrs Turpin can not restrain her gratitude for the fact that she is not “white-trash or a nigger or ugly” (“Revelation” CS 492). She cries out loud in the doctor’s waiting room “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” Mary Grace is thus provoked to violence, unleashing her fury on the older woman. She is eventually sedated, but is unrelentingly vicious to the end:

“What you got to say to me?” [Mrs Turpin] asked [Mary Grace] hoarsely . . .
The girl raised her head. He gaze locked with Mrs Turpin’s.

“Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target. (“Revelation” CS 500)

In “Good Country People”, Hulga is presented as being in a state of “constant outrage” which obliterates “every expression from her face” (CS 273). She has several violent verbal confrontations with her mother, but it is in her encounter with the bible salesman that the most brutal consequences of her warped comic sense become evident. The “great joke” of their planned outing begins to take on “profound implications”: Hulga imagines that she seduces the bible salesman and then turns his remorse into a “deeper understanding of life” (CS 284). The joke, however, is on Hulga: the bible-salesman steals her wooden leg and leaves her “humiliated, desolate, and marooned in a hayloft” (Park 249).

Judith Wilt designates three values that women’s comedy rages against: fertility, humility and community. Both Hulga and Mary Grace take their place in the “odd and difficult” history of this comedy as Wilt describes it (179). Hulga is “the virgin-mocker . . . with the feasting smile”; she “piles no sand bags on the dike of the collapsing world” and finds “no role in the world which totally satisfies her” (Wilt 179-80). Like Mary Grace, she “expresses rather than represses”; and “exposes and deflates” (179) the “Christian” pretensions of an older generation. As Wilt predicts, both characters eventually become the victims of their own aggression - in the course of the narrative, they are overpowered by the comic roles they have created for themselves. Mary Grace is carried out of the doctor’s surgery on a stretcher and no one disputes the “white-trash woman” when she claims “[t]hat there girl is going to be a lunatic” (“Revelation” CS 501). Hulga, who has been proactive throughout the

story, using her intelligence, her disability and her heavy presence to intimidate and disarm, is finally rendered physically and intellectually stagnant - immobile without her wooden leg and compelled to revert to the meaningless clichés of her mother: “Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. ‘Aren’t you,’ she murmured [to the bible salesman], ‘aren’t you just good country people?’” (“GCP” CS 290).

Other elements of women’s comedy are present in O’Connor’s stories and contribute to their ambiguous comic/tragic status. For example, Barreca asserts that women writers of comedy emphasize “recognition over resolution” (Last Laughs 17). Hulga’s humiliation at the end of “Good Country People” is of an intensity which overshadows the importance of the final conversation between her mother and Mrs Freeman: her shattering self-knowledge places her on the threshold of something terrifying. This reverberates more strongly than the closing observations of Mrs Hopewell and Mrs Freeman, which are subtly intended to unify and integrate the experiences of all four characters. The same overwhelming sense of non-closure is present at the end of “The Enduring Chill”, another of O’Connor’s stories which contains several comic elements. It is evident that the feminist elements of O’Connor’s comic perspective are also identifiable in her treatment of male characters. In this story, Asbury’s illusions of himself as kind of martyr to the god Art (CS 373) are shattered by the realization that his illness is not fatal. The significance he had imparted to his impending death is therefore misplaced and he is forced to painful awareness that “for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror” (CS 382). This “terror” is “Holy Ghost emblazoned in ice instead of fire” imparting a “purifying” self-knowledge (CS 382). At the end of the story it “descends, implacable” (382) on Asbury, and the narrative abruptly ceases in the midst of the

action. This emphasis on revelation over resolution is linked to another characteristic of female comedy. Judy Little notes that, for women writers, “the comic context is a liminal one in which inversions are not turned upright again” (21). Liminality refers to those “occasions in human experience which are marked by ordeal or celebration; these include initiations, weddings, or the arrival of a new season”(2). “The Enduring Chill” closes with Asbury in such a liminal phase: his encounter with the Holy Spirit can be regarded as a kind of “initiation”. It strips him of his identity as “failed but faithful artist”; and permanently inverts the world order he had constructed in which death is his legitimate and justified gift from life (CS 370). Asbury is thus parodied as he is placed at the threshold of a major life transition (Little 3).

Feminist criticism offers a framework for understanding O’Connor’s ambivalent sense of humor. In the context of feminist discussion, her pairing of violence with comedy can be seen as indicative of a deliberate intent to unsettle - to disturb and disrupt in order to force the recognition of different possibilities. In these terms, comedy becomes an “inflammatory device” that prompts a call to action (Barreca 8). O’Connor uses the tragi-comic characters of Mary Grace, Hulga and Asbury to subvert the conventions of a mother figure who represents “patriarchal values” (Walters 187). But this is not straightforward subversion - the effects of this action are obscured by O’Connor’s dual allegiances. The mother figures are marked as traditional by their use of “old fashioned” humor: a humor characterized by clichés. Fay Weldon recognizes this type of humour as being cruel in its lack of feeling: it is “dismissive” and “diminishing” of those who suffer (310). These women are, nonetheless, presented as being amiable and well-intentioned. By juxtaposing them against the nastiness of their children, O’Connor extends her ambivalence such that the reader

experiences simultaneous sympathy and repulsion for both sets of characters. This split reaction characterizes the reader's response to the corpus of O'Connor's fiction. It creates an uncertainty and hence a vulnerability which implicates the reader in the "joke" that O'Connor creates and contributes to the ambiguity that surrounds her comic intent.

In The Habit of Being, O'Connor consistently uses comedy as a characteristic response for determining and orchestrating her world-involvement. Her letters indicate a proactive relationship with cultural structures which implicates her in a tradition of resistance and justifies a feminist interpretation of her comedy. At the same time, however, her letters **also** indicate a point of reference located outside of society and social concerns. In a recent article on what she describes as O'Connor's "double vision", Hedda Ben-Bassat traces the effects of O'Connor's self-avowed commitment to interpreting the "contemporary situation at the ultimate level" (O'Connor qtd in Ben-Bassat 185). She notes that:

[t]he fragmenting violence for which [O'Connor's] fiction is famous, does not serve merely 'the eccentricity of defiance' The wounds her writing inflicts on blinkered eyes require, as their effects, inklings of transcendence which only spiritual insight can penetrate. (186)

Ultimately, O'Connor's laughter resonates outside of knowable paradigms or theoretical frameworks. Her comedy breaks traditional social frames and structures (Barreca New Perspectives 6) to bring her characters to a heightened degree of self-knowledge. However, to adapt a point made by Carol Christ, this "coming to self" is the precursor to "a giving up of self . . . a surrender[ing] of self to the powers of

being” (19)⁶. It has already been demonstrated that O’Connor’s mode of perception in her letters textualizes her involvement in something “essential”. It is possible to recognize her comic sense as operating in a similar way. In both her letters and her stories comedy sets up the possibility for an experience of “awakening”, in which the self is confronted in all its deficiencies. What was once comic now takes on a profound significance when it is seen in light of a new standard of time. The relationship between the temporal and the eternal - negotiated subtextually in O’Connor’s letters through her relationship to the “other” - must finally be played out in concrete terms between individuals and their God⁷.

¹ Susan Edmunds, in a recent reassessment of O’Connor’s involvement in the civil rights movement of the time (“Through a Glass Darkly: Visions of Integrated Community in Flannery O’Connor’s Wise Blood”), comments on the absence of emotion in many of O’Connor’s anecdotes, and is highly critical of the lack of compassion her letters display in their references to African Americans:

O’Connor’s pointedly Christian responses to the civil rights movement are hard to reconcile with the running commentary in her letters concerning the African Americans who worked on her mother’s farm. In these comic tales written to amuse her white correspondents, O’Connor shows no respect for privacy, cutting powers of judgment and little evidence of charity. (560 *note 3*)

² Robert Detweiler (“The Curse of Christ in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction”), commenting on O’Connor’s fiction, draws attention to her “fine accomplishment in creating the illusion of reproduced backwoods speech” (361). The mastery of language and control of comic devices that Detweiler recognizes in O’Connor’s stories anticipates her use of the colloquial in her letters:

[O’Connor] makes no attempt at actual verisimilitude in the exhaustively detailed naturalistic mode. Rather, through the nuance of the occasional ungrammatical word or construction, she gives the impression of the coarseness and clumsiness of the dialect without submitting to its spirit. (361)

³ John Irving’s defense of “inappropriate” humor (“The Making of a Writer: Trying to Save Piggy Sneed”) offers an interesting perspective on O’Connor’s use of comedy. According to Irving, humor may sometimes seem out of place, but “comedy [is] just another form of condolence” (21).

⁴ Interestingly, Shloss diverges briefly to discuss the way in which O’Connor’s fiction may be seen as a statement “relevant to the life of its author” (7). Shloss implies that O’Connor’s serious health problems led to an “uninterrupted consciousness of imminent demise” (5), and that this consciousness compelled her to “wean” **herself** from “social particulars”. Harsh comedy allowed her to achieve this detachment; it enabled her to “face every minute the ultimate ravishment of the flesh” (7).

⁵ As Martha Chew (“Flannery O’Connor’s Double-Edged Satire”) points out, Hulga and Mary Grace form part of a “whole company of ugly, rude daughters” who populate O’Connor’s stories, all of whom

satirize the "façade of sweetness required of Southern women" (20). In particular, Chew identifies Virginia Cope in "A Circle in the Fire", the unnamed child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost", Mary Fortune Pitts in "A View of the Woods", Mary George Fox in "The Enduring Chill", and Mary Elizabeth in "The Partridge Festival" (Chew 20).

⁶ David Havird ("The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion") interprets this repeated pattern in O'Connor's fiction in terms of feminist theology, maintaining that O'Connor forces self-awareness on her characters in a "humiliating and often violent way" (15). According to Havird, O'Connor's strategy is to "knock [her] proud female characters down a notch" by insisting that they "surrender their pride, which has been masculine in its figuration, to Christ" (15). Havird goes on to argue that "the dramatization of this abasement take[s] the form of sexual submission" (15).

