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Flannery O'Connor's Art And The French Renouveau Catholique: A Comparative Exploration Of Contextual Resources For The Author's Theological Aesthetics Of Sin and Grace

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S ART AND THE FRENCH *RENOUVEAU CATHOLIQUE*:
A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF CONTEXTUAL RESOURCES FOR THE
AUTHOR'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF SIN AND GRACE

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DEDICATION

To Sara, my best friend and helpmeet

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the ten years it has taken to complete this dissertation, I have been keenly aware that no dissertation writer is an island, especially when that writer is attached to the mainland called a *family*. I would like to thank my wife Sara and our children Abigail, Jacob, David, and Esther, who celebrated with me on the days I wrote a thousand words and exhorted me not to lose heart when the well ran dry. At times they must have felt, as I did, that we were engaged in what Tolkien pictured as the noble but doomed struggle of “fighting the long defeat.” On many occasions I have been sorely tempted to cut losses and quit. My family has been my troop of thanes, the Master Samwise to the bearer of this heavy burden. Sara in particular has been my faithful refuge and support through the long slog. She and the children will be happy to find me around the house again on Saturdays, the oppressive constraint lifted. It seems like a dream now, but I look forward to returning to the simple pleasures of the Shire.

I thank my mother and father, Elsbeth and Richard, for how they have supported me along this path for close to half a century. Mom has shown selfless loyalty in caring for her husband of fifty-two years, who for some time has been engaged in his own struggle with the gathering storm of dementia. In his prime, Dad was a leader of men in a foreign land. He is guileless, in the best sense of that word, with an unassuming radiance and a large vision of life. He has set before his children and grandchildren a compelling example of a purposeful and integrated life. As Augustine would say, his loves have been rightly ordered. His life has shown me better than any syllogism that Nietzsche was

tragically mistaken to hold humility and mercy in contempt as weak. Dad's meekness carries not a hint of the *ressentiment* Nietzsche so despised; it is his glory. In his confusion of mind he will not be able to read what I have written in these pages, but I could not have written any of them without the impact he made on my life from my earliest years. He has shown me, above any man I have known, what a man should be. I am honored to be his son, and I hope this work reflects something of the legacy his good fatherhood has left me.

I am grateful for my brother Philip and my sister Christine Beasley and her family, as well as Sara's parents Malcolm and Monica and her sister Alex. They have provided the family backing that has refreshed my spirits for years.

I am indebted to the many friends who have encouraged me to press on along the way: for Martin Donougho who lent his generous support in the early years, and Meili Steele whose steady good cheer saw me through to completion. I am thankful for Ralph Wood's encouragement to study Flannery O'Connor and to attend the Rome conference in 2009, the push of old brothers-in-arms Dan Cole, Andrew Dionne, and David Myers; the support of my faculty colleagues, especially John Crutchfield, Trevor Castor, and Mark Wenger; and the joy this past year of a growing friendship with Bill Tate in Chattanooga. I am grateful for another new friend, John Dunaway, professor emeritus of French and interdisciplinary studies at Mercer University, who knows O'Connor and the French subjects of this dissertation so well, and who so generously applied his keen editorial eye and the wisdom of his years to the chapters I sent him over the summer.

I am thankful, too, for the many undergraduate students who have enriched my life since I began teaching English and humanities at Columbia International University

in 2001. Their refreshing contributions in and out of class can be felt in these pages. I have found writing to be like breathing: you have to give out as you take in. Classroom teaching has been my daily oxygen supply, a welcome reprieve from the enclosure of the office. Provost Jim Lanpher, Dean Bryan Beyer, and my supervisor and English colleague, Sandra Young, have assured me of their ongoing support over the course of this prolonged campaign. I am grateful for the reserves of their patience.

Two years ago I tried to complete, but my committee sent me back to the drawing board. It was difficult at the time to accept the verdict, but now I know this dissertation is better for it. I am grateful for their honesty and exhortation to give it another try.

This past week I taught Milton's crisis sonnet "How Soon Hath Time."¹ The sonnet expresses the poet's anguish at having passed the age of 23 without accomplishing the task for which he feels he has been prepared. I remember being moved by that sonnet when I read it at 23, during my early years as a graduate student at Indiana University. Mercifully, I could not know then that 26 years later I would still be a student. The consolation of the sestet has become more poignant to me now:

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time, leads me, and the will of Heav'n;
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great task-Master's eye.

¹ The sonnet begins: "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth, / Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year! / My hasting days fly on with full career, / But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th."

ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor described herself as "a Catholic peculiarly possessed of a modern consciousness" (*HB* 90). What makes her such a fascinating author is that she was almost uncannily sensitive to what Charles Taylor has analyzed in his large study *A Secular Age* as the fraught spiritual cross-currents of late modernity. Decades before Taylor described the modern secular social imaginary as a haunted space, O'Connor wrote in an essay that "if the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (*MM* 44). She interpreted the freak "as a figure of our essential displacement" (45). What Taylor works out about the late modern *Zeitgeist* in close to a thousand pages of dense analysis, O'Connor memorably puts before her reader in a few vivid strokes.

She was a modern who, as a Christian believer, opposed the self-sufficient spirit of modernity. She held to original sin as fact, not mere symbol; and she believed that its only answer was redemption by a costly grace. Her fiction is her prophetic critique of the project of Enlightenment modernity. It is much more than that too, but it is that.

This is a comparative study of some of the contexts that informed the author's approach to her art. My argument is two-fold: first, O'Connor's fictional poetics cannot be separated, as some critics seem intent on doing, from its theological rootedness in the Christian dramatics of sin and grace; second, O'Connor was profoundly nourished in working out her theology of art by the resources available to her in the twentieth century writers and artists of the French Catholic Revival. Her personal library testifies to her long and deep interaction with these contexts. I have singled out Jacques Maritain,

Georges Rouault, François Mauriac, and Blaise Pascal, who enjoyed a revival in the context of existentialism. What unites these figures is that, like O'Connor, they are moderns who critique modernity from common Christian commitments. This results in interesting formal affinities of thought and aesthetics.

O'Connor wrote her stories on a semi-secluded farm in Middle Georgia, but her bookcases and friendships opened her to contexts far afield. In the decades after World War II, the French exercised a special prominence in the thought of American Catholics. As O'Connor's late friend William Sessions and Sarah Gordon have pointed out, these contexts which fed her thought and art deserve more attention than they have received.

O'Connor was a literary *bricoleur*. She had the creative knack for using the material at hand to craft her stories. Her habit of reading, painting, and conversation provided the grist for her writing. She joked that she had a "food-chopper brain." She borrowed from many; what came out of the process remains wonderfully unique.

Chapter three is not specifically French in focus, though I consider it to be a necessary prelude to the comparative discussion of Rouault's visual aesthetics in chapter four. It is an exploration of the author's lifelong symbiotic engagement with visual art.

My primary concern in this dissertation is to think about some of the ways in which O'Connor interacted creatively with these resources. Broader comparative considerations are necessary prolegomena to more detailed readings of her fictional works. I will touch on her fiction here, but what I have in mind is an invitation to readings. A more detailed application lies beyond the scope of the present project.

PREFACE

In a 2013 piece for the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, veteran O'Connor scholar-teacher Ralph Wood reflects on 42 years of teaching her fiction in the college classroom. Though he has taught many other authors, "she is the only one of whom I have never grown weary" (139). He adds, "unlike others who complain about the endless outpouring of O'Connor studies . . . I welcome them" (139). It has now been 65 years since Flannery O'Connor launched her debut novel *Wise Blood* in 1952. Nearly seven decades of articles, books, monographs, and dissertations have yielded an ever-expanding body of critical reflection on her work. Appropriately, the most recent of these books, Daniel Moran's *Creating Flannery O'Connor* (2016), is the first work to organize and narrate the sometimes confusing story of O'Connor's reception over the past half-century. In 2010 Avis Hewitt noted that the MLA bibliography for that year "cites 1,329 entries on her. Books and articles on her work rank her twentieth among the entire array of U.S. authors of the last four centuries" (Hewitt xii). Seven years later, the "endless outpouring of studies" shows no signs of slowing down.

To the casual observer the volume of available O'Connor criticism may seem like much ado about a disproportionately small literary oeuvre. She only published her fiction for twelve years between the appearance of *Wise Blood* in 1952 and her succumbing at age 39 to a long and quietly heroic battle with incurable lupus erythematosus in the summer of 1964. Her friend Sally Fitzgerald writes that at O'Connor's death, her literary remains appeared to amount to just "two novels, two volumes of short stories, and a

handful of deceptively simple essays which were then gathered and prepared for publication by friends five years after her death” (11). More has come to light over the years, but her canon is still by no means large. The essays appeared under the title *Mystery and Manners* (1969). Her Iowa MFA thesis of six stories and a smattering of other unpublished stories were gathered in her *Complete Stories* (1971), raising her total story count by a dozen, from 19 to 31. In 1979, fifteen years after her death, many of her letters were edited (and somewhat sanitized) under the title *The Habit of Being*. Four years later, Carter Martin brought out Leo Zuber’s compilation of the book reviews O’Connor wrote for her diocesan paper *The Bulletin* from 1956 to just a month prior to her death. In 1985, Arthur Kinney helpfully published an annotated list of books and some marginalia contained in the private library her relations turned over to the Ina Dillard Russell Library in Milledgeville after her death. That appeared to be all of it, until her high school and college linoleum-block cartoons (2012) and slim Iowa prayer journal (2013) appeared in print nearly three decades later. Even so, the O’Connor canon as it now stands takes up little more than six inches of shelf space. Except for the letters and the complete stories none of the published volumes approaches three hundred pages, and “of her fiction there are hardly more than a thousand pages in all” (Fitzgerald 11).²

By her own admission O’Connor’s range was not wide, but even those who read her work from radically divergent critical camps agree that the river runs deep. Even though she jokingly referred to her “one-cylinder syntax” and called her work a “mule and wagon” compared to Faulkner’s “Dixie Limited” roaring down the tracks (*MM* 45),

² More heretofore unpublished items (journals, letters, visual art, juvenilia) may appear over the next decade, especially after the thinning of the ranks of the last of O’Connor’s family members to have had personal contact with the author. Robert Donahoo in 2010 entered his call for more items to be released (Donahoo 253).

her readers have not been fooled by such talk. Her syntax may appear simple, but the engine under the hood hums along on four cylinders at least. Perhaps we should expect no less from an author who subscribed to a four-tiered medieval exegesis³ and who maintained that “the longer you look at something, the more of the universe you see in it” (*MM* 77). Her stories epitomize the rich text. They are also tough and alive with that forcibleness Sir Philip Sidney called *energia*, Hazlitt and Keats called *gusto*, and Bergson theorized as the *élan vital*. Like Jane Austen, with whom O’Connor shared a comic vision and genius for carefully-crafted wit, and whose oeuvre was similarly limited in scope, O’Connor worked at polishing her “two inches of ivory” at her manual typewriter in the Andalusia farmhouse.⁴ By now four generations of readers have gazed with wonder not unmixed with perplexity at the curious wordsmithy of her miniature masterpieces. Shock, anger, bemusement, delight, hilarity, and a surprising *gravitas* are among the responses a reader might experience—in the course of reading the same story. Her fiction is bracing, demanding stuff. Readers tend to relish the experience or recoil from it; rarely do they respond with indifference.

* * *

It leaves the mind reeling to consider the sum total of what O’Connor absorbed during her three brief years of intellectual formation when her rigorous coursework at Iowa, her own first fiction efforts, and her voracious reading all tumbled together.

³ “The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate” (*MM* 72-73).

⁴ In a letter to her nephew James Edward Austen dated December 17, 1816, Austen refers to her work as “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush” (Austen 280).

Ashamed of the desultory, provincial nature of her reading as a college student in Milledgeville, she compensated by ravenously digesting a smorgasbord of modern masters.⁵ Though she paid careful attention to the reading recommendations of her respected writing teachers, she was also throughout her life something of a quirky autodidact with fiercely independent tastes. When she found an author she liked, she could pursue the strain like a bloodhound. This was certainly the case during these early graduate years with mentor-authors like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, whose work she more or less devoured whole (*HB* 99).

But it was here too that she discovered what would develop into a lifelong passion for the European thinkers of her day, and particularly the authors of the French Catholic Renaissance. She began to read Léon Bloy, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, and François Mauriac in her Iowa apartment. She would later say that “they all seemed to be French for a while.” These were the sources that fed O’Connor’s theology and her art; they were her contexts. They have not always been carefully attended to in the scholarly literature on her work. To invoke Chesterton’s aphorism, it is not that these contexts have been tried and found wanting; more likely, they have been found difficult, and left untried.

* * *

An unexpected virtue of completing this project at a more advanced stage of life is that I can now see how the strands of my life have converged on this project. Growing up in Vienna, Austria in the decades after the end of World War II, I well remember the

⁵ Her words again: “I went to a progressive high school where one did not read if one did not wish to; I did not wish to . . . In college I read works of social-science, so-called. The only thing that kept me from being a social-scientist was the grace of God and the fact that I couldn’t remember the stuff but a few days after reading it. I didn’t really start to read until I went to Graduate School and then I began to read and write at the same time. When I went to Iowa I had never heard of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, much less read them. Then I began to read everything at once . . .” (*HB* 98).

hulking flak towers that stood as grim reminders of Austria's part in the conflict that would so impact the generations in this dissertation. The seeds of my future interest in comparative literature were sown, no doubt, during my early years of study at the British-accredited international school which primarily served the United Nations community in Vienna. At times I was the only American in my class. I learned German and French from a young age; in time I would minor in French in college and work for five memorable summers in the early 1990s in French-speaking Belgium, near Waterloo.

In college I majored in English and art, which in graduate school at Indiana University blossomed naturally into master degrees in comparative literature and art history with emphases in interarts studies and modern European painting. As a graduate assistant at the tender age of 21, I was asked to design and teach an undergraduate course dauntingly titled *Modern Literature and the Other Arts*. The course compared Western literature, music, and painting from the French Revolution to the early twentieth century. And since IU had a renowned vocal program, we also were encouraged to teach an opera! It was a trial by fire—my students were no younger than I—but through it I discovered a love for teaching and saw the pedagogical value of comparative thinking.

A few years into teaching in South Carolina, I developed an undergraduate seminar in Flannery O'Connor's fiction and poetics, and since Columbia is only a three-hour drive from Milledgeville, the course came to include a field trip to Andalusia and Georgia College and State University. There I met professors Bruce Gentry and Hank Edmondson, who held forth on O'Connor in the Blackbird coffee shop, as well as librarian Nancy Bray, who introduced us to the O'Connor rooms at the Ina Dillard Russell Library. A colleague acquainted me with veteran O'Connor scholar Ralph

Wood, who visited our little seminar group in April 2008, just as I was beginning to research the dissertation. His gravelly advice has rung in my ears for ten years now: “don’t get it right; get it *written*.”

Wood’s encouragement led me in to present a paper on O’Connor and Pascal at the 2009 O’Connor conference in Rome. I remember sitting with him over steaming pasta plates in the *Campo de’ Fiori*, beneath the statue of Giordano Bruno, debating the relevance of Pascal to her aesthetics. Three years later I presented on O’Connor and Mauriac at the O’Connor conference at Loyola. These experiences helped to clarify my focus on O’Connor’s contexts and her reception of the French thinkers of the *renouveau*. O’Connor’s cartoons were published in 2012, which led me to think about the visual emphasis of her work in connection with Rouault’s art.

I taught a modern art seminar in 2005. While leading students on a spring break tour to New York museums and galleries, I chanced upon an exhibition of Rouault’s *Miserere* prints at the Museum for Biblical Art. Eventually I met the Tribeca-based Japanese-American painter Makoto Fujimura, who in the fall of 2009 staged a one-man show of his work, “Rouault-Fujimura: Soliloquies,” alongside a selection of Rouault paintings at the Dillon Gallery in Chelsea. My interview with Fujimura about his long fascination with Rouault was published in the fall 2010 issue of the art journal *Image*.⁶

A pattern emerges: nothing has been wasted, not even the ten long years of writing and waiting. I can only give thanks for what I have not deserved and join with Rouault to echo the psalmist’s cry: “*Non nobis, Domine, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.*”

⁶ I think, too, of the stimulating conversation I had by phone in 2007 with O’Connor’s old friend and longtime University of South Carolina English professor Ashley Brown, who died the following year in a nursing home in Columbia. Another memorable conversation around that time was with Buford Norman, distinguished professor of French at USC and author of a fascinating book on Pascal, *Portraits of Thought*.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used to refer to Flannery O'Connor's works:

BC *The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*

CS *The Complete Stories*

HB *The Habit of Being*

MM *Mystery and Manners*

PG *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews*

PJ *A Prayer Journal*

VB *The Violent Bear It Away*

WB *Wise Blood*

CHAPTER 1

O'CONNOR'S READING AND LIBRARY:

"THEY ALL SEEMED TO BE FRENCH FOR A WHILE"

Précis

In this chapter I propose that studies of O'Connor's literary achievement have not dealt sufficiently with the broader contexts that nourished her work—contexts which a comparative approach helps to elucidate. Beginning in graduate school at Iowa in the late 1940s, and continuing until her death in 1964, O'Connor quietly adopted a "habit of reading" that was remarkably engaged with trans-Atlantic currents of thought, particularly those of the French *renouveau catholique*. Her friend William Sessions, who died last year, lamented in 2006 that these contexts have not been sufficiently explored, and suggests that they hold the potential for illuminating her work in fresh ways. O'Connor's engagement with these contexts is an important part of a fully-orbed biographical study of the author that, as Robert Donahoo has pointed out in his 2010 "state of O'Connor studies" report, invites further investigation. In this chapter I note the pronounced European bent (indeed, Gallic bent) that can be discerned in her personal library and book reviews, and briefly survey the work that has been done to explore these trans-Atlantic and trans-disciplinary contextual spaces that so decisively shaped her theological approach to the craft of fiction.

The growing scholarly reflection on Flannery O'Connor's essays, letters, personal library, and book reviews over the past three decades has led to a greater understanding of how her literary imagination and technique were fed by an astonishingly rich diet of reading. Her "habit of reading," which she commenced in earnest in her first year of graduate studies in Iowa, and never stopped, answered Milton's call for an "exercised virtue" in *Areopagitica*:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race . . . Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. . . And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. (Milton 728-729)

O'Connor read, to use Milton's salutary sense of the term, *promiscuously*. In addition to keeping up with current events in the local newspaper, she "tucked into" a remarkable spread of books and articles in literature, philosophy, theology, aesthetics, psychology, and history. She read broadly, but also strategically, and she mulled over what she read. She discussed her reading with the many friends who stopped by for an afternoon visit on her screened porch (Sessions 57), and as *The Habit of Being* so richly testifies, she went on discussing books and ideas with her friends in numerous thoughtful letters. She operated a minor book-shipping operation from her remote farmhouse, wrapping up and sending books to her friends and requesting books from them in return. She quipped to her friend Betty Hester, one of her chief purveyors in Atlanta, that book reviewing was an excellent way to get one's hands on free books.

In an often-quoted letter of personal introduction she wrote to Hester, dated 28 August 1955, O'Connor looks back on her reading during her graduate years at Iowa in the 1940s:

I didn't really start to read until I went to Graduate School and then I began to read and write at the same time. When I went to Iowa I had never heard of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, much less read them. Then I began to read everything at once, so much so that I didn't have time I suppose to be influenced by any one writer. I read all the Catholic novelists, Mauriac, Bernanos, Bloy, Greene, Waugh; I read all the nuts like Djuna Barnes and Dorothy Richardson and Va. Woolf . . . I read the best Southern writers like Faulkner and the Tates, K. A. Porter, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor; read the Russians, not Tolstoy so much but Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov and Gogol. I became a great admirer of Conrad and have read almost all of his fiction. . . . I have learned something from Hawthorne, Flaubert, Balzac and something from Kafka, though I have never been able to finish one of his novels. I've read almost all of Henry James—from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nevertheless. . . . But always the largest thing that looms up is *The Humerous* [sic] *Tales of Edgar Allen Poe*. (HB 98-99)

By any measure, this must have been a remarkable three years of reading.⁷ Her diet would alter in the 1950s and into the 1960s, as such things do. She would add to her

⁷ O'Connor looked back on her reading regimen at Iowa as her awakening to fiction. She had studied social sciences in college, and she went to Iowa thinking that she would become a journalistic writer or

plate more theology and biblical studies, as well as works of aesthetics and literary and cultural criticism. Some of the fiction on the list represents required reading for her MFA coursework. Some of the books, to evoke Francis Bacon's taxonomy, were tasted rather than swallowed or digested (Bacon 150). She read authors at Iowa she would not return to; others, like Mauriac, would develop over the years into a passion. During her remarkable eight-year stint as a book reviewer for the *Bulletin* between 1956 and her death in 1964, she would write 120 reviews of 143 book titles.