⁷ In her Ph.D thesis (Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: The Rhetoric of Prophecy), Linda Conrad argues that frequently in O'Connor's fiction, the relationship of "primary importance" to a story is between the individual and the divine (63). Conrad discusses at length the pattern of this relationship in terms of the biblical concepts of "election", "rebellion", "judgment" and "redemption" (see Conrad Chpt. 2).

3 Maintaining a critical distance: resoluteness and O'Connor's religious consciousness

Part A: Religious understanding in O'Connor's letters

For Flannery O'Connor, comedy and resoluteness are integrally related concepts. Resoluteness is a way of describing the determined, focused inquiry necessary for the writer to engage properly with human life. Comedy is the catalyst for this resolute process; in many ways, it also describes the process itself. Comedy shatters all vestiges of illusion and sets the individual on the resolute path towards confronting the truth about the self. Richard Giannone's definition of the term *catanyxis* may be useful in clarifying this link between comedy and resoluteness. According to Giannone, *catanyxis* is "a thrust of sudden sensation, of anguish that embeds deep in the soul an attitude, a determination" (336). In the corpus of O'Connor's writing, this sequence characterizes the individual's progression towards insight. The enlightenment that results points towards the link between resoluteness and the development of a religious consciousness. O'Connor's letters, by providing a detailed account of the significance of religion in her life, illuminate the nature of this relationship and foreshadow its operation in her stories. While O'Connor's comic sense creates an undercurrent of humor in her letters, her religious sense is expressed overtly on several occasions. Writing to John Hawkes in October 1959, she maintains that her personal vision is not a construct of her own "perception and sensitivity", but rather has been given to her "whole[,] by faith . . ." (HB 352). She makes many other comments which reinforce this influence of faith in her life. In her first letter to "A" she

writes: "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement" (HB 90). Significantly, the first letter of O'Connor's correspondence with Cecil Dawkins is marked by an admission with similar implications: "The only concern, so far as I see it, is what Tillich calls the 'ultimate concern.' It is what makes [my] stories spare and gives them any permanent quality they may have" (HB 221). O'Connor asserts adamantly the relationship between religion and life, - her faith is the frame of reference that she brings to the world. As she states in a letter to Shirley Abbott: "I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy . . . the message I find in the life I see is a moral message" (HB 147).

"A deepened sense of mystery": the significance of a religious perspective

From her letters it is evident that O'Connor's appropriation of her Christian orthodoxy affords her a sense of perspective in relation to her uncertain, even chaotic position in the world. It has already been established that O'Connor is several times displaced: from Southern culture, by virtue of her Catholicism; from literary/intellectual culture, by virtue of her regionalism; from the opportunities and possibilities for the development of her talent, by virtue of her limiting illness. O'Connor's faith works in the same way as her comedy, allowing her to disengage from forces which threaten to stifle or minimize her artistic endeavor. The strongly religious overtones which pervade her correspondence have been identified by some critics as contributing to a "univocal and finalized consciousness" which manifests itself continually in the "penchant" for "settled judgments" (Crews 49-52) that characterizes her fiction.

However, in an important letter to the poet Alfred Corn, O'Connor describes how her faith allows her to maintain an open, inquiring mind: "What kept me a skeptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read" (HB 477). O'Connor's collected letters contain many examples which reinforce this "distancing" function of religion. Her faith allows her to remain detached from mundane perception and ordinary observation. As she explains in another letter to Corn, her understanding of Catholicism allows her some middle ground between the "determinism" of religious fundamentalism and the "chaos" of an irreligious, Godless society (HB 489). It nurtures a "deepened sense of mystery" (HB 195), allowing her to exercise the "anagogical vision" (HB 503) which creates in her fiction a prismatic experience of meaning.

O'Connor's explicit references to religion do not detract from the humorous tone of her correspondence. Her comic sense is never far from the surface when she is attempting to delineate the effects of her religious vision. Her emotive involvement with her faith is implied in the following quotation from a letter to fellow Catholic writer, John Lynch: "I feel that if I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything" (HB 114). This comment suggests multiple links between O'Connor's faith and her sense of humor. To begin with, the violence and strangeness of O'Connor's comedy - discussed in more detail in the previous chapter - is telling of a complex perceptual framework. It indicates a vision of existence which does not respect "accepted" boundaries and definitions, and is supported by an awareness of the supernatural co-existing with the natural (HB 453). At the same time, O'Connor's uninhibited assertion of her often

excessive religious concerns and observations creates, in itself, a startling candor. In many of her letters, her dogmatism takes expression in terms that can be recognized as comic. For instance, O'Connor's response to the Catholic teaching on contraception is reminiscent of the grotesque humor that characterizes both her fiction and her personal writing:

I wish various fathers would quit trying to defend it [the Church's stance against contraception] by saying that the world can support 40 billion. I will rejoice in the day when they say: "This is right, whether we all rot on top of each other or not, dear children, as we certainly may. Either practice restraint or be prepared for crowding". (HB 338)

A remark made in a letter to Sr Mariella Gable about the "inevitability" of Catholicism - "[w]hen you leave a man alone with his Bible and the Holy Ghost inspires him, he's going to be a Catholic one way or another" (HB 517) - is also comic in its sweeping disregard of biblical history and scholarship. In these instances, it can be argued that O'Connor purposely pursues the extremes of her religious vision in order to highlight the implications of a God-centered consciousness. Her exaggerated imagery distances her from convention - it arrests the attention of her reader and allows her the space to outline and demonstrate her own version of how truth operates. O'Connor exploits the comic potential of her words in order to heighten their impact. In these instances, her actions concur with the treatment of her fictional prophets - in particular, old Tarwater and the Misfit - as discussed in Chapter Two.

The resolute action of truth

O'Connor believes that the truth creates its own relentless momentum. She discusses and demonstrates this repeatedly throughout her correspondence; it is this notion which contributes to the strong impression of resoluteness that pervades her letters. It appears that resoluteness, for O'Connor, entails following the truth through relentlessly to its natural conclusion; it is vital for discerning long-term or essential meaning. Clearly, her understanding of resoluteness is influenced by her faith - the context of her many references to the importance of the "following through" action indicates that O'Connor interprets resoluteness in religious terms. In a letter to John Hawkes, she explains the operation of her "Catholic sense of history" in which "everything works towards its true end or away from it, everything is ultimately saved or lost" (HB 350). In a much later letter to Janet McKane, she maintains that she "follows [the mystery of the redemption] through literally in the lives of [her] characters" (HB 536). Resoluteness describes O'Connor's engagement with truth. In her frequent debates on religion, she explains that the truth she adheres to is metaphysical truth - it has its source in Catholic dogma and its effects are recorded in immortal terms. It also has a temporal dimension - as she explains in a letter to Cecil Dawkins, "spiritual realities" have the power to affect individuals "in the flesh" (HB 365). In between its incomprehensible inception and its supernatural resolution, O'Connor maintains that religious truth is played out in a very human context. Her letters reveal her preoccupation with applying "mystical" truth to "normal" human circumstance; resoluteness describes the nature of this application. In that it allows her to disengage with irrelevant or distracting considerations, it becomes invaluable for

ensuring the integrity of O'Connor's vocation as a writer. Her letters reveal that resoluteness characterizes *both* her own response to life *and* the operation of truth in her stories.

Resoluteness and integrity: (i) confronting the spiritual malaise

O'Connor's tenacity is most readily evident in the way in which she deals with the difficult questions of spiritual emptiness and doubt, and illness and suffering. Her letters reveal that her religious consciousness is resilient in the face of the contemporary spiritual malaise experienced and discussed by many of her friends. In that she refuses to allow **emotion** to influence her response to what she believes to be **truth**, her resilience is marked by an impassiveness that suggests a form of stoicism. However, O'Connor's letters are rescued from stolidity and seriousness by virtue of her comic sense - her resoluteness is frequently tempered by a humorous tone. In a letter to "A" she maintains that "the very notion of God's existence is not emotionally satisfactory anymore for great numbers of people, which does not mean that God ceases to exist. . . . The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally" (HB 100). Throughout her letters, O'Connor rallies against sentimentalizing the spiritual life. She is candid about the inadequacies of her own faith, stating on several occasions that tenacity is the most essential quality for sustaining her relationship with God: "the only force I believe in is prayer, and it is a force I apply with more doggedness than attention" (HB 100). She reinforces this with the following comic image: "[p]icture me with my ground teeth stalking joy - fully armed too as it's a highly dangerous quest" (HB 126). O'Connor believes that a

tenacious and stoic faith is required to survive the nihilism of the times. Although she maintains that she “has never left or wanted to leave the [Catholic] Church” (HB 114), she advises her friend Louise Abbot to be persistent in her search for faith:

What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe. If you feel you can't believe, you must at least do this: keep an open mind. Keep it open toward faith, keep wanting it, keep asking for it
(HB 354)

Resoluteness and integrity: (ii) dealing with illness

The determination that O'Connor displays in relation to her faith is motivated by her commitment to what she believes to be religious truth. In her approach to her illness, her actions are somewhat different: O'Connor is resolute in the sense that she is unflinching - determined not to allow her illness to take on an exaggerated importance in her life. She appears to cultivate an acceptance of her illness as a “passive diminishment”, a concept borrowed from Teilhard de Chardin. She discusses this in the following extract from a letter written late in her life to Janet McKane: “What he [Teilhard] means is that . . . the patient is passive in relation to the disease - he's done all he can to get rid of it and can't so he's passive and accepts it . . .” (HB 509). From her letters, it appears that O'Connor asks nothing of her illness - neither meaning, nor revelation, nor virtue. Writing again to Janet McKane some months later, she refuses to impart any great significance to her experience of ill health: “I don't much agree with you and your friend, the nun, about suffering teaching you much about the

redemption. . . . I don't know any more about the redemption than anybody else" (HB 536). O'Connor had many years before resigned herself to her physical limitations, and sought to endure rather than transcend her deteriorating condition, as is evident in the following comments made in a letter to "A" in 1956:

I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies. (HB 163)

The above quotations exhaust almost all serious reference that O'Connor makes to her illness in her letters. Her comic sense, reverberating throughout the correspondence, mitigates the solemnity of her response - preventing her resoluteness from becoming a version of martyrdom. In an early letter to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick, O'Connor cannot resist emphasizing the humorous side of her physical limitations:

I am making out fine in spite of any conflicting stories. I have a disease called lupus . . . [It] is one of those things in the rheumatic department; it comes and goes, when it comes I retire and when it goes, I venture forth. . . . I have enough energy to write with and as that is all I have any business doing anyhow, I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing. (HB 57)

O'Connor's letters are marked by an absence of serious discussion on the nature, development or effects of her condition. Usually her health is mentioned in passing - either in response to specific requests from friends or as an explanation of lapses in her letter-writing. This silence is perhaps the most telling indicator of a resoluteness that

expresses itself as a determination to incorporate her illness into her life and to get on with the more important business of writing.

Resoluteness and integrity: (iii) commitment to “vocation”

O'Connor's commitment to her vocation as a writer links her faith to her illness, and subordinates both to the most important expression of her resoluteness - her determination to achieve artistic excellence. This is best illustrated in her letters through her ongoing references to the way in which her physical condition has impacted upon her creative work. It is evident, from her more intimate discussions, that the acceptance of her illness that O'Connor achieves and conveys is not inconsistent with personal struggle. The resoluteness that characterizes her response to her illness is well summarized by the "journey" metaphor, referred to earlier, in which O'Connor compares sickness to a "long trip to Europe" (HB 163). With its connotations of a “rite of passage”, it hints at the painful transition which she describes explicitly in a letter to Maryat Lee. O'Connor's realization of the seriousness of her condition forced her to return to Georgia against her will. In the following extract, O'Connor responds to Lee's contemplation of a similar return:

So it may be the South! You get no condolences from me. This is a Return I have faced and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me. And as I told you by the fence, it was only the beginning. (HB 224)

Lee Sturma describes O'Connor's illness and her forced exile to the South as a "crisis of limitation", which compels O'Connor to find "positive uses for the limitations she was experiencing" (111). Her strong commitment to her vocation as a writer forces her to mobilize all resources at hand in order to perfect her creativity: O'Connor works hard at making a "virtue" of her "necessity" (Sturma 111). Throughout her letters, O'Connor reveals the elevated importance of vocation in her understanding of authentic human existence. In the following extract from a letter to "A" she defends the work of a mutual friend:

The harshness with which you speak of C. is not justified. She may be basically irreligious but we are not judged by what we are basically. **We are judged by how hard we use what we have been given** [emphasis added]. Success means nothing to the Lord, nor gracefulness. She tries and tries violently and has a great deal to struggle against and to overcome. (HB 306)

O'Connor believes that resolute commitment to vocation is sanctified in itself and requires neither successful outcomes nor accompanying religious overtones.

O'Connor's concept of vocation may be better understood by referring to the writing of Simone Weil. Her letters reveal an ongoing interest in the life and work of Weil.

Sturma points out the similarities in O'Connor's and Weil's "inner journeys" (110) and describes the kinship O'Connor felt with Weil as "shared identity" (110). Weil's reflections on vocation in her "Spiritual Autobiography" delineate clearly the concerns that O'Connor alludes to in her letters:

[T]he carrying out of a vocation differs from the actions dictated by reason or inclination in that it [is] due to an impulse of an essentially and manifestly

different order; and not to follow such an impulse when it made itself felt, even if it demand[s] impossibilities, seem[s] to me the greatest of all ills. (Weil 16-17)

Like O'Connor, Weil believes that the resoluteness displayed in pursuit of vocation constitutes its greatest value - and that this cannot be undermined by the individual's "mediocre natural faculties" (17):

After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that no matter what human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from outside . . . [This] conviction led me to persevere for ten years in an effort of concentrated attention which was practically unsupported by any hope of results. (17)

Weil associates the pursuit of vocation with the pursuit of what she refers to as "truth". Like O'Connor, she links vocation to faith by referring to the perfection of Christ as her ultimate goal (Weil 31). While O'Connor acknowledges that religious piety can be waived for the sake of vocation, Weil goes so far as to proclaim that "one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for truth" (22). She thus places truth over and above religious convention, allowing nothing to impinge upon the resolute operation of intelligence which she describes as "a specifically and rigorously individual thing; requir[ing] total liberty[,] implying the right to deny everything and allowing of no dominations" (28-29). Even though Weil recognizes Christ as the

fulfillment of her vocation, she also, paradoxically, recognizes the necessity of her remaining outside of Christianity: “the degree of intellectual honesty which is obligatory for me, by reason of my particular vocation, demands that my thought be indifferent to all ideas without exception” (35).

In her understanding of vocation, Weil highlights the problematic relationship between intellectual integrity and religious commitment. The intellectual obligation to follow the truth wherever it leads may be incompatible with the religious requirement for obedience to established teaching. From her letters, it is evident that O'Connor also confronts this conflict of interest. Although it must be acknowledged that she never concedes the right of the Catholic to dissent from Church doctrine, her intellectual interests clearly extend beyond the Catholic tradition. O'Connor is familiar with the work of a variety of writers such as Nabokov, Updike, Murdoch and Malamud. She reads Jewish and Protestant theologians; and is deeply influenced by Teilhard de Chardin - a Catholic priest who was eventually censured by the Church hierarchy for his highly controversial teachings. O'Connor's admiration for many of these writers and thinkers is motivated by her deep respect for intellectual honesty. Even though she seeks permission to read books by Gide and Sartre which have been placed on "the Index" ([HB 259](#); [HB 263](#)), her comic observations indicate her recognition of the unsustainable position that Catholics often find themselves in. In a letter to her Jesuit friend, Fr J.H. McCown, she writes: “All these Protestants will be shocked if I say I can't get permission to read Gide” ([HB 259](#)). O'Connor is adamant that the Church respond to the intellectual demands of Catholics and non-Catholics alike:

I seem to have nothing but friends who have left the Church. They have all left because they have been shocked by the intellectual dishonesty of some Catholic or other - or so they say, frequently of priests . . . I wish we would hear more preaching about the harm we do from the things we do not face and from all the questions that we give Instant Answers to. None of these poor children want Instant Answers and they are right. (HB 309)

In her understanding of vocation, O'Connor - like Weil - acknowledges the importance of protecting the resolute operation of the intellect. However, O'Connor appears to have less difficulty than Weil in reconciling her intellectual interests with her faith interests. O'Connor is a writer, not a philosopher. Her vocation allows her to manage faith/intellect incongruencies in an interesting way. As a writer, she is able to use her stories as a forum for playing out her interpretation of dogma. Through her fiction, she can "test" the workings of Catholic teaching, thus engaging in a continual process of challenge and inquiry without compromising - at least overtly - her conformity with orthodox beliefs. Comedy and resoluteness may be identified as functions of this approach to Catholic dogma.

The resoluteness that characterizes O'Connor's response to life allows her to maintain her integrity as a writer. Both her actions and her thinking in relation to her illness and her faith - as revealed in her letters - continually show her editing and refining what she considers to be "superfluities" which would impede her recognition of the truth of her situation. O'Connor's gaze is always focused on her creative effort. The commitment she displays is evidently a product of her religious consciousness - this is confirmed by her understanding of vocation, discussed above. O'Connor's

preoccupation with defining her role as writer allows her to be specific about the artistic end she is striving to achieve. In an essay entitled “The Fiction Writer and His Country”, O’Connor identifies the link between the writer’s life, and his or her creative output:

[V]ocation is a limiting factor which extends even to the kind of material that the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively . . . The Christian writer particularly will feel that whatever his initial gift is, it comes from God; and no matter how minor a gift it is, he will not be willing to destroy it by trying to use it outside its proper limits. (Mystery and Manners 27)

O’Connor’s Christian sense of resoluteness enables her to focus her talent, and to develop a sensitivity to artistic integrity present in her own work. Her appreciation of, and respect for, the uniqueness of her fiction manifests itself continually in her letters - most noticeably in her interchanges with her critics. Writing to publishers Rinehart & Co. in 1949, O’Connor asserts her refusal to alter her first novel Wise Blood on the advice from the editor-in-chief that it lacks direction and objectivity:

I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity of aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from . . . In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not be persuaded to do otherwise. (HB 10)

Throughout her letters, O’Connor maintains her resolve in response to criticism of her work. Her resilience is demonstrated again in her reaction to the critical attention that

followed the publication of her second novel, The Violent Bear it Away, in January 1960. O'Connor manages to remain indifferent to favorable and unfavorable reviews, but she is adamant about the importance of having her intentions understood. She values the criticism of Dr T.R. Spivey because it is aimed at this kind of understanding:

Thank you for what you have to say about the novel. I am glad you can say this much good about it but I would not like to have you stop at that point. Get on with the rest of it. My feelings are not easily hurt and I am aware of some of the book's limitations, perhaps different ones than you are. Anyway, you have more to bring to it than most & I will listen to you even if I can't agree. (HB 381-2)

O'Connor's commitment is to the integrity of the work she creates and she persistently refuses to judge success or failure by any other standard. She writes to Andrew Lytle, editor of the Sewanee Review: "I feel better about the book, knowing you think it works. I expect it to get trounced but that won't make any difference if it really does work" (HB 373). The pragmatism that O'Connor displays further links her resoluteness to her comedy, demonstrating the way in which the two concepts are, to a certain extent, "opposite sides of the same coin" (HB 105). Her preoccupation with the way in which the truth operates in her stories necessitates her removal from emotional reactions which threaten to undermine the integrity of the writing. O'Connor willingly turns herself into an object of humor - happy to be considered "peculiar" and resigned to being "trounced" for the sake of remaining faithful to her unique artistic vision.