O'Connor would not have considered herself a public intellectual, like her hero Jacques Maritain. She had a great hunger to engage with ideas, but "intellectual" carried a hieratic air that made her cringe. Indeed, her fiction is relentless in its caution about intellectual pride as one of the sins that mark a character's need for redemption.⁸ But those who spend time in her world soon find themselves beholding the understated splendor of that rare thing: a beautiful mind. Once she struck out in earnest on her vocation as an author of fiction, she pursued her "habit of art." But she saw this habit as much broader than writing. She would define it as "anything that helps you see," or, "a way of looking at the created world and of . . . [finding] as much meaning as possible in things" (*MM* 101). In her Georgia farmhouse she was also busy as a lay theologian,

cartoonist. In "The Teaching of Literature," she writes: "I don't recall that when I was in high school or college, any novel was ever presented to me to study as a novel. In fact, I was well on the way to getting a Master's degree in English before I really knew what fiction was, and I doubt if I would ever have learned then, had I not been trying to write it. I believe it's perfectly possible to run a course of academic degrees in English and to emerge a seemingly respectable Ph.D. and still not know how to read fiction" (*MM* 123).

⁸ The first evidences of her satire of the proud intellectual can be seen in her college linoleum-block cartoons. The self-described intellectuals in her stories make a kind of gallery of maimed souls blinded to reality: Joy/Hulga is the first and most autobiographical, followed by Wesley, Asbury, Thomas, Julian, and Sheppard. Perhaps her most sustained negative portrayal of the modern (post-Cartesian) intellectual is that of Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away*, whose mind-body dualism is concretized in a head that is wired like a fuse box.

amateur philosopher, painter, culture critic, and expert on peafowl husbandry—all activities she considered part of the *habitus* of artistic creation. She was, in short, interested in so much more than “just” writing her stories. She wrote, in her modified cenobitic regimen, for three or at most four hours every morning, between trips into town for morning mass and lunch with society at the Sanford house tea room. That still left plenty of time to pursue other hobbies which seeded her writing. She said that she had a “food-chopper brain.” Perhaps she knew instinctively that to create the fiction she desired to write, she had to have plenty of grist in the mill. Her two walnut bookcases, “piled high with charactry,” attest that she kept her food-chopper well stocked.⁹

Thus a rich contextual world not only surrounds the imaginative world of her fiction, but also intersects with it on many levels and helps to fashion it, as it does for all who are involved in the creative process. It is worth remembering that no human artist creates in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*. O’Connor’s contexts serve to expand her work in many directions, which is why contextual considerations cannot be set aside even with New Critical and more recent poststructuralist calls to drill down exclusively on the text. Her *context* is, as the etymology implies, always *with the text*. The view of O’Connor as a country bumpkin of the culturally-degenerate South, what H. L. Mencken deprecated as “The Sahara of the Bozart,” is a popular myth which may have gained some traction among readers during her lifetime, but has long been discredited by scholarship. Her case is far more complicated. Even as she professed gratitude for the material of Southern manners, she knew that the “Southern school” had writers crawling out from

⁹ “Before high piled books, in charactry, / Hold like rich garners the full ripen’d grain” (Keats, “When I have fears that I may cease to be”).

under every rock, and she had a horror of becoming another Margaret Mitchell. The truth is that few authors of her time seem more complicated to write about. The complication appears in that memorable self-description, “I am a Catholic writer possessed of a modern consciousness” (*HB* 90). This accounts for the number and diversity of critical approaches to her work: there are so many dots to connect. But it also means, more encouragingly, that even with all the scholarship that has been done, more work remains. Some avenues have been insufficiently explored; others still await discovery.

This is particularly true, as her late friend William Sessions suggests in his 2006 piece on the thought of one of O’Connor’s favorite European Catholics, the German existentialist priest Romano Guardini, in the area of intertextuality. The examination of the contexts within which O’Connor worked holds the promise of illuminating and invigorating her oeuvre by flinging open a fresh set of windows on debates that may have grown stale. Sessions admits the potential pitfalls of the “biographical fallacy” in source or influence studies. But even so, he argues that “contextual readings do bring surprises and reversals that take us back into the texts” (59). He proposes that this area of intertextuality deserves more attention than it has received: “with the exception of a few studies and books, O’Connor criticism is not noted for examining intellectual contexts for her work” (58). Sessions’ recommendation bears scrutiny because up until his death last year, he was perhaps the last living major O’Connor scholar who knew the author personally. His essay on Guardini was motivated in part because he recalled long conversations on O’Connor’s front porch where they discussed “thinkers from France, Germany, and Italy” (57).

The essay which follows Sessions' piece on Guardini in *Flannery O'Connor's Radical Reality* is Sarah Gordon's "Seeking Beauty in Darkness: Flannery O'Connor and the French Catholic Renaissance." Gordon presents a brief overview of the *renouveau* before bearing down on Bergson and Bloy. Gordon's privileged status as "the keeper of the flame" in the world of O'Connor studies is well known (Gordon "Introduction" xvii). Thus it is noteworthy that Gordon echoes Sessions' call for more critical investigation of these contexts. She writes:

Today's Christian readers should recognize that O'Connor's work has spiritual precedent and an aesthetic base in Catholic modernism.

Although we surely would never dismiss the strong influence upon her of the medieval church and the tradition of the medieval grotesque . . . I believe that scholars have paid little attention to the early twentieth-century philosophy and aesthetic initially presented by Henri Bergson and taken up by Jacques Maritain and his wife Raïssa, both converts to Catholicism, and the circle of writers surrounding the Maritains that included poet and polemicist Charles Péguy, Ernest Psichari, . . . the poet Paul Claudel, and the painter Georges Rouault. (Gordon "Seeking" 70)

Gordon's piece, together with Sessions' essay which precedes it, issues a clear call for scholars to do more work on the contextual matter of viewing O'Connor's peculiar achievement in its *Sitz im Leben*. This dissertation is my response to their invitation.

I

The mention of contexts and biographical criticism draws attention to the gap of research in this area. In his 2010 “state of the O’Connor studies” essay, titled with appropriate irony “Everything That Rises Does Not Converge,” Robert Donahoo points out that biography remains one of the areas of O’Connor scholarship still requiring significant work. This judgment may seem surprising, since it comes only a year after Brad Gooch published his labor of many years, *Flannery: A Life* (2009). But Ralph Wood voices a widespread disappointment with Gooch’s work when he points out its “publindness to her Catholicism,” especially mystifying “since her Christianity lay at the core of her identity” (Wood 143). Thus, Wood laments that “almost half a century has lapsed since her death, and yet no satisfactory biography has emerged” (143).

The fact is that a biography of the author that can be called in some measure definitive has not yet appeared, and especially after William Sessions’ death in 2016, the prospects do not look encouraging. For a long time, at least since 1980 when she tried to discourage Brad Gooch from making an attempt to fill that void, O’Connor’s close friend Sally Fitzgerald promised an authorized biography for close to four decades, but she died in 2000 leaving the promise unfulfilled (Gooch 376). Sessions took up the mantle of the promised tome. As I experienced on two occasions at major O’Connor conferences at the Pontifical Institute in Rome in 2009 and Loyola University in 2012, Sessions kept his entourage hopeful with repeated genial assurances that his *magnum opus* would shortly arrive.¹⁰ Even Wood, writing in 2013, hopefully awaits the promised event: “not until

¹⁰ I recall that at the Chicago conference in 2012, when Sessions read from his then-unpublished manuscript of O’Connor’s Iowa prayer journal, which he discovered as part of his biographical foraging, he suggested that parts of his forthcoming biography might even make use of electronic media to be digitally interactive.

W. A. Sessions' official biography is published can we hope for a full account of the relation between O'Connor's faith and fiction" (143). That "full account" never came. Sessions died in the summer of 2016, leaving his prolix manuscript unpublished. Regrettably, all that may survive of Sessions' decades of labor in helping to craft O'Connor's legacy is a handful of essays and the short introduction he penned to O'Connor's Iowa prayer journal, published in 2013. Sessions will be remembered by literary historians as O'Connor's friend (often playfully lampooned in her letters as "breathless Billy"), the literary executor of O'Connor's correspondent "A," or Elizabeth Hester, and a biographer of the Earl of Surrey and Francis Bacon, the two books upon which he built his long teaching career at Georgia State. He will likely not be remembered as the author of the definitive biography of his more famous friend.

It now seems apparent that no one with a direct personal connection to the author will produce a large-scale critical biography. Those who knew O'Connor are all by now in their late eighties and early nineties and are rapidly passing from the scene.¹¹ What we have, then, is Jean Cash's 2002 life, a serviceable "dates-and-facts biography that fails to probe O'Connor's depths" (Wood 143), and Paul Elie's creative interweaving of the lives of O'Connor, Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day in *The Life You Save*

¹¹ In 2007, when I began work on this project, I had the chance to speak with O'Connor's friend Samuel "Ashley" Brown over the phone. Brown, who is frequently mentioned as part of O'Connor's closest circle in her letters, has on several occasions contributed helpful reminiscences to essay collections and the O'Connor *Review* and *Bulletin*. A longtime faculty member in English and Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina, Brown was at the time in a nursing home in Columbia. He died in 2011. Ralph Wood, often considered the dean of O'Connor's theological readers, was an undergraduate at East Texas State when he attended O'Connor's November 1962 lecture there on "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature" (Wood viii). Sarah Gordon, for decades the "keeper of the flame" of O'Connor's legacy at GC&SU, narrowly missed meeting the author in Milledgeville. She began reading O'Connor in 1966, two years after the author's death (Gordon xvi). The ranks of these O'Connor "veterans" who share a generational hermeneutic horizon with the author are rapidly thinning.

May Be Your Own (2003). Elie never meant his book to be read as a major biography of any one of the authors.¹² Gooch's *Flannery: A Life*, the most ambitious such study to date, cannot be called definitive because of its strange silence on the theological dimension of O'Connor's life and aesthetics. Perhaps, to evoke Wittgenstein's aphorism, he passes over in silence that of which he cannot speak. Gooch gives his readers a "quirky O'Connor,"¹³ but he unaccountably ignores the "lay-theologian O'Connor" so crucial to the theological aesthetics she articulates in the letters and essays. Gooch's omission makes Jonathan Rogers' undergraduate-level introduction, *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*, with its subtitle, *A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor*, a welcome stop-gap on that front, even if Rogers' book is best read as a popular synthesis of other studies.

I mention Donahoo's call for more work in biographical criticism partly because it agrees with what Sessions and Gordon have identified as a dearth of research efforts to explore O'Connor's intellectual contexts. I intend this dissertation to make a contribution in this area of O'Connor studies. It might be argued that all criticism is, in some measure, and more or less overtly, biographical in nature. Critics who swear off any interest in reading a text with reference to an author's life are often quite interested in promoting their own biographically-motivated agenda. Writing always issues from, and leads back to, *persons*. We read and write because we desire to communicate with people and because we find people fascinating. And O'Connor's work is no exception to

¹² Wood writes, "Elie does well with the three converts [Percy, Merton, and Day] but he does not know quite what to make of the native Catholic [O'Connor] whose convictions were even more radical than theirs" (143).

¹³ Like Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People" who is fascinated by "the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children" (CS 275), Gooch takes evident delight in O'Connor's quirks and foibles, presenting her as almost debilitatingly awkward. For example, he narrates with questionable discretion the Danish book salesman Erik Langkjaer's description of O'Connor's kiss as "a sort of *memento mori*" (Gooch 251).

this. Though at times she tried to detach herself from her stories (she was reared on the New Critical “Intentional Fallacy” and distrusted Romantic expressivist tendencies), at other times she no less vigorously insisted on her personal attachment to them.¹⁴ This dissertation will proceed on the assumption that the activities of reading and writing are not, as Barthes and Foucault claimed when they heralded the “deaths” of authors (with strong biographical motivations of their own), merely the dehumanized inscription of an impersonal language system. Reading and writing are profoundly human activities.

Thus the investigation of contexts may present a fresh angle when it seems that an author’s texts have been parsed to bits. Wordsworth’s “we murder to dissect” is what one might feel about the fate of O’Connor’s “mystery” after reading some studies that seem to analyze tree-bark through a microscope and miss the sweeping design of the forest.¹⁵ O’Connor cut her teeth at Iowa on the New Critical attention to text; she was grateful for that attention and worked to promote it. But even when she uses patterns and other internal lexical markers, like the proud female landowner or the big black valise, her stories are not a hall of mirrors gazing inward, a self-referential play of linguistic signifiers. Rather, they lead outward to the broader intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, and theological contexts in which they are situated. She said that “the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima affects life on the Oconee River” (*MM* 77). We have only to think of her galvanizing use of a Heidegger quotation from his essay “What is Metaphysics?” in

¹⁴ On the one hand, she would write that “a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper, and the more complete the work, the less important it is who wrote it or why. If you’re studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life” (*MM* 126). But she also wrote: “My background and inclinations are both Catholic and I think this is very apparent in the book [*Wise Blood*]” (*HB* 68), and “Hulga in this case would be a projection of myself” (*HB* 106).

¹⁵ “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: — / We murder to dissect” (Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned”).

“Good Country People,” repeated references to Holocaust newsreels in “The Displaced Person,” the overlay of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in “The Artificial Nigger,” or the wonderfully apt allusion to Kafka’s letter to his father in “The Enduring Chill,” to notice how she drew on contexts far afield from Middle Georgia to enrich the symbolic texture of her work. But she did this in less obvious ways as well. And it is in the exploration of these contextual spaces that there seems to be more room for exploration.

This is where a comparative approach, such as the one I offer here, can help fill the gap in O’Connor studies that Sessions has pointed out. O’Connor’s fiction has generally been discussed within the disciplinary walls of Southern Studies or American Literature programs. Understandably so, these interpretive communities have been keen to discuss the meaning of her work within their respective “horizons of expectation.” Thus she has been read in relation to an array of Southern and, more broadly, American authors. The usual suspects are Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, Nathanael West, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Walker Percy, and more recently, Cormac McCarthy. These studies have yielded fruitful insights. But tangentially, they sometimes have worked to downplay the clear testimony of her two walnut bookcases which a comparatist may be more apt to note: namely, the collection’s strong orientation toward European thought.

In this regard, I have for some years been interested in O’Connor’s connection to some of the prominent members of the French *renouveau catholique*, the broad and rather unorganized movement that reinvigorated Catholic culture and thought in the first half of the twentieth century. This revival can be traced to the efforts of first-generation figures who emerged around the time of the Dreyfus Affair at the turn of the century, such as Ernest Psichari (the grandson, ironically, of the noted arch-skeptic Ernest Renan) and

Charles Péguy, both of whom died in battle in the first months of the Great War (1914), as well as the poet Paul Claudel. Even Joris-Karl Huysmans, the notorious creator of the occult sensualist Jean des Esseintes in *A Rebours*, became an unlikely convert and early contributor to the movement. In the next generation the movement swept up Jacques Maritain, Georges Rouault, Etienne Gilson, François Mauriac, Julien Green, Claude Tresmontant, and Gabriel Marcel, among others. The impact of these thinkers on the circle of O'Connor's closest friends from the 1920s to the 1960s, the decades in which she lived and worked, can hardly be overstated. The revival had a German component as well, and Sessions rightly identifies Romano Guardini as the presiding figure for O'Connor among the Germans. Though they followed a separate path in many ways from continental Catholics, G. K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene are notables of the concurrent British Catholic revival, which had its roots in John Henry Newman's apologetics and the efforts of the Victorian tractarians.

O'Connor called herself a "hillbilly Thomist," but the two walnut bookcases, book reviews, letters, and essays suggest that the epithet "hillbilly Europhile" would be no less appropriate. The focus of this dissertation will be on the considerable significance to her work of her French connection. Here I have in mind the public philosopher Jacques Maritain, painter Georges Rouault, novelist François Mauriac, and seventeenth-century polymath and lay theologian Blaise Pascal. Pascal's presence may seem anachronistic here, but his influence was arguably stronger among the modern existentialist thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century than it was in his own time, or indeed in any other century prior to his rediscovery in the context of the *renouveau*. In

the twentieth century, what we might call Pascal's "untimely meditations," especially his prophetic attack on a self-sufficient rationalism, suddenly seemed uncannily *au courant*.

II

What does a private book collection reveal about its owner? If the books are purchased simply for show and never read, a "Gatsby-style" meretricious display of handsome bound volumes to denote a certain culture and class, they might reveal nothing beyond priggishness. But in the case of an inveterate reader and bibliophile like O'Connor, a carefully-culled private collection can reveal a great deal.¹⁶ In discerning hands, such a library can become as exciting as an archeological dig. Margin notes and underlinings may mean nothing at all, but they can also be indexical clues that point to pathways and structures of thought. To my mind, this is what makes Arthur Kinney's annotated catalogue of O'Connor's private book collection, *Resources of Being* (1985), a still-underappreciated resource in O'Connor studies. Some scholars have followed its clues to do their own digging at the archeological site—the special collection of the Ina Dillard Russell Library in Milledgeville. Kinney's book has its quirks. It has been unattractively printed, his book entries are not organized alphabetically, some of his category judgments can be odd, and his annotations are frequently abbreviated and seem arbitrary, at times, in what they include or omit. But he has done a great service to scholars in showing, in a way that complements the essays, letters, and reviews, that

¹⁶ It is sobering to ponder that what most people living today will leave behind is not a collection of books, but what has replaced bookcases in most homes: a darkened wall-sized television screen. It is fortunate for O'Connor and her readers that she did not come into the possession of a television set until the last year of her life. Ironically, it was the gift of a group of nuns who were grateful for her contribution to the *Memoir of Mary Ann*.

O'Connor was not just an enthusiastic and discriminating reader, but a canny book collector.¹⁷

It should be noted that the majority of the books in her two large Georgia walnut bookcases are not works of fiction, but Christian theology. Of these, the majority are Biblical studies, with a special focus on studies of the Old Testament. O'Connor quipped in her letters that it was "a good Catholic collection for this Protestant town" (*HB* 527). Sister Kathleen Feeley comments that the quality of the collection testifies that O'Connor was a "keen amateur theologian . . . and owned one of the finest private theological libraries in this country" (Kinney 6). "Her concentration," Kinney notes, "was in the major French and German theologians of the Roman Church—in Maritain, Gilson, Bloy, Péguy, Marcel, and Weigel" (6). But she also read Protestant theologians. She quipped to her friend Lon Cheney about Karl Barth's evangelical dogmatics: "I like old Barth. He throws the furniture around" (*BC* 181).

Not a few of O'Connor's books made their way into her collection because of her book reviewing work over the final decade of her life for the *Bulletin*. As Ralph Wood has argued in his early study of these reviews ("The Heterodoxy of Flannery O'Connor's Book Reviews"), she did not always toe the party line within Catholicism. She took her fellow Catholics to task, for example, for the blinkered evasions of the "pious cliché," but also for not taking enough time or interest in reading the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, for themselves.¹⁸ Her "catholicity" meant that she read and appreciated

¹⁷ "Over the fleeting years of a brief life Flannery O'Connor assembled a rich and impressive collection of books on philosophy, theology, literature, and literary criticism at Andalusia" (Kinney 1).

¹⁸ She praises Romano Guardini for his "total absence of pious cliché" (*PG* 16), urges readers to read the Bible and especially the Old Testament (25, 33-34), and writes in her review of *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, "Too often books issuing from Catholic sources on the subject of Protestantism are narrow, overbearing and totally ineffective" (35-36).

Protestant theology. She thought that Catholics needed to engage with Protestants more substantively. Her fluency with contemporary Protestant thinkers shows in her 1962 *Bulletin* review for *Christian Faith and Man's Religion*, in which she manages to epitomize the thought of Barth, Fromm, Bonhoeffer, Schleiermacher, and Niebuhr in a single remarkable paragraph.¹⁹ Wood argues that her book reviews indicate that even though she thought highly of Gilson and Maritain, she was not comfortable with the “rational humanism” they advocated. Indeed, as Lorna Wiedmann has pointed out in her provocative 2014 essay “Flannery O’Connor’s Six Protestant Conversion Tales,” O’Connor’s conversion stories “have classic Protestant reversals more in line with the Augsburg Confession than the Council of Trent” (33). We will have occasion to return to this. And though she had reservations about his theology, she liked some of the poetic imagery in Teilhard de Chardin.²⁰

A glance through her collection of books in the Ina Dillard Russell Library testifies to her long and fruitful *rapprochement* with the French thinkers of the *renouveau*. It should be mentioned that though she had a basic reading knowledge of French, she read her European authors in English translations. She had no less than 16 François Mauriac novels in her possession at the time of her death. No other author of

¹⁹ “Fromm rejects Christianity entirely in favor of natural religion, Barth rejects religion entirely and sees the Christian faith as a judgment against it. Bonhoeffer rejects religion on the grounds that man has outgrown it but accepts the Christian faith. Schleiermacher sees the Christian faith as the fulfillment of religion but makes this faith dependent on feeling. Niebuhr emerges as the most balanced and most nearly orthodox of the five. He sees the Christian faith as both the judgment against and the fulfillment of religion” (PG 136).