Resoluteness and integrity: (iv) the resolute aesthetic

From The Habit of Being it is clear that O'Connor's resoluteness in relation to her vocation also extends to a preoccupation with artistic technique. The integrity that O'Connor values so highly in art is achieved through a complex aesthetic framework. In her discussion of Simone Weil's life and work, Kate Lindemann refers to Weil's concept of the "discipline of attention" which makes it possible to "leave imagination and desire so as to see the world as it really is" (Lindemann 295). It is evident from her letters that O'Connor strives to cultivate a similar working habit. Her resoluteness enables her to attain a detachment comparable to Weil's. Although Weil needed to remain outside of Christianity in order to guarantee the sincerity of her vision, O'Connor actually draws upon various tenets of orthodox Catholic philosophy in order to ensure that her work complies with "the demands of art, which are a good deal more exacting than the demands of the Church" (O'Connor Mystery and Manners 183-4). From the debate that takes place in her letters, it is possible to discern the criterion that O'Connor uses to determine value in artistic creation. It is in her earliest correspondence with "A" that O'Connor makes many of her most insightful comments on her own theoretical framework. As a starting point, she believes that the artist must be faithful to "the accurate naming of the things of God" (HB 131). At first she refers to this as the basis from which the artist must work. Later she revises her definition, stating that it is not a basis but an aim: "it is trying to see straight and it is the least you can set yourself to do" (HB 131). The "things of God" are sacred. The "accurate naming of the things of God" involves intense appreciation of the sacredness of the "visible universe" (HB 128). Arthur Kinney notes that, for O'Connor, "the secular and

sensual world contains - and also requires - perceptual transpositions. Objects and events demand metamorphosis into higher apprehensions of Reality” (218).

O’Connor’s aesthetic, “alive with the power of the miraculous”, continually embattles “a more rational world of statistics and probabilities” (Kinney 218) in an attempt to convey an experience of what she refers to as “felt life” (HB 124), a term that she borrows from Henry James. “Felt life”, or “life that is felt at a moral depth” (HB 124), is the hallmark of artistic authenticity for O’Connor. It is reliant upon a knowledge of the universe which is more than empirical and need not be consistent with notional understanding:

The writer doesn’t have to understand, only produce. And what makes him produce is not having the experience but contemplating the experience and contemplating it don’t mean understanding it so much as understanding that he don’t understand it. (HB 180)

In another context, Raimond Gaita has described this as “a form of understanding which is inseparable from disciplined feeling - in which, one might say, feeling is itself a form of understanding” (Gaita 15). For O’Connor, “disciplined feeling” may be described as a by-product of resoluteness. She believes that it is conveyed in art through close attention to technique.

O’Connor acknowledges that her ideas on technique are inspired by Jacques Maritain, in particular his concept of “the habit of art”. In his use of the phrase, Maritain defines “habit” not as mere mechanical routine, but as “a quality or virtue of the mind” (O’Connor Mystery and Manners 65). The habit of art “deprives [art] of many facile means and stops its progress in many directions” (Maritain 56).

Formulated according to Thomistic principles, it sees art as operating “for the good of the work done” so that the duty of the artist consists in “the conformity of the work to its means and end” (Maritain 41). The human element in the creative process is subject to rigorous demands that resemble a kind of asceticism. O’Connor refers to Maritain’s theory that the artist needs to “purify” his or her mind for the sake of the integrity of the creation: to ensure that “those elements of the personality that don’t bear on the subject at hand are excluded” (HB 105). The habit of art is a regime in which the writer’s whole personality is brought to bear on the artistic creation; every aspect of self is subordinated to the goal of artistic truth. Significantly, O’Connor does not miss the comic implications of this practice; in a letter to Janet McKane she describes her experience at Lourdes: “I prayed there for the novel I was working on, not for my bones, which I care about less . . .” (HB 509).

O’Connor’s description of creative endeavor as “trying to see straight” (HB 131) places the artist on the same path as the prophet - a commitment to “seeing straight” is reminiscent of Isaiah: “Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh. / Make a straight highway for our God across the wastelands” (Isaiah 40:3). In both cases, there are intimations of long-term striving, the need for clear discernment, and the belief in an external standard of judgment. In both cases, commitment to an end becomes a mechanism for detachment from means that are distracting, superfluous, misleading or false. In her use of letters, it is evident that O’Connor takes advantage of the potential for sustained and collaborative inquiry which renders letters conducive, as a genre, to the understanding that equates to “seeing straight”. The Habit of Being indicates that

“seeing straight” is made possible by O’Connor’s personal vision - in particular, her acute perceptibility to the comic potential of situations and events, and her recognition of a religious dimension coexistent with the natural world. Both comedy and faith are ways of putting life into perspective. For O’Connor, comedy enables the deconstruction of the "acceptable" order of things; it allows her to penetrate to the heart of the human condition and so to communicate reality on her own terms, as she sees it. Religion provides her with the expansive parameters necessary to recognize and understand the implications of her insights. It forms a theater for the dramatic playing out of vulnerability and falseness, certainty and truth. O'Connor is thus afforded a spectator's view of human weakness. According to Kinney this allows her to recognize “the *drama* of reality as well as the truth of it” (220), as she follows through resolutely to the "natural conclusion" of the scene. From her perspective - outside of cultural influence, an observer of otherworldly stature - what she sees is always comic. Her letters show that this is true in a self-reflective sense: it describes the way in which O'Connor understands her own life. It also describes her artistic practices. From the insight which her letters allow, it is possible to identify resoluteness, religion and comedy as interconnected components of O'Connor's aesthetic. Her stories demonstrate the extent to which these concepts work towards the same end: bringing about a catharsis which forces her characters to "see straight", at the same time controlling the progress of the reader towards similar revelation.

Part B: Expressions of resoluteness in O'Connor's fiction

O'Connor's fiction is pervaded by the same strongly resolute momentum recognizable in her correspondence. From her letters, it is possible to discern the intent of this momentum. Writing to Cecil Dawkins, O'Connor describes "the fact of the Word made flesh" as the "fulcrum" that "lifts" her stories (HB 227). She maintains that she is concerned specifically with "Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history" (HB 227). In a later letter to Janet McKane, she states that she follows the implications of this intervention "through literally" in the lives of her characters (HB 536). Evidently, the resoluteness that dominates O'Connor's stories is motivated by her preoccupation with the connection between the natural and the supernatural, and is directed towards textualizing the significance of this connection to the individual. To this end, her stories are pervaded by references to the individual's sense of a reality both independent of the self in its strangeness, at the same time organic to the self in its vital involvement with the individual's being. In "The Geranium", Old Dudley is tormented by "that thing inside him" (CS 4) that demands satisfaction. In "The Turkey", Ruller runs from the certainty that "Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch" (CS 53). In "The Heart of the Park" - later revised by O'Connor to form part of her novel Wise Blood - Enoch is overcome by "a terrible knowledge without any words to it, a terrible knowledge like a big nerve growing inside him" (CS 82). In "A Circle in the Fire", Mrs Cope is continually frightened by "her good fortune at escaping whatever it was that pursued her" (CS 190). What O'Connor's characters are experiencing is the relentless encroachment of "truth" - they are made subject to the full effects of the

"spiritual reality" (HB 365) of Church dogma. They are at the mercy of an independent and resolute momentum which pushes them forward to often horrifying moments of revelation.

It is possible to identify the expressions of religious awareness that O'Connor most frequently brings to bear on her fictional characters. From her letters, it is evident that her main concerns are self-knowledge and prophecy. It becomes clear that, applied to her writing, these concerns take on a corrective function: her heavy-handed use of religious concepts is intended to correct and sharpen her characters' perception of both the self and the world. In this role, her religious sense resembles the operation of her comic sense - both are motivated by the desire to uncover and highlight essential truth which has been either hidden or misconstrued.

Seeing the self in a "blasting, annihilating light": resoluteness and self-knowledge

The resolute operation of truth is clearly recognizable in O'Connor's ideas on self-knowledge. That this is achieved in a religious context is evident from some of her lengthier religious discussions with "A". In her early letters to "A", O'Connor methodically addresses all of her friend's questions about, and criticisms of, the Catholic Church. When the subject of "purity" is raised, she attempts to explain the way in which it must be understood in relation to self-knowledge. O'Connor writes: "I don't think purity is mere innocence; I don't think babies and idiots possess it" (HB 126). Rather, purity is attained through an unrelenting commitment to recognizing and understanding one's own situation. It describes a state of acceptance - "an acceptance of our individual circumstances" (HB 124). In her letters, O'Connor describes the

process of self-acceptance in terms that are harsh and almost brutal: much later in her life she talks about the necessity of seeing the self "in a kind of blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime" (HB 427). The truth about the self leads to the practice of a Christianity "which may not be socially desirable but . . . is real in the sight of God" (HB 517). In her letters, O'Connor illustrates this with an anecdote from the life of St Thomas Aquinas. For St Thomas, self-knowledge meant confronting the self in all of its imperfections. It thus motivated his violent eviction of a prostitute from his bedroom:

[St Thomas'] brothers didn't want him to waste himself being a Dominican and so locked him up in a tower and introduced a prostitute into his apartment; he ran her out with a red-hot poker. It would be fashionable today to be in sympathy with the woman, but I am in sympathy with St Thomas . . . [He] doubtless knew his own nature and knew that he had to get rid of her with a poker or she would overcome him . . . I call this being tolerantly realistic. (HB 94; HB 97)

St Thomas' actions are reminiscent of the expressions of Christianity that appear frequently in O'Connor's fiction. The comic overtones of the scene with the prostitute, as O'Connor describes it, indicates that humor is a by-product of the resoluteness that she describes. This is also apparent in her stories. For O'Connor, the comic and the resolute work together in the quest for self-knowledge. In *The Habit of Being*, her discussions on the life of Simone Weil allow her to elaborate further on this point. She describes Weil as an "angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth" (HB 106). Her description of Weil's resoluteness is comic at the

same time as it is tragic or "terrible". O'Connor notes that "[T]he Comic and the Terrible . . . may be opposite sides of the same coin" (HB 105). For her, they are both versions of the holy; as such, they both may be used to describe the individual's progression towards self-knowledge. It is a purifying progression in which the "eternal truth" culls the self-indulgent distractions of what O'Connor refers to as "a personal psychological revolution" (HB 457).

In many of her stories, O'Connor brings her characters to self-knowledge through the intervention of purifying forces. At the end of "The Enduring Chill", she actually refers to a "purifying terror" which tears "the last film of illusion" (CS 382) away from Asbury's eyes, and forces him to confront the truth about his meager and limited existence. In this story, the force at work is "the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire . . ." (CS 382). In "A Circle in the Fire", Mrs Cope is shaken out of her self-containment and self-satisfaction when her property is destroyed by fire. O'Connor again couches this awakening in religious terms: in the final line of the story she refers to the arsonists as "prophets . . . dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" (CS 193). In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost", the child becomes aware both of her faults and of the possibility for self-acceptance during Benediction. Proximity to Christ is the catalyst for this more insightful understanding. The closing symbol of the story – "The sun [as] a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood . . ." (CS 248) - is an example of O'Connor's use of sacrificial imagery to indicate the purification that precedes self-knowledge. There are many other examples of the link between religion and personal revelation in the corpus of O'Connor's writing. However, the story that best exemplifies her adroit handling of this

relationship is “The Artificial Nigger”. In this story, it is possible to trace a more complex process of purification leading to self-knowledge. From her letters, it is evident that “The Artificial Nigger” illustrates important elements of O’Connor’s thinking on personal revelation. As she writes to “A”, her central character – Mr Head – exemplifies the effects of the conversion experience: “Mr Head is changed by his experience even though he remains Mr Head . . . [H]e bears his same physical contours and peculiarities **but they are all ordered to a new vision** [emphasis added]” (HB 275). An in-depth discussion of “The Artificial Nigger” allows identification of the way in which O’Connor textualizes her understanding of the relentless operation of truth: it works through accepted versions of purity in an exploitative manner, taking the suffering of the traditionally disenfranchised - children and African Americans - and using it to reveal “a new vision” (HB 275), a vision of the “true depravity” (CS 270) of the self. In this instance, the catharsis that is achieved emanates not from the imposition of external forces, but from the protagonist's response to his own actions. This integrated involvement with revelation leads eventually to a more integral engagement with the other person.

“The Artificial Nigger” is dominated by explicit religious imagery. Early in the story it is revealed that Mr Head conceives of the trip to the city with his grandson Nelson “in moral terms” (CS 251). This implies that everything to follow in the story is to be read against a standard of judgment reminiscent of a religious code. O’Connor, as narrator, clearly identifies the violations of morality. The city itself is associated with sloth and treachery - its sewer passages remind Nelson of “the entrance to hell” (CS 259); it helps him to understand “how the world was put together in its lower parts”

(CS 259). With its distracting materialism, its impersonal haste and its physical vastness, it is portrayed as being highly threatening to naïve country travellers who are in danger of being overtaken by its darkness (CS 266) and “never heard from again” (CS 259). O’Connor’s identification of religious concepts continues throughout the story. Mr Head’s denial of his grandson is assessed in moral terms: the author/narrator reveals that Nelson’s mind “had frozen around his grandfather’s treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present at the final judgment” (CS 267). The redemptive value of “the artificial nigger” - the plaster statue of an African American that the two characters come across after they spend many hours lost in the city - is made explicit to the reader. Mr Head and Nelson are reconciled through their identical reaction to the figure: “They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy” (CS 269). The story closes with Mr Head as grateful penitent; in his reflections on what has happened to him, he displays an insight into complex religious concepts:

Mr Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. (CS 270)

It is necessary, however, to place the overtly religious overtones of “The Artificial Nigger” in the context of earlier discussion on O’Connor’s use of religion as a device for achieving her aesthetic ends. Critics who maintain that this story is “the closest thing we have in O’Connor to specifically Catholic allegory” (Strickland 453) do not do justice to the structural complexity of her art¹. O’Connor’s religious perspective is most important for reasons of artistic strategy. As Robert Detweiler notes, O’Connor’s understanding of theological concepts creates in her fiction a “swift, abrupt, compressed economy of movement that has the concentrated force and impact of expressionist drama” (367). Detweiler recognizes the link between the operation of religious concepts and the playing out of narrative drama in O’Connor’s fiction. He notes that O’Connor’s “structure of action usually imitates the pattern of spiritual action that involves judgment or grace” (365). In “The Artificial Nigger”, her religious understanding operates to purge Mr Head’s inflated ideas of self. The thoroughness of his “undoing” is made possible by a relentless momentum which builds to a climactic moment of revelation. The effect of this is heightened by the fact that Mr Head is already committed to his own elaborately formed ideas on the progression towards wisdom. O’Connor’s understanding of the resolute operation of religious truth corrects Mr Head’s practice of confusing the pursuit of truth with self-aggrandizement.

O’Connor uses imagery suggestive of steady, certain development to convey the momentum that Mr Head believes he is involved in. He is preoccupied with the process of character formation, and the moon shining through his room - contemplating itself “with the look of a young man who sees his old age before him” (CS 249) - symbolizes the paradigm that he works within. Mr Head participates in the

traditional practice of mentoring in which age and experience take responsibility for directing the progress of youth. He reflects that: "only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" (CS 249). O'Connor dwells on Mr Head's deftness and capacity for clear-sighted action:

Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features . . . His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men. (CS 249-50)

Mr Head has achieved the status of a "Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante", or a "Raphael, awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to the side of Tobias" (CS 250). His "mission" is to lead his grandson, Nelson, in a similar progression towards wisdom. Towards this end, Mr Head and Nelson embark on a journey to the city. Mr Head is relentless, even merciless, in his plans for the boy's progression from ignorance to understanding:

He had been thinking about this trip for several months . . . It was to be a lesson that the boy would never forget. He was to find out from it that he had no cause for pride merely because he had been born in a city. He was to find out that the city is not a great place. Mr Head . . . fell asleep thinking how the boy would at last find out that he was not as smart as he thought he was. (CS 251)

However, the model for resolute progression that Mr Head commits himself to is undermined by O'Connor as the story unfolds. Mr Head places much emphasis on

discernment and dexterity; in the course of the story, O'Connor portrays him as displaced from his confident momentum. Indeed, his trip to the city pivots on his displacement. Immediately after his early morning reflections on the day's significance as a kind of initiation ritual for his grandson, with himself as omnipotent guide, Mr Head unintentionally slips back into sleep. When he wakes up again, it becomes apparent that his role as leader has already been usurped: Nelson is ahead of him - up, dressed and cooking breakfast (CS 251). Throughout the story, O'Connor continues to undermine Mr Head's authority. She reveals that, in spite of his aura of confidence, he is "secretly afraid" that the train taking them to the city will not stop to pick them up (CS 252). On the train, it is clear that Mr Head is, socially, out of his depth.

O'Connor's detailed descriptions of his actions renders him a comic figure:

Mr Head saw two unoccupied seats and pushed Nelson toward them. "Get in there by the winder [sic]," he said in his normal voice which was very loud at this hour of the morning . . . Mr Head sat down and settled himself and took out his ticket and started reading aloud everything that was printed on it.

People began to stir. Several woke up and stared at him. (CS 253)

By using Mr Head as an object of humor, she throws into question his capacity for clear discernment. Louis D. Rubin Jr. refers to Mr Head's displacement in the city as "the classic humor situation of country-come-to-town" (120) and locates it within the tradition of Middle Georgia humor. O'Connor takes a convention of this comic tradition and uses it - in collaboration with her religious consciousness - to create a greater resonance of meaning: the tragic/comic status of "The Artificial Nigger" reflects both the ambiguity and the poignancy of Mr Head's initiation process.

Inevitably, Mr Head is subjected to a “blasting annihilating light” (HB 427) by which he is able to recognize his own displacement. He perceives it in terms of the discrepancy between the truth of his own paltry image and the self-image of greatness he had constructed.

It is Mr Head’s gross injustice towards Nelson that brings about this “purification” and self-knowledge. As a child, Nelson represents traditional notions of purity; as a country child experiencing the city for the first time, his innocence and vulnerability are even more pronounced. Mr Head's denial of his grandson in these circumstances constitutes a form of abandonment; his participation in this type of crime against the innocent sets up the possibility for his first real encounter with shame. The religious imagery pervasive in the story intensifies the significance of Mr Head’s actions - shame becomes associated with sin, and forgiveness and reconciliation are recognized as emanating from divine mercy. This experience develops Mr Head’s sensitivity to a new standard of discernment: “He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation” (CS 268). Mr Head’s encounter with mercy provides him with a benchmark, against which he is able to recognize the truth about the self:

He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. (CS 269-70)

In a letter to Ben Griffith, O’Connor maintains that the plaster statue of the African American in “The Artificial Nigger” is intended to suggest “the redemptive quality of

the Negro's suffering for us all" (HB 78). For the purposes of her story, O'Connor works through traditional versions of purity - taking advantage not only of the suffering of the African American people suggested by the defaced statue, but also of the innocence of the child, Nelson. She uses both forms of vulnerability to bring Mr Head to self-knowledge - which her letters indicate to be a more developed, authentic and intense state of purity (HB 124-6). Extended reference to "The Artificial Nigger" enables identification of the way in which O'Connor's understanding of religion, as evident in The Habit of Being, precipitates in her fiction action which brings about the necessary purgation. At the end of the story, the learned "role" Mr Head had constructed for himself is no longer relevant: the resolute action of truth has created an inverted educative structure in which the "teacher" is brought to enlightenment by the "student".