²⁰ She knew Teilhard was a controversial figure, and she tended to adhere in her reading to the Church’s Index. She liked Teilhard’s idea of “passive diminishment,” citing it in her “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*” in connection with “the Christian’s creative action to prepare his death in Christ” (MM). But her ironically-titled story, “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” while an explicit reference to Teilhard’s “Omega Point,” makes it clear that she did not share Teilhard’s optimistic and heterodox universalism. What rises in that story is pride and sin, and the violent “convergence” at the end is anything but harmonic.

fiction alive or dead, we should note, can claim the distinction of occupying so much of her limited shelf space. She also possessed five of Mauriac's nonfiction works: *Great Men* (1949), *Words of Faith* (1955), *The Son of Man* (1960), *Memoires Intérieures* (1961), and *What I Believe* (1963). For the *Bulletin* she reviewed Mauriac's novel *Lines of Life* in October, 1957, noting Mauriac's representation in fiction of "the difficulty of the acceptance, even the recognition, of Grace by those whose lives have been deadened with the kind of morality and pious habit which has no basis in genuine charity" (PG 45). She also reviewed *The Son of Man* in September, 1960, commenting on how Mauriac impresses on the reader "the strong sense of the flesh that Christ takes on" in the Incarnation (95). Brian Kinney is right to observe that she collected "God's plenty of Mauriac" (Kinney 4).

Not surprisingly, considering the homage she pays to Jacques Maritain as her mentor in Thomistic thought and aesthetics, the author is well represented in her collection with *Art and Scholasticism* (1930), *The Range of Reason* (1952), *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), *Preface to Metaphysics* (1962), and *Sin of the Angel* (1959). She reviewed Maritain's *The Range of Reason* in November, 1961, writing that "Maritain has been one of the major voices in modern philosophy to reassert the primacy of reason. All his work springs from confidence in it. He puts it in the proper perspective, where it serves and not substitutes for revelation" (124-125).

Pascal and Rouault may not stand out in her shelves as obviously as do Maritain and Mauriac, but their presence is felt. She owned Trotter's 1941 Modern Library translation of Pascal's *Pensées* and *Provincial Letters*, the standard English text before A. J. Krailsheimer's translation two decades later. Her copy of Romano Guardini's *The*

Lord has one of Rouault's paintings of Christ emblazoned across the dust jacket. Rouault is represented in more subtle ways as well; for example, in the large contribution he made to Maritain's two major aesthetic statements, *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. His presence is also felt in his important connection to the Maritains' spiritual godfather, the mendicant-mystic Léon Bloy. O'Connor's interest in Bloy, which commenced in Iowa, is reflected in her marked copy of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain's compilation of Bloy's writings, *Pilgrim of the Absolute* (1947), as well as Béguin's critical study, *Léon Bloy: A Study of Impatience* (1947). Both are works she acquired and read soon after they were published during her graduate days at Iowa. Her Iowa prayer journal shows how large Bloy loomed on her horizon at that formative time.²¹

Other French *renouveau* thinkers and works bear mention. Though he might have bristled to be classified as a contributor to the movement, Henri Bergson in an odd way played a role in the conversion of the Maritains in the first decade of the twentieth century. Raïssa narrates in her journals that it was his galvanizing university lectures, in part, that kept them from the brink of suicidal despair. Perhaps it is because O'Connor appreciated this connection that she owned three Bergson works: *The Creative Mind* (1946), *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1954), and *World of Dreams* (1958).

She prized her copy of Gilson's *Unity of Philosophical Experience* (1952), calling it "a book indispensable to an understanding of the modern age" (PG 129). She wrote

²¹ On May 30, 1947, she wrote, "Bloy has come my way . . . He is an iceberg hurled at me to break up my Titanic and I hope my Titanic will be smashed, but I am afraid it takes more than Bloy to destroy the age in us—the age is The Fall still I suppose and certainly Original Sin in us" (PJ 33). [We may see in this statement the early seeds of her use of the "shock" aesthetics of the grotesque.] On September 22 she wrote, "Bloy again. It should be a great instigator of humility in me that I am so lukewarm as to need Bloy always to send me into serious thought" (35).

appreciative *Bulletin* reviews for two other Gilson books in her possession: *Painting and Reality* (1958) and *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (1938). We also find works by Péguy, Marcel, Tresmontant, de Lubac, and two copies of Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, as well as his *Last Essays* (1955).

The point of listing these books is not to multiply examples; rather, it is to establish that the personal library O'Connor left behind in her remote Georgia farmhouse is something of a comparatist's cornucopia. The collection as a whole points to a mind actively conversant and engaged with some of the international thought currents of her age. Those currents, as the books reflect, are the ones that relate to O'Connor's lifelong interest: namely, the application of a robust biblical theology to a principled modern (and yet, intriguingly off-modern) aesthetics. Kinney, the collection's pioneering archeologist, deduces perceptively that the whole of it is a massive signpost pointing to O'Connor's strong vocational determination, which she pursued from various angles over her career through her essays, letters, and stories, to work out "a theology of creativity" (7). The prominence of French thinkers in this endeavor is noteworthy. American authors are also well represented, of course: thus we find, as we would expect, Hawthorne, Henry James, Lubbock, Van Doren, Booth and Warren, Welty, and West. But the surprising feature is that more than half the collection is authored by Europeans, and the majority of these authors are French. Perhaps the best reflection of this European tilt is that even that iconic masterpiece of American cultural criticism in her collection, *Democracy in America*, represents the observations of the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville.

III

It is not, of course, that this “French connection” has gone unnoticed in O’Connor scholarship. O’Connor herself was the first to bring it into focus, mainly through her letters, essays, and talks. She could not stop speaking about Maritain, of course, and she wrote that “Mauriac is one of my admirations” (*HB* 356). A curious little volume in her collection is Pierre Brodin’s untranslated work, *Présences Contemporaines*, which bears the publishing date of the last year of O’Connor’s life, 1964. Brodin’s survey of notable contemporary authors features a ten-page essay on O’Connor, including a letter O’Connor obligingly addressed to him when he asked her about her French influences (Kinney 114-115).²² In that letter she wrote, “When I first began to write fiction (around 1945) I read everything I could of the French Catholic novelists, Bloy, Bernanos, and Mauriac” (qtd. in Schlafer 55). It is a fascinating instance of how O’Connor, who had spent so much of her life reading French authors, in the final years of her life came to be viewed reciprocally through French eyes, as an American author with significant French ties. This, perhaps, is the beginning of the “French connection” finding its way into criticism of her work. The same year, her correspondent and sometime sparring partner Ted Spivey points to the French connection in his memorial to their friendship, “Miss O’Connor is unquestionably a religious writer in the tradition of Bernanos and Mauriac” (Quinn 86).

Some of O’Connor’s scholars have followed these early hints over the years, though in piecemeal fashion, in the odd essay or portion of a chapter, and the explorations at times simply awaken a desire for the connections to be worked out more

²² The letter makes fascinating reading. For example, she writes, “I think the character of Old Tarwater owes something to Léon Bloy” (Kinney 115).

fully. James Grimshaw, Jr., working with few available scholarly resources, published his interesting *Flannery O'Connor Companion* in 1981, just two years after the appearance of *The Habit of Being*. In the book's first appendix (95-100), Grimshaw composes blurbs to introduce his readers to some of O'Connor's "Catholic and Christian Existential Influences." His list constitutes an early critical attempt, perhaps even the earliest of its kind, to draw attention to the author's European intellectual contexts. After the existentialists Buber, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kierkegaard, Grimshaw cites Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, and François Mauriac. Then, perhaps surprisingly because of its rarity in O'Connor scholarship since that time, he includes an entry for Blaise Pascal. Under this he writes, "Pascal's contradiction of man—greatness and wretchedness—is what O'Connor uses to best effect in her fiction" (98). It is no more than a hint, certainly, but the hint is astonishing for two reasons: first, because it appears so early in O'Connor scholarship; second, because no scholar since Grimshaw has taken up the Pascalian *misère/grandeur* antinomy he discerns as a characteristic feature of her fiction.

The piecemeal work that has been done on O'Connor's connection to the *renouveau* thinkers is perhaps best illustrated in the two collections of essays edited roughly ten years apart by a duo of European scholars, Karl-Heinz Westarp and Jan Nordby Gretlund. The first of these volumes, *Realist of Distances: Flannery O'Connor Revisited* (1987), is a collection of essays that were presented at an international O'Connor conference in the unlikely location of Aarhus, Denmark. In its opening piece, Ashley Brown, O'Connor's friend and longtime professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina, reminisces about the conversations he had with O'Connor in the 1950s about François Mauriac: "I used to think that her work

resembled his in certain respects” (Brown 24). Linda Schlafer opens her comparative study of O’Connor and Bloy, “Pilgrims of the Absolute,” with these words:

Among the least discussed of the influences on Flannery O’Connor’s thought and work are the writings of a number of French authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The lack of scholarly attention to these writers is the more remarkable inasmuch as O’Connor herself was insistent upon their importance in her religious and artistic formation. (Schlafer 55)

Schlafer intriguingly proposes that Bloy’s exaggerated persona and writing can illuminate O’Connor’s use of grotesque distortion as violent and revelatory (56). She finds in O’Connor and Bloy similar views on place and country, time and eternity, limitations and excesses, personal and vocational identity, and “the poor” (61).

Nine years later, Gretlund and Westarp published a second volume of essays through the University of South Carolina: *Flannery O’Connor’s Radical Reality* (2006). We have already noted that two pieces in this volume call attention to O’Connor’s European contexts. Sessions’ essay “Then I Discovered the Germans” focuses on Romano Guardini’s existentialist emphasis on the *Gegensatz* (antithesis), to stress relationships in creative tension (Sessions 61). Sessions commends this as another way to approach O’Connor’s aesthetic of the antithesis.

Sarah Gordon’s “Seeking Beauty in Darkness” essay seamlessly follows Sessions’ piece by stressing the contextual importance of the French Catholic revival. Gordon’s choice of Henri Bergson may seem surprising given that Bergson is not

generally taken to be associated with the revival.²³ However, as Gordon argues, Bergson's lectures at the Sorbonne galvanized the students Jacques and Raïssa Maritain at the time of their conversion, and thus Bergson's thought (particularly his notion of the artist's freedom to distort and his Hopkins-like intuition of "inscape") merits scrutiny. Perhaps Gordon's finest insight in the essay is her suggestion of a comparison between Bergson's concept of *la durée*, O'Connor's "moment of grace," and Eliot's "stillpoint of the turning world" from *The Four Quartets* (Gordon 75). Gordon then switches her attention to Bloy, and expands on Schlafer's earlier work in this area, reiterating that Bloy's theological understanding of radical poverty has much in common with O'Connor's approach to "the poor" in her poetics (81). She takes the title of her essay from Jacques Maritain's words of introduction to his strange friend Bloy in *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, a book that was revolutionary to O'Connor when she read it as a graduate student in 1947, the year of its publication. Maritain writes in Bloy's defense:

I understand quite well that for certain minds, fortunate in having been spared the dizziness of any abyss, whether from its brink or from its depth, the case of Léon Bloy is a singularly obscure puzzle. But I must repeat: there are perishing souls who seek beauty in darkness, and on whom quiet apologetics would be without avail. Nor would pure theology act on them, for their reason is too weakened by error. . . . Bloy, in shouting out his disgust at all lukewarmness, in shouting on rooftops his thirst for the absolute, inspires these famished ones with a presentiment of the glory of God. (qtd. in Gordon 82)

²³ Nevertheless, McInerney relates that Bergson converted to Christianity on his deathbed (131).

Gordon simply adds, “I suggest it might equally well be a defense of O’Connor” (82).

As stimulating as these reflections are, to my mind the most provocative part of Gordon’s essay is her unexpected shift to the *renouveau* painter Georges Rouault on the last page. The move seems odd, perhaps, because after discussing Bergson and Bloy at some length, it is clear that she is moving toward a conclusion. Thus the mention of Rouault seems like an afterthought, a kind of postscript. Or, as I read it, perhaps Gordon is simply inviting another scholar to take up this study. She notes that Rouault created a visual analog of his friend Bloy’s thought, a vision so stark that Bloy ironically recoiled from it. She notes that Rouault was Maritain’s closest artist friend and most admired painter; that indeed, Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism* referred to him as “the ideal of a Christian artist” (82). She observes, as we have above, that O’Connor “was certainly familiar with the work of Rouault: indeed her copy of Romano Guardini’s *The Lord* features a full-color cover of one of Rouault’s Christ paintings” (82). A fascinating constellation begins to form in shadowy outlines in the mind of the reader: Bloy, Maritain, Rouault, Guardini. And Gordon writes these lines:

Clearly, O’Connor’s large and startling figures are analogous to—if not influenced by—Rouault’s broad strokes and simple outlines, the deliberately distorted bodies, and the wide, wounded eyes of his Christs and clowns. There is in Rouault’s thinking a real and ironic similarity between the world’s derision of the clown . . . and the world’s scorn for Christ. (83)

This is the pay-off. Gordon suggests that there may be something in Rouault’s visual subject matter and use of grotesque distortion that finds an aesthetic analogue in

O'Connor's "large and startling figures." With that, Gordon delivers her Rouault invitation to any comers willing to take it up and run with it. Eleven years later, her invitation still has not been taken up.

Other studies have touched on the *renouveau*, but again, in teasingly piecemeal ways and never in the context of a full monograph. Farrell O'Gorman's *Peculiar Crossroads* (2004) and John Sykes' *The Aesthetic of Revelation* (2007) are two contextual studies that use the European Catholic revival as a point of departure to juxtapose O'Connor with her Southern Catholic counterpart, Walker Percy. O'Gorman's thesis is that O'Connor and Percy are existentialists concerned with the encounter of God in the now (53-54). Intriguingly, O'Gorman suggests that in the existentialist component of the *renouveau* lies a Pascalian and Augustinian strain that indicates that Catholic tradition is not limited to Thomistic humanism (O'Gorman 83). O'Gorman alludes to Ralph Wood's provocative 1976 essay, "The Heterodoxy of Flannery O'Connor's Book Reviews," in which Wood identifies O'Connor's sense that "something more radical [than Catholic humanism] was required—a darker reading of human misery, a more startling revelation of transcendent hope" (Wood "Heterodoxy" 4). Sykes' discussion of the *renouveau* is limited to his second chapter, "Romantic Symbol and the Catholic Revival," where he argues that O'Connor's appropriation of a "Romantic conception of the symbol," by means of the *renouveau* and specifically Maritain, allowed her to bridge her New Critical poetics and Christian vision (Sykes 26-34).

Finally I will mention two studies that are, in their own idiosyncratic ways, rich and generative examinations of O'Connor's European intellectual contexts. Both appear to have largely been "moth-balled" today, but they deserve to be read afresh. John

Desmond's *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History*, published thirty years ago in 1987, takes its cue from O'Connor's reviews of German Catholic philosopher of history Eric Voegelin's massive *Order and History* and Claude Tresmontant's *Study of Hebrew Thought*. Desmond may have been the first O'Connor scholar to make use of Kinney's catalogue of O'Connor's book collection, published just two years earlier. Finally, Henry "Hank" Edmondson III's monograph, *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism* (2002), is noteworthy because Edmondson is by vocation not a literary scholar, but a professor of political philosophy at O'Connor's alma mater in Milledgeville. His book makes a valuable contribution to O'Connor's intellectual contexts: it is the only extended study of O'Connor's fiction and poetics as a fictional rejoinder to Friedrich Nietzsche's radical atheistic critique of Christianity. If Nietzsche seeks to transcend the Christian categories of good and evil in his attempt to effect his transvaluation of values, Edmondson argues, O'Connor no less strenuously insists on the original sin that critically disables this endeavor from the start.

This brief survey of the critical literature is by no means exhaustive. Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (2004) is another rich exploration of contexts, masterfully interweaving European and American cultural strands. Still, amid "the endless outpouring of O'Connor studies," as Wood has characterized the cottage industry of reflection on her oeuvre, the critical efforts to situate her work in what Sessions has called her "intellectual contexts" are proportionately in the minority and have only served to awaken the desire for more.

CHAPTER 2

O'CONNOR AND JACQUES MARITAIN:

“I CUT MY TEETH ON *ART AND SCHOLASTICISM*”

Précis

Jacques Maritain became one of the *renouveau*'s chief spokesmen after he and his wife Raïssa converted to Christianity from the despair of radical skepticism in the first decade of the twentieth century. At a time when the young O'Connor was still finding her craft and voice, Maritain embodied for her the mentorship of an engaged continental Catholic thinker who had made a significant contribution to modern aesthetics. This contribution came in the form of a potent little book, *Art et Scholastique* (1920), which in many ways embodies the spirit of the *rappel à l'ordre*.²⁴ For O'Connor, reading the book was a clarion call summoning her to her vocation. Maritain is the central figure in the narrative of O'Connor's "French connection." He gave her the gift of a sturdy armature upon which to build a body of work, as well as the permission to work out a distinctively Christian vision in it. The timing of this discovery could not have been more propitious. But O'Connor also departs from Maritain in important ways.

²⁴ The "return to order" was a broad movement in French culture after the alarming chaos and loss of the First World War which attempted to restore a measure of equilibrium and connection to tradition. The "Neoclassical period" in the early 1920s, in which Picasso and others of the *avant-garde* reverted to a more representational style and traditional drawing techniques, is an aesthetic instance of the *rappel à l'ordre*.

I will propose two arguments about O'Connor's involvement with Maritain's life work to rework Thomistic thought as a response to the questions of late modernity. The first is that her approach to fiction owes an incalculable debt to Maritain's philosophical tutelage. Her deep and prolonged engagement with Maritain, which began when she first read *Art and Scholasticism* during her MFA studies at Iowa in 1946-1947 and continued throughout her writing career, is openly acknowledged in *The Habit of Being* and *Mystery and Manners* and constantly implied in her fiction.²⁵ O'Connor could soak up like a sponge the works of an author she liked, and there was arguably no contemporary thinker she preferred to Maritain. Maritain's mentorship as an artist's philosopher, a metaphysician who wrote on aesthetics, can be said to have filled a critical void left by the death of her beloved father, who first encouraged her talents as a writer and whose memory O'Connor revered.²⁶

To this argument we must attach an important asterisk. For all her appreciation of his guidance, O'Connor's fictional aesthetics are not just a slavish replica of Maritain's. As necessary as Maritain's theory is for explaining key aspects of O'Connor's orientation toward her art, I will argue that it alone is not *sufficient*. She "cut her teeth" on Maritain's aesthetics, but to state the obvious, they were her teeth, not his. We might say that just as Maritain was no mere imitator of Aristotle, so it is reductive to read O'Connor merely as a Neothomist scribe. *Art and Scholasticism* is a tidy little book, but it is

²⁵ Maritain published *Art et Scholastique* in France the year after the conclusion of World War I, in 1920. The English translation O'Connor read dates from 1930, when she was five years old.

²⁶ My argument for this is that Edward O'Connor understood and encouraged O'Connor's artistic genius, whereas Regina, whose outlook on life was more practical, tended to respond to O'Connor's writing with less enthusiasm. Edward's death from lupus during O'Connor's high school years came as a huge blow. She revered his memory, and it seems to me that she would find in Maritain something of the wisdom and encouragement of a father figure.

perhaps too tidy and too little a book to account for the mysterious beauty (for beauty it is, though of a peculiar kind) of the O'Connor grotesque. In other words, students of Maritain who also read O'Connor (their tribe today is admittedly small) sense that there are dimensions of O'Connor's fiction that cannot fit neatly under the familiar "hillbilly Thomist" label alone. As helpful as Maritain's handbook is to explain key aspects of O'Connor's fiction, in the end "modernized Scholasticism" seems too limited a heuristic. Even Maritain admits the paucity of the Schoolmen's statements about the fine arts (AS 3). This is by no means to minimize the great stimulus O'Connor received from Maritain and the Angelic Doctor, but to recognize that like Maritain, who with considerable creativity extrapolated what was only implicit in the *Summa*, she too could be a canny literary *bricoleur*, using the traditional materials at hand to craft something new.

To be specific, what Jude Dougherty calls Maritain's "Greek confidence in the human intellect," a confidence central to what may be called the philosopher's program of Thomistic humanism, does not seem to fit the way in which O'Connor relentlessly bears down in her fiction on the ruinous depravation of original sin, not least in its "noetic" aspects, namely, in the workings of the mind.²⁷ Original sin's twistedness, its perversion and misshaping of form from rectitude as the operational arena for the action of divine grace, is not only O'Connor's persistent thematic domain, it is the striking hallmark of her theological use of the grotesque. We might say that Maritain's thought tends not to place a comparable stress on the marring of creation's beauty by sin. In her insistence on the pervasive distortion of sin on image-bearing humanity (her "maimed

²⁷ "A Greek confidence in the human intellect and the intelligibility of nature is the cornerstone of Maritain's philosophy of being" (Dougherty 38).

souls”), O’Connor seems closer in spirit to the Pauline anthropology of Augustine and Pascal—and, rather intriguingly, the Reformers Luther and Calvin—than the Hellenic rational orientation of the medieval Schoolmen. This might explain why one of her early Catholic readers, Father Simons, made the keen observation about her stories that “while [her] convictions might be Catholic, [her] sensibility appeared to be Lutheran” (HB 108).²⁸

Maritain alludes in *Art and Scholasticism* to “the splendor of grace” (AS 29), but he does not define this splendor more distinctly than by the familiar Scholastic words Thomas attached to beauty: namely, integrity, proportion, and radiance or clarity. Perhaps splendor can be more easily recognized in an existential encounter than it can be defined, as St. Thomas implies in his experiential definition of beauty as *id quod visum, placet*, “that which being seen, pleases.” I propose that O’Connor’s characteristic paradox of a “grotesque beauty,” which involves ugliness and distortion in the discussion of beauty’s splendor, demonstrates that she has wrestled more deeply than has Maritain with the aesthetic implications of grace’s work of redemption in a fallen world. The splendor in her work is of a strikingly different order when the light of grace penetrates the pervasive ambient darkness, irradiating and transforming it.²⁹ We recall Milton’s statement in “Areopagitica,” which her aesthetic of contrast so richly glosses:

Good and evil we know in the field of the world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven in

²⁸ See too Lorna Wiedmann’s provocative study, “Flannery O’Connor’s Six Protestant Conversion Tales,” published in the 2014 *Flannery O’Connor Review*. Wiedmann’s essay can be read as a longer defense of Simon’s assessment.

²⁹ Thus, at the beginning of John’s Gospel, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned. . . . It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam feel into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil. (728)³⁰

We might say that O'Connor's "incarnational" account of beauty compares perhaps most favorably to the sharp conflict of what has been studied, particularly in the art of Caravaggio and his Baroque heirs, and most famously in Rembrandt, as *tenebrism*, the spiritual drama of a radical *chiaroscuro*. I submit that this decidedly non-classical aesthetic accounts in great part for the fascination O'Connor's work holds for even her non-theological readers, though they cannot articulate it in the terms of her Christian dogma, as she did. And to my mind, it is this "aesthetic of extremity" in O'Connor's fiction, which Frederick Asals postulated might have come to her from Poe (Asals 24), points insistently to the great Pascalian antinomy, worked out in the context of a return to Augustine (who received it in turn from the Pauline epistles), of the conflict between depravity and grace, the *misère/grandeur*. We should note that this is not a Thomistic emphasis, nor is it something O'Connor would have gleaned from her reading of Maritain. It points to a mysterious appearance of the "splendor of grace" that does not harmonize with the moderate humanism of classical Aristotelian virtue ethics, which takes a more optimistic view than does O'Connor of man's capabilities in his fallen state.

This chapter will begin with an introduction to Maritain as the important modern Catholic public thinker he would have appeared to O'Connor (I). This will be followed

³⁰ This aesthetic of antithesis in Milton's post-lapsarian state of "knowing good by evil" arguably appears most starkly in the way O'Connor depicts the battle for Tarwater's soul in *The Violent Bear It Away*.

by some reflections on O'Connor's discovery of *Art and Scholasticism* (II), a *précis* of the nine chapters of that short but potent aesthetic handbook (III), and a brief discussion of some of its distinctives (IV). To conclude, I will reflect on some parallels between O'Connor's aesthetics and Maritain's (V), and suggest some ways in which O'Connor went beyond the aesthetics of her mentor (VI).

My focus in this chapter is on Maritain's theory of art in *Art and Scholasticism* and O'Connor's reception of it in her occasional writings about the art of fiction (*Mystery and Manners*) and her personal letters (*The Habit of Being*). Maritain's 1952 A. W. Mellon lectures on art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., published in the following year as *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, do not appear to have had as great an impact on O'Connor. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that by the time the later work appeared she had already settled into her craft and had moved on from her apprenticeship years. *Creative Intuition* is also a more sprawling, abstruse, and perhaps more romantic and mystical book: Maritain ventures into expressivist territories to locate poetic intuition in "the preconceptual life of the intellect" (*Creative* 4). O'Connor, who tended to prefer the intellect's governance of the emotions in art³¹ and handled the mystics with some caution, may well have found this a less congenial direction: "at one point I got a double dose of the mystics . . . and I haven't had a taste for them since" (*HB* 297). For any number of reasons, Maritain's later book did not capture O'Connor's imagination as did the shorter and more transparent *Art and Scholasticism*, which would always hold pride of place as the delight of her youth, the book on which she "cut her aesthetic teeth" and which confirmed her in her vocation.

³¹ "I do think that emotion has to be controlled in a story by the critical intelligence, not that emotion controls the critical intelligence" (*HB* 291).

I

To gain a sense for what Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) would have meant to the young O'Connor, we need to outline the place he occupied in her context during what Ralph McInerney has called a "golden age of Catholicism" at mid-century. Maritain is certainly not as well known in our generation as he was when his friend T. S. Eliot could hail him as "the most powerful force in contemporary French philosophy."³² Like Eliot, Maritain comes from the venerable stock, common in the liberal arts three or four generations back but now an endangered species, of classically-trained humanists deeply versed in the history of ideas.³³ He was a public thinker. Metaphysician, epistemologist, philosopher of science, political philosopher, philosopher of art, lay theologian—but first, he insisted, a metaphysician³⁴—Maritain left his mark as the one who along with the medievalist Etienne Gilson led the neo-Thomist revival in Catholic thought during the momentous period of upheavals W. H. Auden poignantly dubbed "the Age of Anxiety." Maritain was prodigiously active as a public thinker over the course of a career spanning the first six decades of the twentieth century.³⁵ His lifespan bracketed and more than

³² Eliot's correspondence includes a letter he wrote to Maritain on the subject of Christian culture. Clearly, he regarded Maritain with great respect as one of the key co-agitators for the revival of a robust Christian culture Eliot after his conversion came to see as essential to shoring up the ruins of Western civilization.

³³ Such advocates for the liberal arts tradition are an endangered species in today's utilitarian and specialized education mill. One thinks of the recent passing of old-school comparatists Jacques Barzun and George Steiner. The academy is poorer for their loss; they have been replaced by micro-specialists.

³⁴ "A philosopher is not a philosopher if he is not a metaphysician. And it is the intuition of being . . . that makes the metaphysician" (*Existence* 19). Maritain's entire project in philosophy can be explained as an agreement with the medieval designation of metaphysics as the "queen-science" (26).

³⁵ Maritain authored more than fifty books, his last (*De l'Eglise du Christ*) appearing in English translation the year of his death. He helped draft the San Francisco United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1945. From 1945-1948 he was France's ambassador to the Vatican. Among other academic appointments and honors, he was named Commander of the Legion of Honor and Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great. He received the Medal of the French Resistance and the Grand Cross of the Order of Pius IX. The French Academy awarded him the Grand Prix of Literature in 1961 and the French National Grand Prize for letters in 1963 (Dougherty 1-3).

doubled O'Connor's: he died at the age of ninety, having outlived O'Connor by nearly a decade even though he had been born more than forty years before her.³⁶

In *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, subtitled *A Spiritual Life*, the late director of the Jacques Maritain Center at Notre Dame Ralph McInerny sketches a sympathetic portrait of the man who for many of his and Flannery O'Connor's generation came to exemplify "the model of an intellectual life as lived by a Christian believer" (3).³⁷ McInerny describes Maritain as "a philosopher who metamorphosed into a theologian" (3). Perhaps the earliest seeds of Maritain's later involvement in the Catholic revival were sown as early as his *lycée* years when he was friends with the early *renouveau* figure Ernest Psichari, the grandson of the famous apostate author of *La Vie de Jésus*, Ernest Renan (10).³⁸ Raïssa Maritain's 1940 memoir *Les Grands Amitiés (We Have Been Friends Together)*, which became something of a "tribal legend" among American Catholics at mid-century (12), recounts the dramatic events that led to her and Jacques' conversion after Charles Péguy and Psichari urged them to attend Henri Bergson's lectures at the *Collège de France* (16).³⁹ Bergson's insistence that the human

³⁶ Had she lived to Maritain's age of 90 rather than 39, O'Connor would have died just two years ago, in 2015.

³⁷ McInerny taught philosophy at Notre Dame for more than half a century, from 1955 to just a year before his death in 2010. He directed the Maritain Study Center for more than four decades. Jude Dougherty, whose *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile* appeared the same year as McInerny's biography (2003, the thirtieth anniversary of Maritain's death), calls *The Very Rich Hours* "the best book about Jacques Maritain in the English language" and "a standard for Maritain scholarship" (McInerny back cover).

³⁸ Renan's 1863 book denied the miracles and the deity of Christ. It launched the modern quest for "the historical Jesus."

³⁹ Psichari and Péguy both died during the first months of combat in WWI. Maritain would distance himself from Bergson's creative evolution, but there were elements of Bergson's early influence that left an indelible imprint on his thought. The "Bergson effect," I think, is most palpable in Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*.

mind is capable of knowing reality saved them from following through with a suicide pact they had entered over their “metaphysical anguish” with the materialist skepticism they had imbibed at the Sorbonne (17).⁴⁰ Raïssa’s story makes for a fascinating read: it involves Bergson’s lectures alleviating the heavy pall of despair, the influence of reading Pascal’s *Pensées* (one of the many ways in which Pascal enters the narrative of this time), and their growing friendship with the eccentric mendicant-mystic Léon Bloy, whom the Maritains dubbed the “Pilgrim of the Absolute,” as well as a serious, taciturn young artist no one had yet heard of, Georges Rouault.⁴¹

The Maritains began reading Bloy’s *La Femme Pauvre* in 1904, the year they were married, drawn to it by Maurice Maeterlinck’s astonishing praise in *Le Matin*: “If by genius one understands certain *flashes in the depths*, *La Femme Pauvre* is the only work of the present day in which there are evident marks of genius” (R. Maritain 87).⁴² The next year, they paid a visit to Bloy at his home at Montmartre, and the following year, in June 1906, they were received into the Church with Bloy standing as godfather. In this way Bergson and Bloy emerge as the unlikely twin mentors of their conversion.

⁴⁰ In the “Jardins des Plantes” episode of *We Have Been Friends* (64-68), Raïssa poignantly narrates their thirst for truth amid the desiccation of the late modern Pyrrhonism. She writes of “those champions of skepticism who emit their ‘*que sais-je?*’ like a puff of cigarette smoke, and find life good in the bargain. Along with the rest of our generation, we were their victims” (65). “I wanted no part in such a comedy. I would have accepted a sad life, but not one that was absurd. . . . Either the world could be justified, and this could not be if real knowledge did not exist; or else life was not worth the trouble of a moment’s further notice” (67). It was then “that God’s pity caused us to find Henri Bergson” (69). Bergson gave “intellectual joy in restoring metaphysics to its rightful place. . . . [He] assured us that such food was within our reach, that we are capable of truly knowing reality” (72).

⁴¹ Raïssa relates that they first met Rouault at Bloy’s home, in 1905 (125). From 1908 to 1923, the Maritains lived in Versailles. At the beginning of that time, Rouault was their neighbor, and he was often a taciturn presence when Bloy made his vigorous presence known.

⁴² Raïssa Maritain narrates the letter to Bloy which this review was based on. Maeterlinck writes: “From the purely human point of view one is involuntarily reminded of *King Lear*, and nothing else comparable can be found in any literature” (R. Maritain 87).

Bergson “opened anew the path to the spiritual, for which there was a hunger on all levels of French culture” (McInerny 131), and Bloy was “the doorway into the Church” (23).⁴³ Maritain would write a book in which he would distance himself from Bergson, but the connection remained; and ironically, Bergson would convert on his deathbed (131).

Thus the Maritains’ conversion, the *cause célèbre* which in many ways can be seen as holding the seeds of the Catholic cultural revival that would spread throughout the century and impact so many, including the little group of Agrarians in which Flannery O’Connor’s talent would flourish, came just one year after the 1905 ratification of France’s official policy of secularism and anticlericalism in *laïcité*, during the roiling opening decade of the new century Roger Shattuck would call “the Banquet Years.”⁴⁴ No doubt Jacques and Raissa fully appreciated the ironic juncture as well as the cultural stakes of their decision: converting to Christianity in this context of rising anti-Church sentiment following the Dreyfus Affair was a deliberate tack against the prevailing secular headwinds of the day.⁴⁵

⁴³ What the Maritains found attractive about Bloy (they were not blind to his indiscretions) was his prophetic presence, in contrast to the smoke-blowing Pyrrhonists of the Sorbonne. Raissa Maritain remembers Bloy’s “grandeur, simplicity, unshakeable conviction, disdain of contingencies, singleness of purpose” (88-89). He “spoke like a man having to fulfil an extraordinary mission, from which nothing must deter him, a man definitely directed toward one thing” (90-91). Bloy encouraged them to read the Scriptures (a practice not common for Catholic laity at the time), and showed them that Christ was the key to the interrelatedness of the two Testaments (100). They thrilled to the last line of *La Femme Pauvre*: “il n’y a qu’une tristesse, c’est de n’être pas des saints” (88). We should note that Bloy had the same prophetic effect on O’Connor, when she discovered his books along with the Maritains’ in 1946 at Iowa. In her prayer journal she wrote: “Bloy has come my way . . . He is an iceberg hurled against my Titanic & I hope my Titanic will be smashed” (*PJ* 33).

⁴⁴ In 1913 Charles Péguy could say, “The world has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years” (Shattuck xv). The historic law of the Third Empire officially driving a wall of separation between the State and the Church (*laïcité*, or secularity) was enacted in 1905. The law remains in effect in France today, though the rise of radical Islam in France’s postcolonial context has brought fresh challenges to its interpretation.

⁴⁵ To borrow the famous title of another unlikely recent convert of the time, J. K. Huysmans, it was to go *à rebours*. There are many fascinating ironies in this story. For example, a key influence in the Maritains’ conversion was Ernest Psichari, who as we have noted was Renan’s grandson.

In 1914, which saw both Psichari and Péguy lost to combat within the first two months of combat, Maritain took up his teaching post at the *Institut Catholique*, where he settled into his program of applying Thomistic thought to the questions of his time. Maritain and the medieval scholar Etienne Gilson would be the major stimulus for this “off-modern” revival of Thomism, the bold reassertion of ontology which had largely been sloughed off as pre-modern skin by the agitators for Comteian positivism, or Scientism, and Nietzsche’s aesthetic transvaluation of values.⁴⁶ Gilson and Maritain did not launch this movement, to be sure.⁴⁷ The appeal to the realism of the Schoolmen to confront the epistemological challenges of advanced modernity preceded them by a generation. Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni patris* initiated the call to revive Christian philosophy “*ad mentem Sancti Thomae*” in 1879, three years before Maritain was born.⁴⁸ But the movement was still in its nascent stages when Maritain and Gilson lent their energies to it. Their commitment to transcendentals signaled a striking turn from the anxious pyrrhonism and acedia of the Banquet Years. The project of shoring up the old foundations of the intelligibility of being against the cultural ruin of the two World Wars,

⁴⁶ Raïssa writes about reading Nietzsche during the Sorbonne days: “And what we received from Nietzsche also was a mere aesthetic intoxication of the mind. Distrust of the weak and the poor, the extravagant exaltation of pride and of violence dancing through the void, all the things one had to accept if one really believed in Nietzsche, was not food from which truly to derive nourishment. The joys which Spinoza and Nietzsche momentarily gave us only left us the emptier and the more hopeless” (64).

⁴⁷ McInerny compares Maritain and Gilson to the potent English tandem of G. K. Chesterton and Hillaire Belloc, the literary partnership George Bernard Shaw memorably dubbed the “Chesterbelloc.”

⁴⁸ Maritain was fond of quoting Leo’s statement: “there is in Thomas something greater than Thomas that we receive and defend” (McInerny 72). Leo’s encyclical prompted the founding of philosophical institutes in Louvain (1891) and Washington (1895). In Victorian England, a similar response to modern positivism was launched by John Henry Newman and the Oxford tractarians, the movement that would profoundly shape the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

which Maritain and Gilson, along with other thinkers, linked to the outworkings of post-Kantian skepticism, would be their *rappel à l'ordre* in the realm of philosophy.⁴⁹

When the Maritains' *ménage à trois* (from their earliest student years in Paris they had lived with Raïssa's practically-minded sister Vera) relocated to Meudon in 1923, after receiving the generous bequest of a fallen soldier who had been grateful for Maritain's teaching, their home became a *centre de rayonnement* for discussions of neo-Thomism that regularly attracted a remarkable group of poets, artists, and philosophers.⁵⁰ It should be noted that not all the visitors were Christian. Dougherty names the likes of Jean Cocteau, Etienne Gilson, Nicholas Berdyaev, Emmanuel Mounier, François Mauriac, Marc Chagall, and Georges Rouault (Dougherty 2).

This *centre de rayonnement* was washed to American shores by the tides of history. The Maritains, who had left France in January 1940 for a series of lectures in Toronto, took up residence as involuntary exiles in New York from 1940-1944. It was in a state of intense *mal du pays*, that Raïssa penned her influential memoirs, publishing *Les Grands Amitiés* in 1940 and *Les Aventures de Grâce* in 1944.⁵¹ This American

⁴⁹ Maritain in the opening of *Existence and the Existent* insists that he is a Thomist, not a neo-Thomist (*Existence* 1), but the "neo" better captures the modern context and application of his Thomism. "From a Thomistic position he challenged the materialisms, positivisms, and determinisms of his day" (Dougherty 2). Dougherty points out that though Maritain's early targets were Luther, Descartes, and Rousseau, his great nemesis throughout his career was Immanuel Kant, and especially Kant's notorious assertion, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (27).

⁵⁰ I am indebted to my friend John Dunaway, French professor emeritus at Mercer, for this metaphor, which pictures the Maritain home as a hospitable "incubator" for *renouveau* thought during the interwar period. One of Maritain's greatest gifts, which he exercised throughout his life, was for cultivating friendships.

⁵¹ Raïssa's memoirs had an incalculable effect on piquing the interest of American Catholics in Léon Bloy and the figures of the French *renouveau*. The English translations appeared in 1942 and 1945. The first words of *We Were Friends Together* convey something of the apocalyptic feeling of the time: "July 6th, 1940. There is no longer any future for me in this world. Life for me draws to a close, ended by the catastrophe that has plunged France into mourning, and, with France, the world, or at least all those in France and in the world who treasure the human and divine values of free intelligence, wise liberty and universal charity" (R. Maritain 11). She opens her chapter titled "Paris" with these words: "I cannot write

relocation had the effect of greatly expanding Maritain's trans-Atlantic influence, and the two decades which followed are especially important for understanding his stature *vis-à-vis* O'Connor and American Catholic thought at mid-century. The Maritain home on Park Avenue in Manhattan became a haven for *émigrés*. Maritain lectured as a visiting professor at Columbia and Princeton. Except for a three-year period after the war when Maritain became the French ambassador to the Vatican, the center of Maritain's work in the 1940s and 1950s would be the United States, not France. He would remain professionally active as an expatriate public philosopher well into his "retirement," taking a professorship in moral philosophy at Princeton in 1948 and delivering the Walgreen lectures in political philosophy at the University of Chicago the following year. He cultivated a number of friendships, including Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Thomas Merton, and lectured regularly at Chicago, Toronto, and Notre Dame.

Thus, when O'Connor stayed with her friends the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut in 1949-1950, the year before the lupus diagnosis forced her permanent relocation to her mother's farm, Maritain, who was teaching at Princeton, was quite literally not far from her thoughts.⁵² In 1952, the year Maritain became "emeritus," he delivered the inaugural A. W. Mellon lectures at the National Gallery in Washington, DC.⁵³ In 1957 Maritain wrote his *Reflections on America*, which McNerny calls "a veritable *billet doux*" (164) to

your name, oh my beloved city, without a deep homesickness, without an immense sadness; you whom perhaps I shall never see again" (24).

⁵² Maritain taught at Princeton from 1948 to 1952, during the years in which O'Connor embarked on her writing career. She asked about his whereabouts in an early letter to Sally Fitzgerald in 1951: "What ever happened to Jacques Maritain? Is he still at Princeton . . .?" (HB 28).

⁵³ These lectures were published the following year as *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. His Thomistic co-laborer Etienne Gilson would follow these with his own set of A. W. Mellon lectures in 1955, *Painting and Reality*.

the country he came to cherish as his adoptive home. The following year, the year of Georges Rouault's death, Maritain's Notre Dame friends founded the Jacques Maritain Center, with Maritain in attendance. It was their American farewell. The Maritains returned to France for good in 1959, because Raïssa's health was rapidly failing.⁵⁴ She would die in 1960; her husband would survive her by thirteen years.