O'Connor's preoccupation with the process that leads to self-knowledge and revelation is evident throughout her fiction. However, her handling of this process differs, creating in her fiction different experiences of meaning. In "The Artificial Nigger", comedy alerts the reader to the process of purgation; in this instance, the reader is not subject to O'Connor's comic intent but is afforded a more discerning perspective from which the ridiculous smallness of Mr Head's actions are readily apparent. In "Everything that Rises Must Converge", O'Connor deliberately involves the reader in the protagonist's delusion, so that he or she experiences more acutely the resolute action of truth. In this story, it is difficult not to sympathize with Julian, who is embarrassed by his mother's attempts to cling to the respectability of a bygone era and spends most of his time in the "inner compartment of his mind" - a "mental bubble . . .

safe from any kind of penetration from without”(CS 411). From such a vantage point, Julian believes that he can recognize the truth about his mother with “absolute clarity” (CS 411). At the end of the story, however, it is his mother’s face which reflects to Julian the truth about himself. Early in the story, O’Connor describes Julian’s mother’s eyes as “innocent, and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten” (CS 406). But her purity is violated by a violent attack from an African American woman. While Julian is hopeful that this experience will reveal to his mother the facts of her situation - “ ‘You aren’t who you think you are’, he said” (CS 419-20) - it actually precipitates the decline of her mental faculties, sending her further back into the idyllic world of her childhood. Her twisted and contorted face - the outward expression of this mental decline - brings home to Julian the fallacy of the “emotional detachment” (CS 412) that he thought he had cultivated. His emotional response marks his realization both of his love for and dependence upon his mother, and his gross ingratitude for the sacrifices she had made for him. As Bryan Wyatt notes, the “death” of Julian’s mother forces him out of his “premature world-weariness and arrogant misanthropy” and “projects the ‘real world’ that he must enter after her death - the world of guilt and sorrow” (71). In this story, the truth unfolds with a resolute and brutal intensity which disarms the reader. O’Connor illustrates the existence of a strong correlation between truth and chaos, implying the prevalence of standards and expectations which go beyond knowable and acceptable limits. Revelation is achieved only through experiences of violence, death and inconsolable grief. In “Everything That Rises Must Converge”, as in “The Artificial Nigger”, O’Connor uses the suffering of the innocent to undermine intellectual pride, subverting the traditional relationship

between “ignorance” and “intelligence” in order to bring the protagonist to a heightened state of self-knowledge.

Following the truth to its “natural conclusion”: resoluteness and prophetic vision

Resoluteness describes the relentless, often disruptive action by which O’Connor’s stories attempt to testify to the presence of a reality greater than the self. O’Connor uses her religious consciousness to create a world in which truth is a ruthless, indescribable force which resolutely pursues her characters. In her stories, O’Connor also examines the way in which the individual develops *after* the truth about the self has been confronted. Wise Blood represents O’Connor’s most complete study of the effects of the individual’s awakening to self-knowledge. It illustrates the resoluteness that continues to characterize the individual’s spiritual progression after the initial experience of “revelation”. Early in the novel, O’Connor reveals that Haze Motes has already encountered major religious questions and has come to the conclusion that he has no soul; this revelation motivates his conversion to nothingness (WB 24). As a tragi-comedy, Wise Blood deals with both the absurdity of Haze’s commitment to non-belief and the violence that becomes a consequence of that commitment. Haze’s faithfulness to his personal vision is reminiscent of the conviction displayed by the prophet. In this novel, as in other stories discussed in the previous chapter, the creation of a comic context allows O’Connor to play out her ideas on prophecy in terms that are both recognizable and acceptable to a modern audience.

In Wise Blood, O’Connor uses several of the religious concepts discussed in her letters to convey the resoluteness that characterizes the vision of the prophet.

O'Connor recognizes "truth" as inherent to Catholic dogma; in an important letter to Cecil Dawkins, she elaborates on the operation of dogma, commenting on its force and highlighting its ability to affect individuals "in the flesh"(HB 365). She maintains that "The Church has always been mindful of the relation between spirit and flesh" (HB 365-6), and that this imbues Catholic teaching with a vitality that is often overlooked or misunderstood. Wise Blood textualizes this very physical relationship between the individual and religious truth. According to Conrad, one of the "many ironies in Wise Blood is that Haze Motes, despite his protest, contains the Fall, the redemption, and the judgment that he claims cannot be **in his body** [emphasis added]" (67).

Throughout the novel, there is little discrepancy between Haze Motes' actions and the "religious" vision that he endorses. In her letter to Dawkins, O'Connor condemns the apathy of "unimaginative and half-dead Catholics who would be startled to know the nature of what they defend by formula" (HB 366). She uses two concepts - prophetic vision and imaginative vision - to explain the dynamic relationship between religious truth and human life. Prophetic vision is "not a matter of seeing clearly, but of seeing what is distant, hidden. The Church's vision is prophet vision; it is always widening the view" (HB 365). Prophetic vision is inherent in Catholic dogma: through dogma the Catholic Church shows that it has the prophetic capacity to understand the future of the individual in terms of both mortal life and eternal life. The "ordinary person" however, does not possess prophetic vision; he or she is required to "accept it on faith" (HB 365). According to O'Connor, the capacity for imaginative vision aids this acceptance: imaginative vision is an understanding of "what the Church is in the large sense" (HB 364). Large in this context appears to mean "larger than life": it is

imaginative vision which enables the resolute “following through” of the truths established by prophetic vision. Applied to Church dogma, O’Connor believes that imaginative vision enables awareness of both the impact of religious truth on the individual, and the way in which this relates to the individual’s progression towards self-knowledge.

In Wise Blood, O’Connor uses imaginative vision and prophetic vision to bring Haze Motes to a heightened religious consciousness. Haze has rejected traditional religious notions of sin, redemption and salvation; ironically O’Connor uses the vehemence of this rejection as the catalyst for the development of a deeper religious awareness. Robert Detweiler describes Haze as a “militant atheist whose fervor is religious in itself” (363)². It is as if, in the character of Haze, the murderous anti-Christ, O’Connor recognizes more promise for spiritual progression than in the indifference and apathy of many “practising” Christians. Haze’s ability to understand the significance of his revelation and to incorporate this understanding into his life is indicative of his capacity for imaginative vision. Haze sustains his disengagement from external influences by fixing his gaze firmly on far-reaching horizons, apparently contemplating the truth about life and the after-life. The irony is that Haze is committed to seeing nothing. This vision of nothing is always before him; it is, consistently, the focus of his attention. Haze follows every situation through to the nothingness that all things dissolve into. As Sabbath Hawks notes: his eyes “don't look like they see what he's looking at but they keep on looking” (WB 109). When Haze finally realizes that Asa Hawks is neither blind nor a true prophet, he appears to incorporate it into the greater truth he has already discovered: “[His] expression

seemed to open on to a deeper blankness and reflect something and then close again" (WB 162). Similarly, as he contemplates the wreckage of his revered car, it is evident that Haze places it within a larger context of emptiness: "His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space (WB 209)". In a recent essay on American art, Edward Colless comments on the ambiguous nature of space - its ability to represent either eternity or the abyss (3). In Wise Blood, O'Connor takes advantage of this ambiguity - developing vastness into a religious concept and in so doing, affording Haze Motes the status of prophet. In confronting the horizons of his personal vision, Haze is exercising the prophetic vision that O'Connor refers to in her letters. According to O'Connor, the prophet is a "realist of distances" (Mystery and Manners 44); Haze's actions in Wise Blood are a testimony to the reality of the distant vision he recognizes. The ultimate dissolution of his vision into nothingness does not diffuse the intensity of his behavior. Rather, his fixed facial expression and inflexible actions take on an added potency as he becomes increasingly resolute about the truth of his "church".

Haze's immobile countenance and rigid movements are the clearest indicators of his detachment from all influences and circumstances extraneous to his mission, which is to convert others to the nihilism he professes. His face looks like "it might be cut out of the side of a rock" (WB 90). It is continually "set in a grimace" (WB 182); even when his car is destroyed by a patrolman, his face "[doesn't] change . . . It seemed to be concentrated on space" (WB 218). His resolute actions complement the

immobility of his facial expression. On several occasions, Haze ignores convention in pursuit of his immediate goal:

When Haze started across the street, Enoch yelled, "Don't you see theter [sic] light! That means you got to wait!" A cop blew a whistle and a car blasted its horn and stopped short. Haze went on across, keeping his eyes on the blind man in the middle of the block. The police man kept on blowing his whistle.

(WB 45)

When Haze first sees the "high rat-colored" car he is to buy, his attention is transfixed in a similar way:

Haze started off toward the back of the lot where he saw a particular car.

"Hey!" the boy [in the caryard] yelled, "you don't just walk in here like that. I'll show you what I got to show," but Haze didn't pay any attention to him. He went on toward the back of the lot where he saw the car. (WB 68-9)

Later, Haze is attracted by a sign which reads "Jesus Saves" (WB 75). He parks his car in the middle of the road and sits mesmerized, oblivious to the traffic behind him.

The most dramatic example of Haze's resoluteness is the self-mutilation which takes place in the last chapter of the novel. He attempts to validate his "Church Without Christ" by providing it with "a new jesus" (WB 140). Earlier in the novel, Haze had preached that:

The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! . . . It needs one that's all man, without blood to waste, and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him. Give me such a jesus, you people. Give me such a new jesus and . . . we'll all be saved by the sight of him!" (WB 140-1)

At the end of the novel, Haze assumes this role. In a sacrificial act, he blinds himself with lime and water. Many years earlier, the false preacher Asa Hawks had promised to give up his sight “to justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him” (WB 112), but he had lost his nerve. Haze’s actions are inspired by a press clipping he had read about Hawks. He carries through his intentions to prove the integrity of *his* belief. O’Connor’s concept of prophetic vision is closely linked to Haze’s act of self-blinding. In her letters, O’Connor clearly distinguishes prophetic vision from clarity of vision. Haze’s blindness perfects his engagement with the distant vision he endorses. As stated earlier, Haze distinguishes his church by revealing that it is founded on nothing - he advocates a religion without any supernatural component. His gaze is focused on the nothingness that encompasses the world in which he lives. Self-blinding aids his contemplation of the frontiers of his world; Haze is able to identify more fully with the nothingness he worships. As he remarks to his landlady, Mrs Flood, “[i]f there’s no bottom in your eyes, they hold more” (WB 222). This remark corresponds closely to O’Connor’s understanding of prophetic vision, which she describes in her letters as “always widening the view” (HB 365).