These events are crucial to understanding O'Connor, for during the fifteen years when she wrote all her mature work (1949-1964), Maritain was as influential in the United States as he was in his home country, if not more so.⁵⁵ In her context, it would have been difficult to name a more influential contemporary Catholic philosopher. It is difficult to recapture this thought-context in today's altered landscape. But McInerney points to the sixteen published volumes of Maritain's work edited by René Mougel, as well as the Maritain societies that have sprung up in Kolbsheim, where he and Raïssa are buried, Rome, Latin America, Canada, and the United States.⁵⁶ John Paul II's 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* mentions Maritain by name as "a model of the continuing effort to effect a *modus vivendi* between faith and reason" (131).

The modern feature of Maritain's bold return to the ontology of the Schoolmen was how he attached it to the growing movement of Christian existentialism. At first it may seem that medieval realism and modern existentialism move in separate spheres of thought, never to be reconciled, but it was Maritain's distinctive contribution to that he

⁵⁴ Jacques had also suffered a minor stroke by that time. In many ways, they knew it was time to return.

⁵⁵ He was certainly not ignored in his native France. In 1961 the French Academy honored with the *Grand Prix* of literature and in 1963 he received the French National Grand Prize for letters (Dougherty 3).

⁵⁶ The American Maritain Association publishes a quarterly newsletter, "The Maritain Notebook," and organizes annual meetings to discuss topics related to Maritain's thought (<https://maritainassociation.com>).

saw no insuperable conflict to adopting *both*.⁵⁷ Maritain announces his conviction on the opening page of *Existence and the Existent* that Thomism represents the “only authentic” existentialism: “A Thomist who speaks of St. Thomas’ existentialism is merely reclaiming his own, recapturing from present-day fashion an article whose worth that fashion itself is unaware of; he is asserting a prior right” (*Existence* 1).⁵⁸ Maritain successfully persuaded the medievalist Etienne Gilson of the existential nature of Thomism (Dougherty 4). Maritain’s Thomistic existentialism, or existential Thomism, illustrates the “modern anti-modern” ambivalent dynamic of the *renouveau* project, which was at once a recognition of its modern situation and a principled revolt against it.⁵⁹ This was the resistance Maritain mounted in philosophy to what he perceived as the spiritual bankruptcy the World Wars had exposed in the latter stages of Enlightenment Rationalism, particularly in its skeptical abandonment of the intelligibility of being. That was the despair he and Raïssa felt so viscerally as students before their conversion. Reconciling pre-modern Thomism with modern existentialism, and applying them to the fraught culture of his time, would be Maritain’s life work and the central contribution he made to Western thought.⁶⁰ Its impact on O’Connor can be felt throughout her work.

⁵⁷ The Christian existentialism of the early 20th century is built on Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in the 19th, and Dostoevsky was certainly a major figure in the discussions of the time. Gabriel Marcel and Romano Guardini, two other contemporary thinkers O’Connor admired, were Christian existentialists.

⁵⁸ Maritain begins his book with a bold assertion of Aquinas’ “existentialism”: “This brief treatise on existence and the existent may be described as an essay on *the existentialism of St. Thomas Aquinas*” (*Existence* 1, my italics). Maritain asserts that existentialism as Sartre articulates it is more an ethics than a metaphysics.

⁵⁹ “Although employing St. Thomas, Maritain is always a man of the twentieth century” (Dougherty 45).

⁶⁰ Maritain’s theistic existentialism, of course, is far removed from the phenomenological presupposition of radical immanence in the atheistic existentialism of his French contemporary Sartre, as he makes clear in the opening chapter of *Existence and the Existent*: “The ‘existentialism’ of St. Thomas is utterly different from that of the ‘existentialist’ philosophies propounded nowadays” (1). Maritain critiqued Sartreian existentialism as “apocryphal” and not “authentic” for its denial of essence (3). In Maritain’s view the

II

Maritain's modern retooling of pre-modern metaphysics struck the young O'Connor as prophetic when she broadened her reading from the social-science textbooks of her college days, as we have seen. By far the single work of the French writers she read that proved of greatest consequence to her work was *Art and Scholasticism*, the volume that O'Connor told Betty Hester she "cut her aesthetic teeth on" (HB 216).⁶¹ The book became a dog-eared handbook for her, one whose pages she would frequently turn to and whose striking aphorisms she would never tire of quoting. O'Connor's discovery of Maritain's book should be situated in the larger context of the group of friends that formed her artistic support community: the Vanderbilt Agrarians Allen Tate and his wife Caroline Gordon (Gordon was O'Connor's personal tutor in the craft of fiction, a crucial behind-the-scenes encourager), Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, and (though they never met, he cannot be omitted from her list of mentors) François Mauriac. The creative stimulus these key O'Connor mentors drew from *Art and Scholasticism* can hardly be overstated.⁶² Their enthusiasm for Maritain's book explains why O'Connor was already predisposed to favor what she read in its pages. What Maritain

intelligibility of being in Thomistic thought is the true existentialism which was vitiated after Descartes and which he sought to restore in his modern context.

⁶¹ Here is the full quote: "I have sent you *Art and Scholasticism*. It's the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on, though I think even some of the things he [Maritain] says get soft at times. He is a philosopher and not an artist but he does have great understanding of the nature of art, which he gets from St. Thomas" (HB 216).

⁶² Maritain was friends with Allen Tate, whom he singles out in the acknowledgments of *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (xxix). Mauriac was part of the circle of friends who met in the Maritains' home in Meudon (Dougherty 2). Robert Fitzgerald, in addition to his work as a literary translator of Greek and Latin texts, taught, in O'Connor's words, "Aristotle and St. Thomas" at Sarah Lawrence College when she lived with them in Connecticut in the late 1940s. O'Connor asked the Fitzgeralds about Maritain in a letter dated October 1951. When O'Connor had to leave the Fitzgeralds suddenly in December 1950 due to her lupus diagnosis, she left her copy of *Art and Scholasticism* at their home and requested that they send it to her. They bought and sent her a new copy of the book (HB 42).

accomplished for his readers on both sides of the Atlantic was to provide a timely intellectual and vocational encouragement for Christian artists who, much like his friend Rouault, sensed their isolation in the prevailing secularism of advanced modernity. The book's popularity among O'Connor's closest literary advisors shows how gratefully this support was received.⁶³

We will have occasion to return to this matter in the chapter on Rouault, but we should note in passing that *Art and Scholasticism* presents a significant bridge by which to connect the creative worlds of O'Connor and Rouault. The steady encouragement of Rouault's friendship seems to have provided the inspiration for both of Maritain's major forays into the realm of aesthetics. By his own admission, Maritain was neither an artist nor an art critic (*Creative* 4). His *métier* was metaphysics. But as was common among continental thinkers of his generation who had been liberally trained and did not shrink from public engagement, Maritain's thought spilled into many fields. His lifelong interest in painting, poetry, and music was more than a side-hobby for him, in large part because this interest was nourished by his wife, a poet, and by many conversations he had with his friend Rouault about modern art. Apart from the consistent stimulation Raïssa and Rouault provided to focus his thinking on the arts, it is uncertain whether either *Art and Scholasticism* or *Creative Intuition* would have come to be.⁶⁴ Indirectly, then, Maritain's aesthetics should be included in any critical assessment of Rouault's legacy. For now, it is sufficient to keep it in mind as a background to the present discussion.

⁶³ Maritain's second contribution to aesthetics, his 1952 A. W. Mellon lectures at Princeton, published as *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), emerged after O'Connor had already formed her craft. While this book carries on the concern with "splendor of form" Maritain developed in the earlier volume, it lacks the clarity of message. O'Connor did not comment on this work as she did on *Art and Scholasticism*.

⁶⁴ Raïssa makes this point in *We Have Been Friends Together*: "It was while thinking of [Rouault] especially that Jacques wrote his *Art and Scholasticism*" (127).

III

Here I will attempt a *précis* of Maritain's main moves in the nine chapters of *Art and Scholasticism*.⁶⁵ The following few pages summarize nearly one hundred pages of close argument. As imperfect as this rendering will be, it will be helpful for the analysis that follows to place Maritain's cards on the table, particularly for the reader who has little familiarity with Maritain's work. To aid readability, I will not provide citations after each statement, but rather give the range of pages for each chapter. Especially in this book, Maritain displayed his gift for packing much content into a small space. It is easy to see how his epigrammatic style would have appealed to O'Connor, who admired clear, punchy prose and an avoidance of sentimentality.

Chapter one (3-4) opens the book with the disclaimer that the Schoolmen did not write a treatise entitled *The Philosophy of Art*. They did not have much to say about the "fine arts" in the modern understanding of the term. However, this does not mean that a coherent theory of art cannot be derived from their "austere treatises."

Chapter two (5-6) distinguishes between the *speculative* and the *practical* order with regard to *telos*. The end of the speculative order is knowledge for no other sake than delight in truth (*frui*).⁶⁶ The practical order directs knowledge to the end of something made (*uti*). Art involves making a work; thus it belongs to the practical order.

Chapter three (7-9) in turn divides the practical order into the spheres of *doing* and *making*. Doing belongs to the realm of morality and is governed by Prudence. Art

⁶⁵ This sketch is intended for readers who have not read *Art and Scholasticism*. The reader who is familiar with the argument of the book may consider skipping this section and moving directly to section IV.

⁶⁶ It is interesting that although Maritain claimed metaphysics as his professional area, his thinking often led him into practical areas of application and polemics (in aesthetics, political philosophy, moral philosophy, apologetics).

belongs to the realm of making; it is primarily concerned with “the good of the work.” Intellect presides over the making of art: art involves “the imprinting of an idea in some matter.” The work of art is thought before it is made.

Chapter four (10-22) defines art as the “*habitus* or virtue of the practical intellect.” *Habitus* is not the equivalent of “habits” in a modern behaviorist sense, but rather a set of “stable dispositions” acquired through exercise and use by which the artist is conformed to “the good of the work.” Art implies “an infallible rectitude”: not moral excellence, but the integrity of making a good work. The habit of art “stands entirely on the side of the mind.” The artist needs “a certain heroism” and also “a profound humility” to remain on “the straight path of Doing.” The artist is “an intellectual who makes.” The virtue of art is not the same thing as moral virtue: the two may be in conflict. It is nevertheless true that “as a man is so are his works.” Art is a profoundly human activity predicated on the Creator’s being and work. In the act of making, the artist images the creative activity of God. The medieval artists displayed in their craftsmanship a strength and freedom born of humility which was largely lost in the Renaissance’s idolatry of personality.

Chapter five (23-37) is the heart of the book, a rapt ode to beauty as a transcendental attribute of God. It opens with Aquinas’ definition of beauty as *id quod visum placet*, or “that which seen, pleases.” Beauty is an object of intelligence, “the flashing of intelligence on a matter intelligibly arranged.” The encounter with beauty delights because in it, intelligence “makes contact with its own light.” An indispensable mediating role in the judgment of beauty belongs to the senses: beauty is intelligible in the sensible and through the senses; it is not merely an intellectual abstraction. The artist

manifests invisible things by the visible. Three properties of beauty are integrity, proportion, and radiance or clarity. These attributes constitute the *splendor formae*, the splendor of form, the mysterious disclosure of an ontological secret within things. There is no single prescriptive way this beauty may be disclosed: it is relative to the nature of the thing and the exigencies of the work.⁶⁷ Beauty promotes delight, desire, love, ecstasy. It draws the soul beyond the created world to God, the fountain of beauty. The radiance of beauty is especially attributed to the second person of the Trinity, the Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-3). The Son of God's person and work displays a splendor of grace that the Greeks did not know. The recognition of beauty requires the disinterested leisure, play, and contemplation of the soul, all of which are endangered by modern materialism and utilitarianism. The disinterested activity of contemplating beauty is essential to the survival of humanity.

Chapter six (38-48) is headed "The Rules of Art," which may tease the reader because Maritain does not specifically enumerate any rules other than the formal exigencies of "the good of what is made," which cannot be prescribed in a set of rules but is governed by the infallible rectitude of "the habit of art." Without intellectual form ruling matter, art would be reduced to "sensual slush." The modern world has a horror of *habitus* and tries to abolish it, substituting mechanical methods and rules. *Habitus* is not a mechanical but a living rule. Without *habitus*, rules are useless. Cultivation and discipline are needed to perfect a natural gift. Art, like love, must be cultivated. The virtue of art involves the improvement of the mind; it requires solitude. The creative

⁶⁷ It is intriguing that at this point Maritain says that there are ten thousand ways of achieving integrity, proportion, and harmony in form, and he cites Rouault's clowns as an example of "splendor of form" uniquely achieved.

artist finds new analogies of the beautiful, new ways in which “the radiance of form can shine on matter.” Thus there will always be new adaptations of rules. The renewal of forms is necessary, but there is no necessary “progress” in the chronological development of art. Art does not presuppose rectitude of appetite.

Chapter seven, “the purity of art” (49-63) elaborates on the disinterested autonomy of art as a *liberal* rather than a *servile* art. The integrity of art is compromised when it is made to serve a utilitarian end. Man lives *in sensibus*; modern materialism signals a spiritual decline. The soul “takes a steep fall” in the Renaissance’s theatrical representation of illusion in nature. Perhaps Cubism signals art becoming “pure” again? Art does not require the exact imitation of the material world: art points beyond the appearance of material nature to reveal the radiance of a form. The artist, whose vision perhaps penetrates more deeply than that of others, often must distort, reconstruct, and transfigure the material appearances of nature. Art is fundamentally inventive; artistic creation continues God’s creation work. Art is imprinted with “the human stamp.” Nature, as God’s creative work, is the artist’s exciter and guide, but it is not to be slavishly copied. Art becomes deceitful when it aims to please or manipulate emotions. The artistic work of the medieval cathedral builders grew out of their faith and revealed the truth of God as a by-product of their commitment to “the good of what is made.”

This leads into chapter eight (64-69), an essay on Christian art. *Christian art* should not here be understood as “church art” or “art for churches”; rather, it is art that bears within it the character of Christianity. It is not a different species of the *genus* art, but the art of redeemed humanity, the artistic fruit of the Christian’s life. The artist depends on the spirit of his time. It is difficult to be a Christian when the secular modern

age lives so far from Christ. The Christian artist should not make the grave error of dissociating his faith from his art. Rather, “be a Christian, then you will make Christian work.” The radiance of grace overflows from a heart suffused by grace. The quality of the work is a reflection of love. Thus, to adapt Augustine, “love rightly, and make what you wish.” There is no Christian style or Christian technique. But there will be a family likeness between the works of Christian artists. Perhaps Rouault and others signal that there will be a regermination of truly Christian art in the world.

Chapter nine (70-81), “art and morality,” brings the book to a close. Art becomes an idol when it is placed before the love of God: “God is infinitely more lovable than art.” Art does not reside in an angelic mind, but in a soul animating a living body. Art belongs to a time and a country; it is part of a human community. The most universal and human works bear most openly the mark of their country. Art serves a fundamental human need. It teaches humanity “the delectations of the spirit,” contemplation for the sake of love. Romanticism, even with its lack of balance and intellectual indigence, still maintains the concept of art; with Naturalism it disappears almost completely. The artist is subject to “a kind of asceticism” in the sphere of art which may require heroic personal sacrifices. The artist must unswervingly pursue the habit of art. The “prudent man” may be ignorant of art. The prudent man and the artist have difficulty understanding one another; the artist might have more in common with the contemplative. The “ungodly divorce” of art and prudence came with the Renaissance, which sacrificed prudence to art. In the nineteenth century, art was sacrificed to prudence.

These nine chapters are followed by a series of appendices, and, in the English translation O'Connor would have read, a long stand-alone essay entitled "The Frontiers of Poetry."

IV

Art and Scholasticism is Maritain's effort to revive for his modern readers a forgotten aspect of the tradition of classical aesthetics: namely, its workman's definition of art in terms of craftsmanship, or "wisdom in making"; its view of art as "a virtue of the practical intellect"; its stress on the intellect and intelligibility in the judgment of beauty; and its ontological concern with *splendor formae*, the splendor of form. In these points of emphasis on intellect, virtue, the impress of form in substance, and the craft of making, Maritain follows the Angelic Doctor in the venerable classical tradition laid down by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*.

But we should add that there remains a key aspect of Aristotelian aesthetics that Maritain does not wish to pass on to his reader, no doubt due to his desire to distance himself from the secularizing materialism of modernity (manifested in the anti-metaphysical positivism of the Realists and Impressionists). Maritain does not applaud a *mimesis* that imitates the appearances of nature. He associates this imitative impulse with a theatrical insincerity that was introduced, with many ill effects, in the Renaissance, and which was codified for the next three hundred years in the rules of the Enlightenment academies. On this point, in his critique of *mimesis* as a falsifying of reality, it is instructive to note that Maritain agrees with Plato's idealism. Furthermore, unlike Aristotle's post-Cartesian followers in the royal Academies who instituted the rules that

dictated official art down to the post-impressionist revolution of Van Gogh and Cézanne, Maritain wished to replace rules with *habitus*, the “habit of art,” whose rectitude would, he thought, guide artists to “the good of what is made,” stressing that there are formal exigencies unique to each individual work that cannot be hardened into a set of rules.

Here we discern what is so striking about Maritain’s contribution to aesthetics, and what must have made *Art and Scholasticism* so heartening a discovery to the likes of Rouault, Mauriac, and O’Connor. It is the way in which Maritain returns to the old, though in a new way; in a way that allows for the modern impulse to “make it new.” Again, we should note that this is the characteristic “anti-modern modern” paradox of the *renouveau* thinkers. Despite his high regard for Aristotle, Maritain is by no means slavishly Aristotelian. He is rather a creative thinker intent on building a new structure (this is the modern part) out of pre-modern materials that moderns have been abandoned. Maritain has the highest regard for a lost tradition he hopes to recover (Thomism), though he has not the slightest intention of admiring it as a curious museum antiquity. Rather, he seeks to transpose Thomas’ concerns into the idiom and concerns of his time.⁶⁸ In Maritain’s view, the project of Enlightenment rationalism of the previous three centuries had so suppressed this great tradition that what he brought out as old must have seemed, to his modern readers, like something curiously new. The provocative title of Maritain’s first book, *Antimoderne*, states the ambivalence with which he met the pressures of what Charles Taylor has described as the fraught cross-currents of advanced modernity.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ We may note that there is something Gadamerian about this interpretive play of ideas and fusion of horizons in Maritain’s recovery project. In *Existence and the Existent* Maritain insists that he is not a neo-Thomist, but a Thomist (*Existence* 1).

⁶⁹ Maritain never wavered from this position over his long career. In one of his last works he wrote, “If I am anti-modern, it is certainly not out of personal inclination, but because the spirit of all modern things that have proceeded from the anti-Christian revolution compels me to be so, because it itself makes

To put it another way, this *antimoderne* provocateur was still in fascinating ways the *moderne* man of his time. Maritain's commitment to some aspects of the project of modern art is apparent in his praise for the stylistic innovations that followed in the wake of Cézanne's revolution in painting and the Symbolists' in poetry. Though he did not share Picasso's materialist worldview, and indeed became increasingly critical of the modern master over time, he was initially encouraged by Picasso's pioneering forays into abstraction. What he saw in Cubism and the succession of styles that followed were movements that proclaimed the "purity" of visual art: a breaking away from all the theatrical falsities that had crept in with the Renaissance and had, in the previous century, brought art to a level of complacency and hypocrisy that Maritain (and his fellow moderns) deplored. Maritain could be uncompromising in his insistence on the autonomy and integrity of art, fiercely guarding it from any commercial, sentimental, or other utilitarian ends, but also from the imitation of appearances.⁷⁰ What distinguished the liberal from the servile arts—what made them truly free—was their disinterestedness.⁷¹ Maritain liked to quote Rodin on this point: "Everything in art is ugly which is false."

The reader can take stock of some of these "old," in the sense of pre-modern, concerns in Maritain: old, certainly, is the emphasis on craftsmanship and the self-

opposition to the human inheritance its own distinctive characteristic, because it hates and despises the past and worships itself" (qtd. in Dougherty 31).

⁷⁰ This was the way Maritain expressed the distinction between poetry and literature: poetry was the pure expression of "creative intuition;" literature was an institution, already in some senses compromised by a utilitarian motive extrinsic to the poetic act.

⁷¹ In this insistence of disinterestedness, or the "purposeful purposelessness" of art, we note that Maritain agrees with Kant.

effacing humility of the artist as artisan making responsible use of a gift he has been given. Maritain's model here is the anonymity of the medieval cathedral-builder. Old, too, is his emphasis on the rigor of personal discipline and a concern for virtue, the *habitus* of the whole person devoted to the excellence of what is made. Also old is the ontological emphasis on beauty as a transcendental grounded in the splendor of the attributes of the Creator from whom all creation and creativity flows, as streams from a fountain. Maritain reiterates here Sir Philip Sidney's argument in the *Defense of Poesy* that the artist is a "sub-creator" whose creativity points to God's work of creation by impressing an idea on matter and shaping formlessness into form.⁷² The emphasis on integrity, proportion, and the splendor or radiance of form is very old: they are the formulations of the Angelic Doctor. We might note that it also bears strong resemblance to what the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in the century before Maritain gleaned from another Scholastic, Duns Scotus: namely, the "inscape," or unique splendor of form intrinsic to the "pied beauty" of things created by the God "whose glory is past change." Maritain stresses the intelligibility of formal splendor, a radiance variously displayed in created things, in a way reminiscent of Hopkins' interest in the *haecceity* or "whatness" of a thing.⁷³

Maritain's aesthetics are perhaps most interesting in his ambivalent reception of the heritage of Romanticism. It is undeniable that modern art was deeply impacted by the Romantics' "subjectivist turn." Maritain affirms that the work of art testifies, among

⁷² Sidney writes of "the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings" (Sidney 957).

⁷³ Thus it is not surprising that Maritain quotes at length a passage Hopkins wrote to Bridges on *The Wreck of the Deutschland* in a long footnote explaining the "radiance of the form" (28).

other things, to the whole personality of the artist who made it (this is in keeping with his existentialism). He has no wish to bracket off the creator from the work; indeed, it is for this reason that the artist's strict, almost ascetic, cultivation of *habitus* is so crucial. But at the same time, Maritain deplores Romantic egotism, which attained alarming heights in the visual arts following Courbet's outsized narcissism. He censures their bohemian indolence, the hedonistic abandonment of *habitus*, and their idolatry of the creation (naturalism) and art (aestheticism) over the worship of the Creator. Yet, and probably here the influence of his early teacher Bergson can be felt in Maritain, he admires the Romantics' *élan* as well as how they freed art from the strictures of Enlightenment academicism. His "splendor of form" seems Romantic in its emphasis on epiphany. And when he writes that beauty "tends of itself to draw the soul beyond the created," Maritain is in the realm of the beatific vision.⁷⁴

But here again Maritain makes a dramatic pivot away from the modern heirs of the Romantics, for in his account the epiphany of beauty is apprehended by the intellect; it is intelligible. And though he deplores the subjective path to skepticism Enlightenment rationalism takes in the wake of Descartes and Kant, Maritain is committed to the use of the mind: his great word is *intelligibility*. Jude Dougherty has noted that Maritain has "a Greek confidence in human intellect" (38). On this point he and his mentor Thomas are in the Aristotelian camp. Maritain agrees with Aquinas that art is "a virtue of the practical intellect"; it is created by, and intelligible to, the mind. It is in artistic beauty that intelligence comes to recognize the radiance of the creative intelligence of God. This is what makes art so indispensable an activity of humanity as bearing the *imago dei*.

⁷⁴ Maritain's "Romanticism" is muted in *Art and Scholasticism*, where the analysis is formal and austere; it is more overt in his later book, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*.

Maritain wants nothing to do with Romantic sentiment or emotional mawkishness, the Keatsian desire for a “life of sensations rather than of thoughts.”⁷⁵ His little treatise, so tightly and logically worked out, tends to austerity.

But again, this needs to be qualified. For this stress on the intellectual apprehension of beauty might seem to put Maritain in danger of the trap of idealism he decries in Descartes: namely, *gnosticism*, the denial of the body at the expense of the mind, the sacrifice of the material world to abstraction. Perhaps he anticipates the charge, because he is quick to emphasize that the intellect apprehends through the senses, and that art involves the imprinting of idea in matter, not an abstraction. The distinction is an important one, especially with respect to O’Connor’s fiction, for she too took pains to emphasize the “incarnational” nature of her fiction, its connection to dust.

What is significant here is how Maritain emphasizes both reason and imagination: an imaginative reason, or a reasonable imagination. It is an intuitive reason very different from Cartesian rationalism: an intuition grounded in faith. The artist is submissive and humble, and the artist is a prophet to his times, in a way that recalls the high function of the poet in Shelley’s *Defence*.⁷⁶ For the creative artist, in Maritain’s view, is able to discern certain lines of connection and render them visible in form. Art is incarnational, in this respect: it is the impress of idea on matter, a spiritual activity apprehended by the mind, but always through the senses and never denying the materiality of creation.

⁷⁵ “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” Keats wrote to Benjamin Bailey in 1817 (258).

⁷⁶ Compare Shelley’s line about poets (in Shelley’s view, “poet” stands more broadly for creative artist): “Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension” (Shelley 839).

O'Connor absorbed Maritain's ideas in a variety of fruitful ways. Her letters testify on several occasions to her enthusiasm for recommending *Art and Scholasticism* to her friends. In April 1957 she sent a copy of the book to Betty Hester (*HB* 216). Many of Maritain's ideas resonated so deeply with her that they become difficult to separate from her own theory of art. My purpose in highlighting some of these connections is to exemplify something of the depth of her engagement with Maritain. But I will go on to argue that a careful comparative reading suggests that as much as her fictional poetics testify to her grateful reception of Maritain, in some important ways they surpass what Maritain could give her. She writes in "The Church and the Fiction Writer" that a Christian writer's "belief in fixed dogma . . . add[s] a dimension to the writer's observation" (*MM* 150). Even after the evident points of agreement have been accounted for, her fiction bears an "added dimension" that goes beyond the aesthetics of her mentor.

But first, to the points of agreement: it is easy to see how closely O'Connor's own concerns as a Christian writer harmonized with Maritain's metaphysics as well as his aesthetics. A number of passages in *Mystery and Manners* so patently breathe the spirit of Maritain that one feels he could have written them. The harmony appears not just in the thoughts, but in the style by which they are expressed: one catches the incisive Maritainian method of distinguishing in O'Connor's own crisp sentences. No doubt the example of the Neothomists encouraged O'Connor's habit of reading a page or two of the *Summa* before bedtime (*HB* 93). The fact that she referred to herself as a "hillbilly Thomist" attests to her close personal identification with this reclamation project (*HB* 81). Here we might indicate some of the parallels.

Ontology. Ontology must come first, for by definition it undergirds all.

O'Connor found in Maritain a modern thinker who agreed with her own Christian conviction in the bedrock of what she called "ultimate reality" beyond the appearances of the natural world. She referred to this transcendent realm as the "mystery" she considered it her task as a fiction writer to adumbrate. Reality is not co-extensive with what the senses perceive, though it is not unintelligible to them. Maritain's ontological insistence on the intelligibility of being predicated on the Trinitarian Being of God matches the account O'Connor gives of her own view. God is personal, rational, and creative; He is the fountain of all being, reason, and beauty in the created world. The artist's task is, as O'Connor put it, to "render the invisible visible."

Like Maritain, she was not unaware of what follows from the fateful "subjective turn" Western philosophy had taken after the Romantics, and she knew that the unbelieving modern reader she wrote for had largely given up on transcendence following the successive critiques of Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche. She wrestled with the difficulties of communicating her vision of reality with her secularized reader. To understand the aesthetics of Maritain and O'Connor, one must begin with the conviction they share with the pre-moderns of the *a priori* existence of ultimate reality. All follows from this realist presupposition, which in the end is an article of supernatural revelation apprehended by faith, though (as for Pascal) not a blind faith that dismisses the empirical evidence of the senses or the testimony of reason.

Critique of Modernity. O'Connor agreed in principle with Maritain's critique of modernity. She decried, as he did, the crass materialism, positivism, and utilitarianism that had, in her view, eviscerated modern thought into a kind of formless therapeutic

pragmatism. She considered that atheistic nihilism was the lethal gas her culture breathed.⁷⁷ She also held, as Maritain did, that the continuity of the Judeo-Christian heritage was essential to the survival of personal freedoms and order in Western culture. Nietzsche owed more to the Christian moral categories of good and evil than he knew: the *anti-Christ* presupposes *Christ* just as *atheism* is attached to *theism*. O'Connor stresses this point in her talk at Sweetbriar College in March, 1963: "The Judeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed even the shape of modern atheism" (*MM* 155). We might note how closely her comments agree with Maritain's exposition of the futility by which Feuerbach and Nietzsche attempt to escape the theism in which their "anti-theological obsession" is rooted: "Why are these philosophies so charged with bitterness, unless it is because they feel themselves chained in spite of themselves to a transcendence and to a past they constantly have to kill, and in the negation of which their own roots are planted" (*Existence* 137).

O'Connor agreed with Maritain's critique of Enlightenment rationalism. Like Maritain, she was not opposed to reason—on the contrary, she praised Maritain's rational definition of art as "reason in making"—but she lamented what she and Maritain saw as the perversion of reason after Descartes.⁷⁸ She held that the Cartesian dissociation of

⁷⁷ "If you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe. If I hadn't had the Church to fight it with or tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw right now. With such a current to write against, the result almost has to be negative" (*MM* 97). See too: "This is a generation of wingless chickens, which is I suppose what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead" (90).

⁷⁸ Chesterton's two chapters in *Orthodoxy*, "The Maniac" and "The Suicide of Thought," make this case.

sensibility (severing intellect from mind, mind from body, and ultimately “brain in vat” from reality) was the first step to the solipsist endgame of the modern rejection of transcendence. In his early book *Three Reformers*, Maritain takes Descartes to task for this fateful move into what he calls “angelism.”⁷⁹ O’Connor understood, as Maritain did, the cost of advocating for transcendent truth in a modern context radically shaken in the aftermath of Nietzsche’s ambition to pulverize the “weakness” of the Christian virtues of humility and mercy and substitute the Dionysian glory of aesthetic self-fashioning, the will to power. She considered Maritain’s advocacy for Christian realism a prophetic witness in the contested arena of modern ideas, and she admired him for maintaining his convictions in the face of opposition.⁸⁰ And though she died the year before the changes of Vatican II were ratified, she shared Maritain’s concerns about the modernizing forces at work in Catholic liturgy and dogma.

Thus O’Connor, like Maritain and the other thinkers of the *renouveau*, was at the same time aware of her modern situation and profoundly critical of it. Her fictional techniques may have been modern; her dogmatic commitments were not.⁸¹

⁷⁹ In Maritain’s view, the grave error of Descartes’ method is to suppose that he has unmediated, angelic knowledge: “The sin of Descartes is a sin of *angelism*. He turned Knowledge and Thought into a hopeless perplexity, an abyss of unrest, because he conceived of human Thought after the type of angelic Thought. To sum it up in three words: What he saw in man’s thought was *Independence of Things*” (Maritain, *Three Reformers* 54-55).

⁸⁰ Jude Dougherty reports that although University of Chicago president Robert M. Hutchins promoted Maritain’s candidacy three times to the philosophy faculty, Maritain was denied each time because the department deemed him a “propagandist,” not a philosopher (32). Much of Maritain’s energies over the course of his career was given to debate and polemics. Dougherty reports that he was gentle in person but could be a fierce contestant in debate (32).

⁸¹ What she thought of the heterodoxies of the controversial paleontologist-mystic Teilhard de Chardin has been debated. While she admired some of Chardin’s less radical ideas—his notion of “passive diminishment” helped her to accept her slow death at the hands of lupus—the ironically-titled “Everything that Rises Must Converge” leaves little question, I think, about what she thought of the evolutionary eschatology of Chardin’s “Omega Point.”

Reason in Making. O'Connor praised Maritain's definition of art for its unsentimental clarity. Maritain admits in *Art and Scholasticism* that St. Thomas did not write much about art. But he finds more than enough to unpack in these definitions he lifts straight out of the pages of the *Summa*: art is "reason in making" and "a virtue of the practical intellect." The purpose of art is "the good of that which is made." Beauty is "that which being seen, pleases." Aesthetic beauty is the "splendor of form." This formal beauty entails such things as radiance, proportion, and harmony.

It was the application of Maritain's ontological metaphysics to the definition and function of modern art—his signature contribution to aesthetics—that most attracted O'Connor. Here we note especially his definition of art, derived from Thomas, as "a virtue of the practical intellect." O'Connor delighted in the no-nonsense clarity of this definition. Unlike sentimental romantic accounts (Maritain uses the term "sentimental slush"), this definition put the primacy on the intellect, which is to say on the *idea*. This went along with Maritain's emphasis on art as intelligent craftsmanship—the impressing of an idea on matter—and on the intelligibility of form in the aesthetic act of judgment.

O'Connor found this emphasis on idea, craft, and form to be liberating, because it did not foreground, as post-Romantic aesthetics tended to do, the ego or personality of the artist. The definition was a humble one; it got the artist out of the way. O'Connor, who disdained any hint of self-promotion on the part of writers, liked that. Maritain placed the focus of the activity of art on making something well: "the good of that which is made." The true artist strives to make a good work and finds delight in the goodness of what is made *for its own sake*. This cleared away other considerations and motives as extraneous, and perhaps harmful: for example, the ambition for personal fame or fortune,

the pressure to conform to what is trendy or popular, or the temptation to barter artistic integrity for the sentimental affective response of the “instant uplift.”

The Habit of Art. It would be difficult to overstate how much traction O’Connor took from Maritain’s application of Thomas’ *habitus* to the realm of artistic creation. Sally Fitzgerald makes this point the foundation of her collation of O’Connor’s letters, which she titled *The Habit of Being* as a testimony to the transforming impact this aspect of Maritain’s thought had on her friend:

When Flannery went home, expecting to return to us, she left behind a book, *Art and Scholasticism*, by Jacques Maritain. I had mislaid it, and bought another copy to send her when I forwarded her things. She told me to keep her copy when I found it, and I have it still, underlined here and there by her. It was from this book that she first learned the conception of the “habit of art,” habit in this instance being defined in the Scholastic mode, not as mere mechanical routine, but as an attitude or quality of mind, as essential to the real artist as talent. (*HB* xvii)

Maritain’s recovery of the *habitus* was O’Connor’s inspiration to develop in her own life something of a modified cenobitic regimen.⁸² Her days varied, but what never changed for the fifteen years of her mature artistry is that she guarded her three precious hours of writing every morning from any intrusion. She knew this much about inspiration: she had to be perched at her typewriter when it struck. For O’Connor, as for Maritain, the

⁸² To Cecil Dawkins she wrote: “You ought to set aside three hours every morning in which you write or do nothing else; no reading, not talking, no cooking, no nothing, but you sit there. If you write all right and if you don’t all right, but you do not read; whether you start something different every day and finish nothing makes no difference; you sit there. It’s the only way, I’m telling you. If inspiration comes you are there to receive it” (*HB* 417-418).

artist's *habitus* was an active state of preparedness of the whole person that was essential for attending without distraction to the exacting needs of "the good of what is made."

Maritain's aesthetic treatise, though short in pages, was O'Connor's chief "cookery book" for her art. She would draw strength from Maritain's ideas throughout her career. The book gave her the critical terms for thinking about her craft and provided the theoretical armature on which to hone it. Above all, Maritain encouraged her to write in a way that integrated all aspects of her person, including her Christian faith. She did not need to hide her belief in Christian redemption; it was part of her act of seeing and judging, and therefore, inexorably part of her aesthetics. Maritain taught her how to be a Christian artist who did not produce "art for churches," but rather art for a modern unbelieving audience. John Sykes has perceptively argued that O'Connor had a message, and the New Critical aesthetic she learned at Iowa, based on Henry James and Flaubert, forbade her to tell it (Sykes 26). Maritain gave her the permission to proclaim a message through her art (4). *Art and Scholasticism* is a crucial introduction to some of the central concerns of O'Connor's fiction, precisely because she cut her aesthetic teeth on it.

VI

The many points of agreement between O'Connor and Maritain are consistent with her expressions of gratitude for *Art and Scholasticism*. Thus it seems natural to read O'Connor as a modern-day disciple of Thomistic aesthetics. She was that, certainly, but she was also more than that. To conclude this chapter, I will propose some ways in which O'Connor's poetics venture into areas that Maritain does not emphasize, or which do not fit neatly under his theory.

We must begin with the obvious: O'Connor wrote fiction; Maritain did not. But more to the point, neither did Maritain write much about the art of fiction. One finds in his essays references to fiction writers like Mauriac (he liked to quote Mauriac's dictum "*il faut purifier la source*"), and in the imagined dialogue in *Art and Poetry* Dostoevsky comes under discussion. Maritain even ventures into music, but the art of prose narrative does not occupy a prominent place in his thinking either *Art and Scholasticism* or *Creative Intuition*. In the latter book, all examples are drawn from visual art and short lyric poems. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain's thought seems for the most part to run in the direction of painting. And this makes sense, given his friendship with painters like Rouault and Chagall. In the decade after *Art and Scholasticism* he wrote essays on Chagall, Rouault, and Severini—all painters. He did not discuss fiction.

We should hasten to add that this is not necessarily a shortcoming when we consider Maritain's impact on O'Connor. The prominence of visual art in Maritain's aesthetics may even have attracted O'Connor, who cultivated a lifelong amateur talent for drawing and painting. As we will see in the next chapter, her entire approach to fiction is strikingly visual, and in her advice to writers, she often stressed the importance of careful observation. Nevertheless, it seems important to note that O'Connor's concern was mainly with the narrative and dramatic. The art of fiction involves a dedicated set of rhetorical concerns which are not specifically addressed in Maritain's aesthetics. Thus, while Maritain's ideas were of great value to O'Connor, we might say they were helpful mainly as broad definitions and inspirations: they set the tent pegs. Maritain gave her a big picture within which to organize her own thoughts about art, a theoretical framework by which to approach important philosophical questions of being, form, means and ends.

These were by no means insignificant gifts. Indeed, there was no modern genre for what Maritain created when he wrote *Art and Scholasticism*. It was a revolutionary document.

But Maritain's ideas were perhaps less immediately applicable in practice during those three hours before noon when O'Connor sat at her typewriter facing away from her window and descended, as every fiction writer must, into the hard work of dramatizing character and working out the plot of a *story*.⁸³ In those dark mines of creation, the application of Maritain's theory to the craft of storytelling was left to her own wits, and, we may surmise, to many an unrecorded conversation with her literary friends the Fitzgeralds, Caroline Gordon, and the Brainard Cheneys. Maritain certainly gave her plenty of resources to apply. Formal clarity, intellect and intuitive artistic logic, craftsmanship oriented to the good of what is made, self-denying *habitus*: the versatility of these directives can be seen in how she claimed them for a medium Maritain may not have had in mind. They are an indispensable place to begin, since they are where she began when she "cut her aesthetic teeth." It is no slight to Maritain to say that though his aesthetics tutored her, she went beyond her tutor. She worked in a medium he did not directly address, so she had to go further.

At this point, it may help to anticipate an objection. From the start, a number of O'Connor's readers have not approached her fiction by way of Maritain and have no interest in reading her work in relation to a pre-modern aesthetics, with its transcendental notions of being and beauty, or in any manner theologically. Some readers have found imaginative ways of reading her work that either downplay, ignore, or openly ridicule her professed Christian vision. O'Connor was aware of the variety of approaches her secular

⁸³ She called *The Violent Bear It Away* her "Opus Nauseous," and said that writing it made her hair fall out.

readers took to her stories; at times she was pained by the elaborate lengths of their *eisegeisis*. Her stories have been read for any number of non-theological reasons: for their grotesque freaks, quirky humor, Southern speech and manners, or portrayal of sex, race, class, and politics. And no wonder: her studies at Iowa under Robert Penn Warren and John Crowe Ransom were strongly marked by the New Critical emphasis on the autonomy and integrity of the art object.

Readers who attempt to bracket out O'Connor's theological concerns will likely also give scant attention to Maritain's aesthetics which helped her to frame these concerns. The difficulty such readers face is that O'Connor's Christian faith cannot be subtracted from her fiction as one might remove a speck of thread from the surface of a garment. Her Christianity makes up the warp and woof of that garment. Christian dogma is that by which she saw and understood the nature of reality; the drama of sin and redemption is what her work is relentlessly *about*.⁸⁴

It is not clear how O'Connor the author may be dissociated from O'Connor the Christian without in some way making her work into something it is not—that is to say, without forcefully reshaping it into a projection of the reader's desire. In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis makes this argument about the central importance of Milton's Christian faith: "Milton's thought, when purged of its theology, does not exist" (65). If modern secular readers do not share Milton's theology, Lewis suggests, they owe his poem at least the basic courtesy "to see the world as if [they] believed it, and then, while [they] still hold that position in [their] imagination, to see what sort of poem results" (65).

⁸⁴ "The greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or the loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama" (*MM* 167).

In the back of Lewis' mind, of course, is that the English Romantic poets did not render this basic courtesy to the author in their subjective appropriation of Milton's text.