In the final pages of the novel, Haze’s resoluteness becomes more pronounced: he progresses through increasing states of self-denial towards his desire for total nothingness. As the novel draws to a close, “nothingness” becomes increasingly recognizable as a religious ideal. The asceticism and self-flagellation that Haze practises are motivated by the same concern which gives meaning to the religious virtue of detachment. Thus the more resolute Haze becomes in his commitment to his nihilistic vision, the more he resembles recognizable patterns of religious fanaticism.

Mrs Flood's comment on Haze's actions highlight this point: "... it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing - like boiling in oil or being a saint . . . There's no reason for it." (WB 224). In Wise Blood, O'Connor demonstrates the way in which resoluteness is related to the religious consciousness. For Haze, as for the theistic zealot, self-deprivation cultivates a desire for nothing; this in turn facilitates unimpeded pursuit of "truth". The significance of the blind prophet becomes apparent in the context of the understanding of prophecy that O'Connor displays in her letters. Writing to Robert Lowell, O'Connor asserts: "prophecy is a matter of seeing, not saying, and is certainly the most terrible vocation" (HB 372). Haze Motes is the prophet who cannot see - a contradiction in terms, according to the literal meaning of O'Connor's definition. However, Wise Blood resonates with the metaphorical implications of prophecy and sight. Haze confronts the truth of his vision fearlessly; at the end of the novel, he gives himself up to the nothingness of his proclamations in a triumphant act of faith. He proves himself to be a "realist of distances", negotiating the horizons of his vision and so endorsing the truth, "no matter how crazy, because it is right" (HB 536).

In Wise Blood, Haze Motes is implicated in the resolute playing out of dogmatic action. Against his will and apparently without his awareness, he partakes in a highly religious drama. Haze's unwitting negotiations with the supernatural world are offset against his involvement with "unnatural" characters - characters entirely out of place in the context Haze finds them. Most importantly, these include Enoch Emery, a half-witted delinquent who at the end of the story assumes the identity of a gorilla; and Sabbath Hawks, the pious/promiscuous daughter of the "blind" preacher. These

depraved characters become involved in the resolute action of truth. The comedy that results may be described as grotesque: O'Connor creates a violent burlesque in which identities are forged and changed, desperately clung to and brutally shattered. In the midst of this grotesque comedy, Haze's actions assume an increasingly religious resonance. In Wise Blood, O'Connor demonstrates the way in which a fervent sentiment, accompanied by focused, persistent effort, may become associated with religious striving - even though it is motivated by anti-God desires. As John Desmond notes, O'Connor's clearly believes that a secular, "anti-Christian ethic" has the potential to operate with the same resolute - and devastating - force as "Christian truth" ("Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor and the Holocaust" 36).

O'Connor's letters indicate the extent to which concepts of "dogma" and "truth" are prevalent in her thought. It is clear that these concepts allow her to develop a unique perspective on the human condition. In particular, they influence the way in which she understands the nature of her own relationship to the world. This is expressed most lucidly in her comments and reflections on her work as a writer, the significance of her illness, and the implications of religious belief. Resoluteness is the concept which underpins O'Connor's understanding of these aspects of her life. From her letters, it is evident that O'Connor recognizes resoluteness as a religious encounter. She is concerned less with the "historical and institutionalized" components of religion than with religion as "a psychological and personal idiom of spiritual potency" (Hutch The Meaning of Lives 3). O'Connor's stories reflect the understanding that she displays in her letters. She uses the religious concepts that she elaborates on and

demonstrates in The Habit of Being to invest her characters' actions with dramatic potential, and to elevate the significance of the drama to apocalyptic levels. Within this fictional context, resoluteness becomes a purgative force and its effects are allowed a fully comic resonance. Together, resoluteness and comedy disrupt and instruct, initiating change and involving the characters always in continual progression.

¹ Bryan Wyatt ("The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O'Connor's Everything That Rises Must Converge") goes so far as to state that "The Artificial Nigger" is marred by its "strongly allegorical component" (68).

² Detweiler identifies a whole group of characters in O'Connor's fiction who fall into the category of "militant atheist". According to Detweiler, Haze Motes, The Misfit ("A Good Man is Hard to Find"), Hulga Hopewell (Good Country People) and Rayber (The Violent Bear it Away) are all characters who "literally feel the curse of Christ upon them. They are not content simply to disbelieve; they disbelieve with a passion and have given their lives to an aggressive denial of the reality of Christ" (363).

Conclusion: Reading O'Connor's letters as "fictions"

Letters, like fiction, allow O'Connor to register her understanding of the human condition and to place that understanding in a context in which it will be challenged and open to change. To this extent, O'Connor's letters point towards the achievement of her fiction, and may be considered as "fictions" in themselves. In her letters, O'Connor conducts a "truth-seeking dialogue" (Tinder "Exercising a Christian Intellect" 627) with her correspondents which anticipates the resolute progression towards a new world perspective and a greater insight into their own humanity that her fictional characters inevitably become involved in. Similarly, O'Connor's interaction with her correspondents shows a respect for human complexity and difference that is also evident in her handling of religious challenge and response in her stories. Most importantly, The Habit of Being contains the impulse to questioning that O'Connor traces out through the movement, development and growth of her fictional characters. Although she repeatedly involves her characters in a supernatural world, the religious forces at play in O'Connor's fiction do not initiate traditional spiritual quests or achieve affirming spiritual conversions. Within the religious context she constructs, O'Connor's characters respond as individuals and as a result her stories resound with potent examples of human weakness and depravity.

The "story" that O'Connor writes through her letters may be summarized as the story of the exploration of crucial contemporary questions. John Desmond has identified these as: "the impact of Christ on human history, modern concepts of the Christian imagination and Christian consciousness" (Risen Sons 4). From her letters, it is evident that O'Connor uses comedy and resoluteness to engage with these questions on her own terms. Comic and resolute responses repeatedly allow her the

depth of inquiry and the capacity for focus that she needs to develop and sustain her unique perspective. The detachment made possible by the letter genre affords O'Connor expanded possibilities of discourse: her comic and religious sensibilities, often abrasive and sometimes offensive, are well accommodated by an epistolary dialogue. When her explorations become too invasive even for letters, the questioning is easily extended into her fiction. The paralleled impulse behind the two genres ensures that in both their language and their effect, O'Connor's letters are as entertaining and as disturbingly powerful as her stories.

There are other ways in which O'Connor's letters display a complexity of technique that complements the mastery of her fiction. In a recent essay, Susan Edmunds argues that O'Connor's fiction "actively trace out points of correspondence and continuity" between the social and the eternal (560). The stories discussed in the previous chapter highlight this achievement. The links that O'Connor forges between the secular and the religious in her fiction may be seen as an extension of the ability she displays in her letters to synthesize "eschatological and sociohistorical frames of reference" (Edmunds 560). As discussed in Chapter One, O'Connor's letters allow her to maintain her strong interests in contemporary issues, at the same time providing her with the detachment necessary to continually heighten her sense of the eternal. Moreover, the way in which she relates to her correspondents sets up the possibility for an engagement with the other person which - in Buber's terms - may be seen as resolving into an encounter with God. O'Connor's letters narrate the possibilities for simultaneous participation in both the cultural and the "essential" without removing her from "the category of life" (Greene qtd in Gunn 10).

The relationship between O'Connor's way of living - what Sally Fitzgerald refers to as her "habit of being" (xvii) - and the preoccupations of her fiction points

towards the central, unifying story at the heart of The Habit of Being. Responding to O'Connor's letters "of themselves" (Kestner 249), the reader's attention is repeatedly directed to a subtext which charts the development of artistic integrity. O'Connor uses letters to negotiate a worldly and otherworldly engagement that nurtures the integrity of her vocation as a writer. The Habit of Being is ultimately the story of the artist's transcendence. Like Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" and Hulga in "Good Country People", O'Connor's genius is compelled into unwilling exile. Her letters textualize the way in which limitation forces a more discerning perspective. As stated previously, letters themselves play a crucial role in the formation of this perspective. At the same time, they are implicated in - and communicate the parameters of - O'Connor's personal vision. In her letters as in her stories, religion is the vehicle that works both with and against geographical exile to force the emergence of new ways of seeing. Alfred Kazin, discussing the motivation behind his latest book God and the American Writer, emphasizes the importance of religion in allowing individuals to "escape the closed net of their actual lives" (Books and Writing). For O'Connor, this transcendence is not ethereal; she does not escape the "closed net" of circumstance by fleeing from a world of violence and death. Rather, her understanding of religion enables her to resolutely face up "to horror and to those exquisite configurations of pleasure and pain by which we habitually draft and sign contracts with reality" (Hutch The Meaning of Lives 155). Through her letters, Flannery O'Connor attempts to establish and sustain the authenticity of her engagement with life. The Habit of Being is a testimony to a continually developing aesthetic - equally responsive to intellectual and physical stimuli - which strives for the fullest possible appreciation of lived existence.

Bibliography

Adams, Phillip. Interview. Re-thinking Australia: Intellectuals and the Public Culture.

By Robert Dessaix. ABC Radio National. April 6 - June 29, 1997.

Asals, Frederick. "Double Flannery." Rev. of The Correspondence of Flannery

O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys, ed. C. Ralph Stephens and Flannery

O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque, by Marshall Bruce Gentry. Canadian

Review of American Studies 18.2 (1987): 231-233.

Barreca, Regina. Introduction. Last Laughs. New York and London: Gordon and

Breach, 1988. 3-22.

---. "Making Trouble: An Introduction." New Perspectives on Women and Comedy.

Studies in Gender and Culture 5. Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992. 1-

11.

Ben-Bassat, Hedda. "Flannery O'Connor's Double Vision." Literature and Theology

11.2 (1997): 185-199.

Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and

Theory: Key Critical Concepts. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall/Harvester

Wheatsheaf, 1995.

Benstock, Shari. "Authorizing the Autobiographical." The Private Self: Theory and

Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 10-33.

Bergland, Betty. "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing

the 'Other'." Autobiography and Postmodernism. Ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh

Gilmore and Gerald Peters. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press,

1994. 130-166.

- Bonney, William. "The Moral Structure of Flannery O'Connor's A Good Man is Hard to Find." Studies in Short Fiction 27.3 (1990): 347-56.
- Booth, Alison. "Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Woman of Letters: The Example of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf." Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991. 85-107.
- Bree, Germaine. Foreword. Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. ix-xii.
- Brightman, Carol. "Introduction: An Epistolary Romance." Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975. Ed. Carol Brightman. London: Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1995. vii-xxx.
- Brinkmeyer, Robert H. Jr. The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1989.
- Brodzi, Bella and Celeste Schenck. Introduction. Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. 1-15.
- Buber, Martin. I and Thou. Transl. Walter Kaufmann. 3rd ed. Edinburgh: Clark, 1970.
- Bullock, Allan and R. B. Woodings, eds. The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thinkers. London: Fontana, 1990.
- Cavaliero, Glen. "Autobiography and Fiction." Prose Studies. 8.2 (1985): 156-71.
- Chew, Martha. "Flannery O'Connor's Double-Edged Satire: The Idiot Daughter versus the Lady Ph.D." The Southern Quarterly 19.2 (1981): 17-25.

- Charters, Ann, ed. Jack Kerouac Selected Letters 1940-1956. New York: Viking, 1995.
- . The Portable Jack Kerouac. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Christ, Carol P. Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Colless, Edward. "Love Letter to a Lost America." Rev. of American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America, by Robert Hughes. The Australian's Review of Books. June 1997: 3-5.
- Conrad, Linda. Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: The Rhetoric of Prophecy. Ph.D. Thesis. Fryer Library, University of Queensland: 1987.
- Crews, Frederick. "The Power of Flannery O'Connor." New York Review of Books 26 Apr. 1990: 49-55.
- Currie, Sheldon. "Freaks and Folks: Comic Imagery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." The Antigone Review 62-63 (1985): 133-42.
- Cupitt, Don. The Time Being. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1992.
- Desmond, John F. "Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor and the Holocaust." The Southern Quarterly 28.2 (1990): 35-42.
- . Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.
- Detweiler, Robert. "The Curse of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction." Mansions of the Spirit: Essays in Religion and Literature. Ed. George A. Panichas. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1967. 358-371.

- Edmunds, Susan. Through a Glass Darkly: Vision of Integrated Community in Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood". Contemporary Literature 37 (1996): 559-95.
- Fitzgerald, Sally. Introduction. Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979. xi-xix.
- Gaita, Raimond. "Remembering the Holocaust: Absolute Value and the Nature of Evil." Quadrant (December 1995): 7-15.
- Giannone, Richard. "Stabbing the Heart: *Catanyxis* and *Penthos* in Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf'." Christianity and Literature 45 (1996): 331-344.
- Gilmore, Leigh. "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography and Genre." Autobiography and Postmodernism. Ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 3-18.
- Goodman, Katherine R. "Elizabeth to Meta: Epistolary Autobiography and the Postulation of the Self." Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. 306-319.
- Gresset, Michel. "The Audacity of Flannery O'Connor." Trans. T. G. Bernard-West. Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor. Ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985. 100-108.
- Gunn, Janet Varner. Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

- Gusdorf, Georges. "The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." Transl. James Olney. Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 207-235.
- Havird, David. "The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion." Mississippi Quarterly 47.1 (1994): 15-26.
- Hawkins, Peter S. "Faith and Doubt First Class: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor." Southern Humanities Review 16 (1982): 91-102.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. "Non-Autobiographies of 'Privileged' Women: England and America." Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. 62-76.
- Holfeltz, Heidi. "A Self-Portrait in Words: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor." Literature and Belief 2 (1982): 59-68.
- Hutch, Richard A. "Biography as Reliquary." Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 76 (1993): 467-85.
- . The Meaning of Lives. Cassell: London, 1997.
- Irving, John. "The Making of a Writer: Trying to Save Piggy Sneed." The New York Book Review 22 Aug. 1982: 21.
- Jelinek, Estelle C. "Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition." Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism. Ed. Estelle Jelinek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. 1-20.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. "Bonnetts and Balls: Reading Jane Austen's Letters." The Centennial Review 31.1 (1987): 84-104.

- Kaplan, Deborah. "Representing Two Cultures - Jane Austen's Letters." The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 211-229.
- Katz, Claire. "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision." American Literature 46 (1974): 54-67.
- Kazin, Alfred. Interview. Books and Writing. By Ramona Koval. ABC Radio National. 20 Feb. 1998.
- Kestner, Joseph. "The Letters of Jane Austen: The Writer as *Emetteur/Recepteur*" Papers on Language and Literature 14.3 (1978): 249-268.
- Kinney, Arthur F. "Flannery O'Connor and the Art of the Holy." Virginia Quarterly Review 64.2 (1988): 215-30.
- Lindemann, Kate. "Simone Weil (1909 - 1943)." A History of Women Philosophers. Vol. 4. Ed. Mary Ellen Waithe. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1985. 287-297.
- Lindroth, James R. "A Consistency of Voice and Vision: O'Connor as Self-Critic." Religion and Literature 16.2 (1984): 43-59.
- Little, Judy. Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- Maritain, Jacques. Art and Scholasticism. New York: Scribner, 1960.
- Mason, Mary G. "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 207-35.
- Mellard, James M. "Flannery O'Connor's Others: Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious." American Literature 61 (1989): 625-643.

- Merton, Thomas. "Seven Words." Love and Living. Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985. 97-132
- Nichols, Loxley F. "Flannery O'Connor's 'Intellectual Vaudeville': Masks of Mother and Daughter." Studies in the Literary Imagination 20.2 (1987): 15-29.
- O'Connor, Flannery. The Complete Stories. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- . The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys. Ed. C. Ralph Stephens. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.
- . The Habit of Being. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- . Mystery and Manners. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.
- . The Violent Bear it Away. 1960. Rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
- . Wise Blood. London: Spearman, 1955.
- Olney, James. "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction." Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 3-27.
- Park, Clara Claiborne. "Crippled Laughter: Toward Understanding Flannery O'Connor." American Scholar 51.2 (1983): 249-57.
- Reynolds, Mary T. "Joyce as a Letter Writer." A Companion to Joyce Studies. Ed. Zack Bowen and James F. Carens. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 1984. 39-70.
- Rubin, Louis D. Jr., "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners: Or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology." A Gallery of Southerners. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.

- Rushdie, Salman. "Is Nothing Sacred?" Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991. Salmon Rushdie. London: Granta Books, 1991.
- Russello, Gerald J. Rev. of Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist, by Kieran Quinlan. Christianity and Literature 45 (1996): 444-446.
- Ryckmans, Pierre. The View from the Bridge: Aspects of Culture. The 1996 Boyer Lectures. Tape-recording. Prod. Janne Ryan. ABC Audio, 1996.
- Schloss, Carol. Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference. 1980. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Sewell, Elizabeth. "Is Flannery O'Connor a Nonsense Writer?" Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 73 (1990): 273-302.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. On the Margins of Discourse. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Smith, Sidonie. A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representations. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Female Rhetorics." The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 177-91.
- . "Selves in Hiding." Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism. Ed. Estelle Jelinek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. 112-132.
- Stanton, Domna C. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century. Ed. Domna C. Stanton. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987. 3-10.

- Stimpson, Catharine R. "The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's Letters." The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century. Ed. Domna C. Stanton. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987. 168-79.
- Strickland, Edward. "The Artificial Nigger." Studies in Short Fiction 25.4 (1988): 453-459.
- Sturma, Lee. "Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, and the Virtue of Necessity." Studies in the Literary Imagination 20.2 (1987): 109-121.
- Tate, Mary Barbara. "Flannery O'Connor at Home in Milledgeville." Studies in the Literary Imagination 20.2 (1987): 31-6.
- Tinder, Glenn. "Exercising a Christian Intellect." Rev. of The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, by George M. Marsden. The Christian Century 2-9 Jul. 1997: 626-629.
- . The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- Walker, Nancy. "Ironic Autobiography: from *The Waterfall* to *The Handmaid's Tale*." Last Laughs. Ed. Regina Barreca. New York and London: Gordon and Breach, 1988. 203-220.
- Walker, Nancy. A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Walters, Mark. "Violence and Comedy in the Works of Flannery O'Connor." New Perspectives on Women and Comedy. Ed. Regina Barreca. Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992. 185-192.

- Weil, Simone. Seventy Letters. Ed. and Trans. Richard Rees. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965,
- Weintraub, Karl J. "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness." Critical Inquiry 1 (1975): 821-48.
- . The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Weldon, Fay. "Towards a Humorous View of the Universe." Last Laughs. Ed. Regina Barreca. New York and London: Gordon and Breach, 1988. 309-311.
- Westling, Louise. "Flannery O'Connor's Revelations to 'A'." Southern Humanities Review 20 (1986): 15-22.
- Wilson, Lawrence. "Leftover Letters." Sewanee Review 96.2 (1988): 283-286.
- Wilt, Judith. "The Laughter of Maidens, The Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision Between Comedy and Feminism." Gender and the Literary Voice. Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980. 173-196.
- Wyatt, Bryan N. "The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O'Connor: Everything That Rises Must Converge" Twentieth Century Literature 38.1 (1992): 66-88.