If we approach O'Connor's fiction from the viewpoint of Maritain's aesthetics, we are left with an interesting question: how can the form of O'Connor's stories about the drama of sin and grace be harmonized with Maritain's transcendental ideal of beauty? This is where the application of Maritain's theory is perhaps more tricky to work out in the practical rhetoric of fiction. For Maritain, beauty is not only a transcendental, it is the sum of all transcendentals and their crown. The perception of beauty in art points the human soul beyond this material world to the glory of God's being.⁸⁵ Maritain follows Aquinas in emphasizing proportion, integrity, and radiance as the constituent properties of beauty. He does not specify in what ways a work would be judged to exhibit these properties, but he insists on their intelligibility to informed judgment. Nor does Maritain have any desire to lay down a set of rules. In his view, each work of art has an organic logic or exigency of its own by which the beauty of form emerges and becomes intelligible. The various ways proportion, integrity, and radiance are worked out belong to the unique *haeccity* of a form.⁸⁶ Thus, and conforming to his emphasis on intellect and metaphysics, Maritain lays out guidelines that shimmer in the realm of the ideal. Even though he defines art as something that is made, and as the impression of an idea on matter which is apprehended by the senses, he does not specify exactly *how* beauty as a transcendental is materially actualized in the work of art, or how it is intelligible as such.

⁸⁵ On this point Maritain agrees with the later theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote a massive multi-volume *Theological Aesthetics* based on this idea of beauty as the radiance of divine glory.

⁸⁶ On this point, again, we see Maritain's agreement with the weight Gerard Manley Hopkins placed on "instress" and "inscape."

Thus Maritain leaves considerable leeway in the application of his aesthetics. We may go on to ask how the Thomistic principles of proportion, integrity, and radiance that constitute beauty may be manifested in an O'Connor story that exhibits *prima facie* the apparently *opposite* features of angularity, distortion, and ugliness. If beauty is, in Thomas' formula, "that which seen, pleases," what do we make of all the famous grotesque elements of O'Connor's stories that may at first glance repel the judging eye? Where in Maritain's vision of beauty do we find room for the freaks, the maimed, the violence, the purple bruises and red clay dust, the ugly pride that blinds the eyes and distends the human heart? What harmony have these wretched things with beauty?

If O'Connor's stories can be called *beautiful*—and I will argue here that they can—it must be a form of beauty that embraces the ugliness, not one which shies away from it. Perhaps O'Connor's fiction comes to proportion, integrity, and radiance, but by a mysterious way that makes use of distortion, fracture, and obscurity. In my view, it is at this place that her aesthetics venture into places beyond Maritain's ken. For Maritain, beauty and ugliness do not belong together; they are mutually exclusive. But in O'Connor's stories, they make contact, and in a strange and paradoxical way that does not violate the beauty, but rather amplifies its splendor. This, I argue, is the striking form "the splendor of grace" takes in O'Connor's fiction. It comes by beauty not directly, but by way of an ironic path. We might call it a "cruciform beauty."

Obviously, this is a non-Hellenic approach to the beautiful. It is difficult to see how one might come to this judgment unless the matter is approached theologically. The key here, as it was for Augustine and Pascal, lies in an apprehension of the ruin of original sin which brings into focus both the price and the surprising beauty of

redemption by grace. It appears to me that O'Connor has a more pressing sense of the desperate plight of humanity after the fall than Maritain does, and that this makes her theological aesthetics take a different, non-Hellenic, direction. There is, in O'Connor, something visceral and urgent one does not sense in Maritain's metaphysical musings. For all the buffoonery that adds so much spice to O'Connor stories, we should not miss the note of urgency that lies behind them. The seriousness is this: O'Connor wrote that the modern world had lost the ability to grapple with the problem of evil because it had explained away the devil and had denied original sin. For her, the "bedrock of original sin" was the basic conflict of every story, the starting point for any drama:

The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character.

Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not. (*MM* 167)

What follows this declaration opens a crucial window on O'Connor's theological aesthetics:

The novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, a total experience of human nature at any time. For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama. The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan colleagues by recognizing sin as sin.

According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment, but as a responsible choice of offense against God which

involves his eternal future. Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. (*MM* 167)

It is this aspect of her theological aesthetics, which, if perhaps it is not entirely missing in Maritain, at least seems more muted. In Maritain's account, the "splendor of grace" does not include a robust interaction with the problem of original sin. Maritain's Thomistic splendor seems too pristine and rarefied for that: it jumps too quickly to an intellectualized beatific vision without wading into the muck of depravity. O'Connor's aesthetic places far greater emphasis on the ugliness of sin than does Maritain's. In her work, this emerges in the darkness and the violence and the grotesquerie of misshapen things. *Reason* tends to prefer tidier instruments. O'Connor's stories of grace venture into murkier and dustier corners of depravity, and this seems to be part of what is involved when she speaks of as the element of "mystery" in her work. It is the mystery, for example, of why such a one as Rufus Johnson with his club foot and lively sense of his own wickedness seems closer to "the splendor of grace" than the clueless counselor Shepard, who believes so firmly in his altruism that he is blind to the pride that ensures that, barring a dramatic work of grace, he will remain a lost soul.

Thus, we may say that the "splendor of the grace" of redemption in O'Connor comes to the reader as a mystery that faces the squalor of original sin and refuses to cloak it behind a fallacious sentimentality. John Bunyan's paradox of sin and grace in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* holds true for this aspect of her aesthetic: "great sin calls forth great grace, and where guilt is most terrible and fierce, there the mercy of God in Christ, when showed to the soul, appears most high and mighty" (Bunyan 344). Bunyan here restates Paul's paradox that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the

more” (English Standard Version, Rom. 5:20). The chief aesthetic principle here is one of *contrast*: the glory of redemption is related directly to its costliness, a cost can only be realized when sin is weighed for what it is. Perhaps the term *chiaroscuro*, associated in visual art with the dramatic oppositions in the tenebrism of a Caravaggio or Rembrandt painting, is the closest term in aesthetics to explain the intensity generated in these radical juxtapositions. And this approach to beauty seems to point to Augustinian-Pascalian thought as a better guide to O’Connor’s theological aesthetic of “the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil” than the more sanitized, rational Thomistic tradition Maritain represents.

We return to Jude Dougherty’s helpful insight that “a Greek confidence in the human intellect and the intelligibility of nature is the cornerstone of Maritain’s philosophy of being” (38). Perhaps it is this “Greek confidence” of Maritain’s that explains why his notion of the splendor of grace seems more sanitized than does O’Connor’s. Dougherty argues that for Maritain, Kant’s need to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith, “reflects the tradition of Luther and Calvin, whose doctrine of original sin holds that with ‘the fall’ intellect is so darkened that it cannot unaided conclude to the existence of God” (27). He explains:

Catholic thought, by contrast, is essentially and historically a system of intellectualism, of objectivism. The basic principle of Catholic thought asserts the reliability of intelligence, that is, that we are equipped with intellects that are able to know objective reality. Upon the reliability of our knowledge depend our practical decisions, our conduct. We can only do what is right on the condition that we know what is right. (28)

It is this “Greek confidence in the human intellect” to overcome all obstacles, and the downplaying of original sin as a weakening of the faculties, rather than the more Pauline and Augustinian view of a violent defacing of the *imago dei*, that accounts for an optimism in Maritain that O’Connor, who in her fiction presents a decidedly more grim view of anthropology under the aspect of the fall, does not share. Evaluating Maritain’s contribution as a political philosopher, Dougherty singles out his idealism as a potential area of weakness. Dougherty’s comments are worth attending to, because they highlight the distinction I am trying to make:

If Maritain has a fault, it lies in his idealism, in his optimism that good will and common sense will prevail and that public assessments of the value of religion will result in conclusions similar to those reached by him, conclusions which he believes have been reached by reflective men in every period of the history of the West. (24)

But even so, one of the aspects we do not readily find in Maritain, though we find it abundantly in O’Connor, is her marvelous sense of humor. It is not that Maritain cannot make a witticism from time to time, but his style as a whole tends to the serious and academic. The reserve is a French one, and also to some extent one he inherits from his profession. O’Connor seems to have had a soft spot for fools. She confessed a particular affection for one of her most foolish characters: Enoch in *Wise Blood*. She recognized aspects of herself very candidly in the intellectual invalid Joy/Hulga. There is a winsome self-deprecation about O’Connor’s sensibility that is not apparent in Maritain, who tended to work in a more serious and dignified register. There are many explanations for this difference, not the least of which is the difference between French

and American culture. To be fair, Maritain did not write fiction, but even O'Connor's nonfiction evokes a smile and not infrequently a good belly laugh. A careful reading of *The Habit of Being* reveals that one of the strange gifts of O'Connor's extreme physical limitation was that she learned not to take herself too seriously. It was not that she lacked a sense of dignity, but it appears that the impairment of her body taught her humility. The self-effacing humor is an important part of O'Connor's aesthetic, and in its own subtle way contributes to the beauty of O'Connor's writing:

It is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe. One reason a great deal of our contemporary fiction is humorless is because so many of these writers are relativists and have to be continually justifying the actions of their characters on a sliding scale of values. (MM 167-168)

This ironic juxtaposition of the serious and the comic could explain the "deep comedy" many readers have found in O'Connor's stories. Because of the security of her belief in the triumphant vindication of God's justice and grace in this fallen world, she could see the comical side of the universe. This writer of the tragedy of original sin could see her oeuvre, as Dante did, as a "divine comedy," because it pointed to the *evangelion*, the good news of the availability of redemption in Christ. On the conviction of that great Christian hope for the modern world, she and Maritain were agreed.

CHAPTER 3
O’CONNOR AND VISUAL ART:
“FOR THE ALMOST-BLIND YOU DRAW LARGE
AND STARTLING FIGURES”

Précis

From her earliest years, O’Connor drew before she wrote. The recent publication of her collected high school and college cartoons (2012) reveals important early graphic developments of her sensibility that would migrate into her pronounced visually-oriented poetics. This chapter begins with an examination of these juvenile cartoons and moves into a discussion of O’Connor’s continued creative engagement with the visual arts (she cultivated painting as a hobby). O’Connor’s comments about art are not showy, but her writings demonstrate that she possessed an interest in the problems of art and that she viewed art with keen judgment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of O’Connor’s insistence in her poetics on strengthening in fiction writers a “stereoscopic vision” which registers and relays the spiritual mystery manifested in the manners of the visible phenomena of the physical world.

This chapter is intended as a prelude to the comparative discussion of the compatibility of her fiction with the striking visual aesthetics of the chief *renouveau* painter of her time, Georges Rouault: the central concern of chapter four.

The publication five years ago of Flannery O'Connor's collected college cartoons (*Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*) suggests that the relationship between O'Connor's prose fiction and visual art deserves closer scrutiny than it has received. In the essay that anchors that volume, "The Habit of Art," Kelly Gerald argues that O'Connor's early work as a cartoonist should be considered an important aspect of her creative life (101). Readers of O'Connor's fiction may not know that she entered into her writing career after having been known to many of her high school and college peers as "the cartoon girl" (106). Indeed, after her graduation from GSCW in 1945, she traveled to Iowa to prepare for a career in journalism which she hoped would allow her to continue her cartooning. Gerald's intriguing thesis is that after she decided in earnest to pursue fiction writing, her graphic impulse was transferred to a different medium, and that this can go far to account for the "highly visual quality of her prose" (101). But the urge to draw and paint did not disappear entirely into her prose; she continued to cultivate her art hobby throughout her writing career. Much of this graphic work remains in the possession of the Cline family and has yet to find public display.⁸⁷

In this and the following chapter I wish to consider O'Connor's graphic impulse in the context of her engagement with the French thinkers of the *renouveau*. My intent is to set O'Connor's fiction in juxtaposition to the art of Georges Rouault, that movement's most important painter and printmaker and one of the great masters of modern art. I will argue that the intriguing matter of O'Connor's relationship to Rouault's visual art can best be discerned in light of the insistently visual nature of her art.

⁸⁷ It generates a stir at major O'Connor conferences, like the two I attended in Rome, Italy (2009) and Chicago (2012), when another of the secretive Cline hoard of O'Connor paintings sees its first light of day.

These two large aims will account for the division of material into two chapters. In this chapter, I will establish an important—and, in O’Connor’s case, at times under-appreciated—context by taking a closer look at this matter of the visual approach she took to her writing craft. The fact that she conceived of her verbal art largely in visual terms makes sense, on a basic level, in view of her lifelong hobby of drawing and painting. But the visual imagination can also be linked, as it was for Dante, to her Christian approach to art. Terms like *sight*, *imagination*, and *revelation* are inseparably bundled in O’Connor’s aesthetics. They are grounded in her belief that the witness of the universe as divinely created is not unintelligible to the senses—here to the chief of the senses, the eye. But the appeal is to a deeper vision too, through what the Apostle Paul calls “the eyes of the heart”: the vision of faith, the apprehension to inner sight of what is not seen through the physical eye. O’Connor liked to invoke the two-stage healing of the blind man in the Gospels: to believe, she wrote, is to begin to see.⁸⁸ I would like to look at this matter through her letters and essays, and suggest some ways the visionary quality of her prose readers have found so arresting is an indispensable feature of the Biblical mode of the prophetic.

The chapter which follows builds on this first part. In it I intend to explore what appears to be a fascinating connection, on several levels, between O’Connor’s fiction and the visual art of the great Catholic artist of her generation, Georges Rouault. Here we can find another important way in which O’Connor engaged with the cultural world of the French thinkers of the *renouveau*. And since Rouault was one of Maritain’s closest

⁸⁸ We might recognize this as a version of Augustine and Anselm’s *credo ut intelligam*. She wrote: “The poet is traditionally a blind man, but the Christian poet, and storyteller as well, is like the blind man whom Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision” (*MM* 184).

friends, the reverberations of this study in the context of this dissertation multiply in fascinating ways. One of these sympathetic vibrations which has largely gone unnoticed is the way in which Rouault's art offers another indirect way (Mauriac's novels are another) in which O'Connor would have encountered a vibrant idiomatic presentation in her time of Pascalian thought. A comparative study of O'Connor and Rouault holds out much promise and is, I believe, long overdue.

We will come to this matter after first engaging with O'Connor's own efforts in the visual arts (I), her evident interest and competence of judgment in the problems of visual aesthetics (II), and the prominence she accorded to the faculty of vision in her poetics of fiction (III). For, as Kelly Gerald has remarked, it seems significant that "she came to writing from a background in the visual arts, where everything that the artist communicates is apprehended, first, by the eye" (101).

Speaking of the eye, we might note the curious fact when people met O'Connor, the physical feature that almost invariably seems to have struck them first was the unique quality of her eyes. Something of her arresting gaze is conveyed in her favorite painting, the 1953 *Self-Portrait with Pheasant Cock*. Her publisher and close friend Robert Giroux remembers the first time he met the young author in New York, at the introduction of Robert Lowell: "She was very quiet. . . . But she had electric eyes, very penetrating. She could see right through you, so to speak" (Gooch 172). Louise Abbot recalls "those dark blue and extraordinarily beautiful eyes" (227). Gabrielle Rolin, a young French journalist and novelist who met her in Paris during her short sojourn on her trip to Lourdes in 1958, notes that "Flannery's way of speaking reminded me of Donald Duck . . . but her eyes . . .

perhaps she owed this interior light to her faith, this look so sharp and blue. Flannery saw further, higher, elsewhere” (30).

I

We begin with some account of O’Connor’s significant early efforts in the visual arts. It may seem odd to imagine how altered our cultural landscape would be if Flannery O’Connor had become a cartoon journalist rather than a fiction writer. But when she graduated from Georgia State College for Women (hereafter GSCW) in 1945 at the age of 20, such was her plan. She enrolled at the University of Iowa with the intention of combining her abilities in visual art with journalism. During her college years, her cartooning accomplishments were so evident in her community that the *Macon Telegraph and News* profiled her as “an up-and-coming cartoonist.”⁸⁹ Her feature editor at GSCW’s student newspaper the *Colonnade* articulated the thoughts of many when she supposed “she might become the new James Thurber” (qtd. in Gooch 110). But in the fall of 1945, after just one semester of journalism courses at Iowa, O’Connor sat across the desk from the director of the Writer’s Workshop, Paul Engle, and scrawled the three fateful sentences on a card (because Engle could not interpret her Georgia accent): “My name is Flannery O’Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writers’ Workshop?” (Gooch 117). Thus the Rubicon was crossed. She abandoned the potential career path as “the new James Thurber” of cartooning to become what we know today, one of the great American writers of the last century.

⁸⁹ Nelle Womack Hines’ feature story on O’Connor was entitled “Mary O’Connor Shows Talent as Cartoonist.” In it, Hines hailed O’Connor as a “female Ogden Nash” (Gooch 96).

Thus we note that for 20 of O'Connor's 39 years, for half of her life, the impulse to draw preceded the pressure to write. When in the fall of 1940 she met the advisor of her high school newspaper the *Peabody Palladium*, she reportedly told him, "I don't know how to write. But I can draw" (qtd. in Gooch 72). By October she was duly installed as the *Palladium's* art editor. Her biographer Brad Gooch gets it right when he says that even though O'Connor claimed not to be a writer at this stage, "she was really writing nearly as much as drawing. For her, the two activities were joined from the start" (73).

Kelly Gerald has shown how O'Connor's habit of sketching and cartooning dates back to her early childhood years in Savannah (Gerald 101). She grew up with no siblings, in a world largely peopled with adults. In her secluded upstairs room across the square from St. John's Cathedral, "she kept the precious crayons and paper she preferred as gifts to candy and sweets" (Gooch 31). As is the case for most children, O'Connor drew before she could write. But whereas many children tend to stop drawing after they learn to write, she continued to draw. Her favorite subject, not surprisingly, was birds (31).⁹⁰ She was a precocious and introverted child who could spend countless hours drawing and making up imaginative stories about her animals (Gerald 103). The young O'Connor appears to us, at this early stage, as a potential southern version of Beatrix Potter. She may have felt the connection herself. Years later she would write to Betty Hester, "I was strictly a *Peter Rabbit* man myself" (HB 288).⁹¹

⁹⁰ Years later, when she began creating her linoleum cuts at GSCW, she developed a clever monogram of the letters M. F. O. C. (Mary Flannery O'Connor) in the shape of a bird.

⁹¹ Gerald adds: "Her taste for making up stories about the adventures of animals and her drawings of birds share similarities with Potter's illustrations, including the clothes. Like Potter, she gave her animal companions a special status, populating the landscape of her imagination with them instead of people" (Gerald 108).

In high school at Peabody in Milledgeville, and later at GSCW, the teen-aged O'Connor continued to draw as her primary means of self-expression. In fact, drawing became her badge of distinction among her peers. Gerald makes the perceptive comment that during the socially awkward years following the sudden loss of her beloved father Edward to lupus, "she craved the recognition her drawings and stories brought her, and she used them to reach out to people as much as to sustain her introverted personality" (105). During the five years that spanned the Second World War (1940-1945) she served in a remarkable array of literary and journalistic endeavors: as art editor of the Peabody *Palladium*, editor-in-chief of the GSCW *Corinthian* literary magazine, feature editor of the *Spectrum* yearbook, and art editor of the *Colonnade* newspaper (Gooch 109). When she graduated from college in 1945 many of her classmates viewed her as a talented local cartoonist likely to embark on a career in journalism.⁹² The fact that she submitted her cartoons for some years on a regular basis to the *New Yorker* confirms that she shared these hopes.⁹³ Not only did she study and imitate the work of the famed *New Yorker* cartoonist James Thurber,⁹⁴ one of her course textbooks was *A Century of Political Cartoons* (Gooch 110). Later, her book collection at Andalusia included Henry James's monograph on Daumier's cartoons (Gerald 129).

⁹² The 1944 *Spectrum* accorded this special recognition: "Mary Flannery O'Connor, of cartoon fame, was the bright spot of our existence. There was always a smile in the *Spectrum* office on the days when her linoleum cuts came in" (Gerald 106).

⁹³ Reflecting on this experience just a year before her death, she writes, "I like cartoons. I used to try to do them myself, sent a batch every week to the *New Yorker*, all rejected of course. I just couldn't draw very well" (*HB* 536).

⁹⁴ Gerald writes: "Thurber's line drawings were minimalist and deceptively simple. He used as few strokes as necessary to give his creations substance, concentrating on the essence of a situation or an impression rather than its material details. He was spare in creating facial expressions and allowed the attitude and positioning of bodies, often themselves little more than an outline, to communicate with unencumbered clarity. In these and other ways, O'Connor's cartoons share a kinship with his" (Gerald 114).

Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons reprints in handsome coffee table format the 120-odd linoleum block prints O'Connor published in various student publications during her five years as a student in Milledgeville (1940-1945).⁹⁵ In his foreword to the prints, graphic artist Barry Moser evaluates their merits as works of art. His comments are especially valuable since they are made by a professional printmaker. Moser concedes that at face value, the prints might seem unremarkable. Albrecht Dürer can rest unperturbed; O'Connor was no minor master of the printmaking medium. None of the cartoons rise above the level of juvenilia. They were clearly intended for momentary journalistic consumption; many of them comment on current events and local gags whose context has been lost. Moser points out, to be fair, that linoleum-block printing does not lend itself to sophistication: it is like attacking a soft potato with a blunt instrument (Moser vii). O'Connor worked quickly and with naïve craftsmanship (viii).⁹⁶

But what the cartoons lack in sophistication they make up for in what Moser praises as “muscle” (viii). In other words, they *work* as images. Moser sees flashes of real genius in O'Connor’s college cartoons, the early seeds of an aesthetic that would grow to maturity years later in her narrative fiction, transplanted then in new soil. His remarks can be summed up under four heads. First, the linoleum prints have all been drawn backwards, a technique befitting an artist who would often find herself working counter to convention. Second, they are generously imbued with her comic spirit. Third,

⁹⁵ Gooch summarizes the technical process: “drawing a sketch on a piece of linoleum, gouging away the white portions, applying oil-based ink to the ridges, printing a reversed paper copy on a special press” (Gooch 72).

⁹⁶ “Her cuts are coarse in technical terms. I suspect that most of them were done inside an hour’s time. If not, then she was dawdlin’. . . . It is obvious she did not work long and hard on these images, and that is very much a part of their charm. She also said that a story—or a linoleum print, if you will—has to have muscle as well as meaning, and the meaning has to be in the muscle. Her prints certainly have muscle, and a lot of it” (Moser viii).

they demonstrate her early keenness in capturing physical gesture. Finally, they show a native sense of composition. Some elaboration of these points seems in order.

To begin, Moser notes that linoleum block printing forces the artist to draw backwards (vii). In the impression, image and letters are reversed. Even if all who use the medium face the same constraint, Moser finds in it a curiously apt metaphor for O'Connor's artistic vision. To him it suggests the famous anecdote of the six-year-old O'Connor training a chicken to walk backwards on a 1931 episode of Pathé News, the event that she would jokingly call "the high point of my life." The discipline of having to draw reverse images seems a fitting visual apprenticeship for a writer whose fiction would prominently feature the dramatic reversals of irony. It is an intriguing observation.

The cartoons also testify generously to O'Connor's comic spirit. Her vignettes are satires of college life, and though they can be trenchant, a lightness of touch prevents them from mean-spiritedness. Nelle Womack Hines commented in her profile for the *Macon Telegraph and News* that "a keen sense of humor enables her to see the funny side of situations which she portrays minus the sting" (qtd. in Gooch 96). In other words, though O'Connor's characteristic mode is satire, a warmth softens the edge of her sarcasm. Moser detects in the prints an early manifestation of O'Connor's willingness to poke fun of herself. She skewers any hint of pretentiousness, especially intellectual fatuousness. Her captions display her gift for the comic one-liner. Gerald points out how her caricatures of contrasting pairs are influenced by the buddy comedy (i.e. Laurel and Hardy) prevalent in the 1940s. It is intriguing to note how this "buddy comedy" routine

of the cartoons would be continued in her stories, many of which work dramatically by the tension of opposing characters.⁹⁷

Third, perhaps the cartoons' most intriguing revelation is the artist's sensitivity to the subtle semantics of physical gesture. According to Moser, a portraitist's facility with gesture is more of a gift than a technique that can be taught. "Much can be forgiven in drawing the human figure if the gesture is right" (ix), and O'Connor evinces this gift for the "right gesture" in spades. Moser sees in a foot turned under another foot a *tour de force* of dramatic pose. He adds, "this understanding of gesture flows over into her fiction" (ix). Years later O'Connor would write of the Grandmother's iconic gesture at the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" that what makes a story work is "an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected" (MM 111).⁹⁸ O'Connor's earliest practice with rendering gesture came in her cartooning. Gesture is basic to what she would later call "manners." The importance of gesture is that it makes contact with mystery: thus, mystery *and* manners, or rather, mystery *through* manners.⁹⁹

Finally, the cartoons reveal O'Connor's expert eye for pictorial composition. Though she apparently had no formal training in design, the way in which she breaks up

⁹⁷ Examples of this abound in her fiction: we might think of Haze and Enoch in *Wise Blood* or Mr. Head and Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger." O'Connor's most consistent use of these dramatic foils is in her stock situation of the female landowner with her helper sidekick, as in Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person", Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard in "The Circle of Fire," and Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People." Gooch perceives that O'Connor loves to play with patterns in her stories (Gooch 8).

⁹⁸ The connection here to the climactic dramatic gesture of what in the Baroque period, and particularly with reference to Rembrandt's painting, is called "the pregnant moment," merits further inquiry.

⁹⁹ "The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. . . It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery" (MM 111).

the picture plane in a complex visual pattern in “Oh well, I can always be a Ph.D.” (34) reminds Moser of the design of Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror* (ix).¹⁰⁰

Kelly Gerald sums up the significance she finds in O’Connor’s cartoons: “Her cartoons show her talent for mimicking what she observed about people and their appearances, behavior, and manners, and what these things revealed about their character. Her carefully drawn satires together with her use of recognizable scenes and landmarks from the campus give her work a documentary flavor, impressionistic but essentially revelatory and truthful” (107). We might quibble with her choice of the word “impressionistic,” but it is noteworthy that Gerald calls these rather coarsely-executed and heavily-stylized line sketches “revelatory and truthful.”

The cartoons may be dismissed as juvenile (O’Connor would not have defended them as anything else), but Moser and Gerald show how their iconography and design elements may be “read” as bearing significant visual clues of the literary artist O’Connor would later become in a different medium. They are “a largely unacknowledged aspect of her creative life” (101). Her friend, the poet Robert Fitzgerald, also saw them in this light. In his foreword to her final collection of stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, he wrote of these cartoons that “in the linoleum cuts the line was always strong and decisive with an energy and angularity” (qtd. in Gooch 111). Clearly, Fitzgerald meant the reader to see the connection between the “strength of line” and “energy and angularity” in the cartoons and the analogous flinty *élan* of her fiction. Thus the cartoons may be taken as visual indices pointing prophetically to aesthetic elements

¹⁰⁰ To my mind, the graceful rhythmic harmony of lines in the print “These Two Express...” (13) suggests the dancing Graces in Botticelli’s *Primavera* or, closer to O’Connor, Matisse’s *The Dance*.

she would later continue, transposed, in the medium of her fiction writing. They are an important part of her developing habit of art (Gerald 101).

Around the age of 21, during the course of her first year as a graduate student at Iowa, O'Connor made the momentous change of career path from drawing to creative writing. The rejections her cartoon submissions received from the *New Yorker* apparently helped to confirm this decision.¹⁰¹ The career in journalism she and many of her college peers envisioned faded as a realizable goal. Perhaps her journalism classes at Iowa did not satisfy her creative imagination. Whatever the reason, after she met with Paul Engle to request a place at the Writer's Workshop, she would never look back. As Gerald observes, the impulse to doodle and cartoon tended to disappear even from her letters: "her urge for cartooning had migrated to her fiction" (128).

This change of medium from the graphic to the verbal meant a significant technical shift, certainly, but it also entailed something of a redirection, though not a radical break, for her creative imagination. It is not difficult to see how the cartooning urge could now be satisfied in the freakish cast of characters she began to "sketch" in her stories.¹⁰² Given O'Connor's early outlet in cartooning, it is not surprising that her readers have noted a pronounced visual abstraction in her fiction that suggests the stylized work of a cartoonist. Of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" she would say, for

¹⁰¹ "I like cartoons. I used to try to do them myself, sent a batch every week to the *New Yorker*, all rejected of course. I just couldn't draw very well" (*HB* 536). She also appears to have been frustrated by some of her journalism and art courses during her first semester at Iowa.

¹⁰² In this, intriguingly, O'Connor's career path bears comparison to that of the inimitable Catholic convert G. K. Chesterton, who began at the Slade School of Art as a cartoonist before discovering his vocation in letters. The difference is that Chesterton became an essay-writing journalist who wrote fiction on the side, and O'Connor became a fiction writer who wrote essays on the side. Both had fertile imaginations, and both, intriguingly, came into their writing careers through a childhood littered with the juvenilia of doodling and cartooning.

example, “[it] is not meant to be realistic, it is stylized and its conventions are comic even though its meaning is serious” (*HB* 437). “Stylized” and “comic” are the operative words. The story even foregrounds comic books: June Star is introduced as “reading the funny papers on the floor” (*CS* 117). In the car, she and John Wesley “exchange comic books” (119). Even Bailey’s garish “yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it” (125) seems to belong in a comic book frame.

The conventions of cartooning feature most prominently in the madcap melodrama of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, a book in which everything seems to run to extremes at fever pitch. The characters appear to the reader as coarsely-drawn cartoon caricatures with exaggerated features. Even their names are outlandish. Thus Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock is described, in the opening paragraph as “a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs and pear-shaped legs that slanted off the train seat and didn’t reach the floor” (*WB* 3). It is not difficult to imagine her as entering the story directly from one of the author’s linoleum prints. She sets the tone for the novel’s other characterizations. Hazel Motes is stenciled in our minds with “a nose like a shrike’s bill and a long vertical crease on either side of his mouth” (4). “His suit was a glaring blue and the price tag was still stapled on the sleeve of it” (4). His sidekick Enoch Emery has “yellow hair and a fox-shaped face” (34). Asa Hawks, “the fake blind man” (109), “was a tall cadaverous man with a black suit and a black hat on. He had on dark glasses and his cheeks were streaked with lines that looked as if they had been painted on and had faded” (35). The flattened, angular, mechanical visual style of the following passage, reported in a jaunty succession of snapshot frames, epitomizes the unique visual aesthetics of O’Connor’s first novel:

[Haze] . . . watched them go up on the porch of a *box-like* two-story house. When the blind man opened the door a shaft of light fell on him and Haze craned his neck to see him better. The child turned her head, slowly, *as if it worked on a screw*, and watched his car pass. His face was so close to the to the glass that it looked like a *paper face pasted* there. (99, my italics)

This exaggerated visual aesthetic accounts in great part for the novel's sustained power as farce. It packs a punch its unsuspecting first readers and reviewers in 1952 felt more strongly than we, who have been forewarned, do today.¹⁰³ Frederick Asals was the first critic to analyze this "imagination of extremity" in depth. O'Connor shocks the reader with the extreme, angular, and garish features that work as a sustained prose transposition of the heavy stylizing features of cartoon illustration. The bold, uniform color schemes (blue, pink, yellow, black) and stark animal features (shrike's bill, fox face, simian streaks) could emerge from the drawing boards of Disney's design studios. But not the story; the story, a relentlessly theological one, is vintage O'Connor.¹⁰⁴ *Wise Blood's* singular contribution to twentieth-century American fiction lies in how its twenty-five-year-old author raises this comic-book farce to the level of the anagogical, deploying a low pop-culture format as a vehicle for examining the theological mystery of original sin and the incarnation of Christ.¹⁰⁵ Nothing like this had ever been done before.

¹⁰³ Gooch notes that 1952 was the publishing date of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Sallinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared the year before.

¹⁰⁴ With its shocking elements of prostitution, profanity, murder, self-blinding, and preoccupation with original sin and redemption through Jesus Christ, the story is all O'Connor.

¹⁰⁵ The novel's visual extremity is what makes it impossible to "translate" into the medium of film without having the ridiculous overwhelm the anagogical. John Hughes, great filmmaker though he is, demonstrates

The youthful zest of this “cartoon aesthetic,” so prominently displayed in *Wise Blood* and “A Good Man,” seems to modulate tonally as her fiction ripens. Stories like “The Displaced Person” signal the change of sensibility. O’Connor herself noted that the novel she published ten years later was considerably darker in its palette. To Betty Hester she wrote: “This book is less grotesque than *Wise Blood* and as you say less funny. But if it had been funny, the tone would have been destroyed at once” (HB 343).

The cartooning bent of high school and college days would migrate, as she settled into her life in Andalusia beginning in the spring of 1951, in the direction of drawing and painting. Many of these visual works of art O’Connor produced as a hobbyist have not yet been released to the public by the Cline family, who hold them in trust. Those which have come to light, again, are by no means masterworks and in their pictorial *naïveté* suggest the “primitive” works of the *Douanier* Rousseau or Americana folk.¹⁰⁶

O’Connor’s paintings can only be touched on here. As a college student, O’Connor painted murals on the office walls of the student center in the basement of Parks Hall (Gerald 115). These were not so much paintings as scale transfers of her line-drawn cartoons. Before her graduation she completed a painting, *Winter*, which was included in a traveling exhibition through Georgia (Gooch 111). At Iowa, it bears mention that Grant Wood, an Iowa professor, had painted his iconic *American Gothic* during the decade before O’Connor arrived (120).¹⁰⁷ She took courses in life drawing

the intractability of this material for film. It becomes a campy cross between Monty Python and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. All is grotesquerie; what is lost is the theological mystery.

¹⁰⁶ O’Connor was certainly aware of Rousseau’s works; she professed a fondness for one of his dogs. Gooch also suggests the bold color and “vibrant expressionist brushstrokes” of Van Gogh as a comparison (Gooch 247).

¹⁰⁷ O’Connor never talked about Wood or his work, though Gooch reports that she attended a picnic at Paul Engle’s summer house, previously owned by the artist-professor (Gooch 138). It is interesting that Wood’s

from the Art Department before she switched to the Writer's Workshop (120-122). During her two years of residence at the artist community Yaddo in New York, painters were among her friends (163). After Yaddo, she came to know Sally Fitzgerald, who among many other talents was an aspiring painter (171). O'Connor took up oil painting as a regular hobby on her return to Milledgeville, enrolling in painting classes in town and decorating the farmhouse with simple scenes from farm life: still-life "studies of zinnias in bowls, angular cows under bare trees, a worker's shack in winter, and a rooster's angry head" (227). At the autograph party staged by the GSCW librarians where she signed copies of *Wise Blood* in 1952, several of her recent oil paintings adorned the walls (210).

The painting she deemed most successful (she mentions it in several letters over a ten-year period) is her *Self-Portrait with a Pheasant Cock*, which she painted in the spring of 1953 "after a very acute siege of lupus" (HB 525). Gooch describes the painting as a most unconventional self-portrait "done in bright Van Gogh reds, oranges, and greens, with vibrant expressionist brushstrokes" (Gooch 246-247).¹⁰⁸ O'Connor made a remarkable statement about this painting in a 1963 letter to Janet McKane: "When I painted it I didn't look either at myself in the mirror or at the bird. I knew what we both looked like" (HB 525). The assured comment, "I knew what we both looked like," suggests that O'Connor did not wield a tentative paintbrush. She attacked her

aesthetic of "regionalism" cultivates the kind of folk *naïveté* that recalls something of O'Connor's visual work. And in light of her interest in "Southern Gothic," the "American Gothic" title seems to invite comparison.

¹⁰⁸ He describes, further, "its full-on portrayal of herself, oval-eyed, wearing a fiery yellow halo of a sunhat, her arm wrapped around a fearsome dark bird" (Gooch 246).

visual art with the aplomb she could muster at the typewriter.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps this is what Moser has in mind when he finds in her visual work “plenty of muscle.” The comment also indicates an important feature of her creative imagination: though she began with careful observation of visual data, she was by no means slavishly bound to it.

II

We now turn to the evidence we have for Flannery O’Connor’s aesthetic judgment as a viewer of art. Certainly she never pretended to be an accomplished art critic; consequently, her abilities as a perceptive art observer could be, and have been, underestimated.¹¹⁰ She often delighted in caricaturing the posturing that could surround modern art. One of her GCSW cartoons positions two college students in front of some crude angular shapes apparently meant to represent a modern painting. The student with O’Connor’s features says to her sidekick, “I don’t enjoy looking at these old pictures either, but it doesn’t hurt my reputation for people to think I’m a lover of fine arts” (Gerald 24). At the beginning of her story “The River,” the sitter Mrs. Connin scrutinizes a nonobjective watercolor (“black lines crossing into broken planes of violent color”) hanging on the wall of the Ashfields’ sterile modern apartment. She says, “I wouldn’t have paid for that. I would have drew it myself” (157-158). Mrs. Connin has been linked with the prophetic; her leading feature is that she stares “with a skeleton’s appearance of

¹⁰⁹ Compare, for example, her statement to Maryat Lee: “I am fixing to paint this afternoon and regardless of nature I will do a painting in the colors of this glass plate” (*HB* 376).

¹¹⁰ She was characteristically self-deprecating about her taste in art. See her almost apologetic comment, “which is as far as I can get as per art,” to Betty Hester after she writes of her fondness for the facial expressions of Daumier’s caricatures. We should take such self-teasing with judicious suspicion: “methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

seeing everything” (CS 170). In the story, her comment is not just a judgment on the art; it is clearly a censure on the dehumanized, spiritually desiccated lifestyle the art reflects.

It is clear from this moment in “The River,” and from many letters in *The Habit of Being*, that the visual arts make up a critical part of O’Connor’s aesthetic world. She had at least an educated layman’s appreciation for the history and specialized vocabulary of that discipline. Music was another matter entirely. She lamented jokingly that she had “the original Tin Ear”: “All classical music sounds alike to me and all the rest of it sounds like the Beatles” (HB 566). Even if we allow for the pleasure she took in exaggerated self-deprecation, it appears the comment was not far from the mark. She gives little play to music in either her letters or her fiction.¹¹¹ She wrote her stories in the era of Bernstein’s *West Side Story* and the Beatles invasion, but apart from a passing satirical reference to an Elvis hit in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” music does not feature prominently in her aesthetic world.¹¹²

What she says about visual art shows that she possessed a shrewder eye than she sometimes let on. It is important for our discussion of Rouault to note that O’Connor took a lively interest in the aesthetic debates surrounding modern art. At Iowa she had taken a philosophy course in aesthetics (Gooch 133). But apart from her formal training, many unrecorded “dinner table” conversations about art would have naturally arisen in

¹¹¹ However, probably thanks to the instruction of Caroline Gordon, her ear was not made of tin when it came to hearing the sounds of words in her stories. She wrote with the ear of a poet. Early evidence of this can be seen in her story “The Crop,” where the protagonist-author, clearly a self-portrait, worries about the sounds of words.

¹¹² The club-footed bully Rufus Johnson brandishes Norton’s deceased mother’s corset and shakes his hips: “‘Gonter rock, rattle and roll,’ he sang. ‘Gonter rock, rattle and roll. Cant please that woman, to save my doggone soul’” (CS 456). We should add this important qualifier: O’Connor had a very keen ear for the sounds of words and for speech cadences, a native knack for intonation and prosody Caroline Gordon helped her develop.

her circle of friends, beginning at Iowa and the artist community at Yaddo, and continuing in her discussions with the Fitzgeralds and the group of Southern Agrarians in the Nashville area. We have already noted the general enthusiasm her closest circle of friends expressed for Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, a book which is explicitly geared toward painting. Here we note that Maritain's Scholastic definition of beauty, lifted straight off a page of Aquinas, gives primacy to the visual faculty: *id quod visum placet*, "that which being seen, pleases."

She was interested in keeping up with current books and articles on art. She read André Malraux's *Voices of Silence* and ordered a book of Daumier's drawings, "because it is what I like," intending to give it to her friend Betty Hester as a Christmas present (HB 494). As has been noted, she owned a copy of Henry James' monograph on Daumier (Gerald 129). What she liked about Daumier's caricatures (not surprisingly, given her interest in cartooning), was "the expressions on their faces" (494). After having read a 1963 *Atlantic* article on Chagall with evident interest, she wrote simply, "Chagall is one of my favorites" (HB 531). It is one of the many moments in her letters when the reader senses that much lies behind the statement that is now lost.

In 1957, her friend Ashley Brown encouraged her to write a review for the *Bulletin* of Etienne Gilson's recently-published A. W. Mellon lectures, *Painting and Reality*.¹¹³ That she took him up on the challenge, and studied Gilson's work attentively, is confirmed by her reference to a technical footnote about abstraction in the chapter "Imitation and Creation." In it the painter Jean Bazaine makes the intriguing case for

¹¹³ Brown would eventually become a longtime professor of English at the University of South Carolina. Before he died in 2008, I was privileged to interview him briefly about O'Connor over the phone.

considering Jan Van Eyck “the most abstract of all painters” (Gilson 259). The footnote runs, in part:

The power of interiority, and of getting beyond the visible, which creation implies, does not depend upon the greater or smaller degree of resemblance between the work and external reality, but, rather, upon its degree of resemblance with an internal world that entirely envelops the external one and that expands itself up to the pure rhythmical motives of being. . . . Van Eyck might well represent the extreme point ever reached by abstraction in the whole history of painting. (259)

Gilson adds a comment to the note: “This entirely confirms the conviction that, in the last analysis, beauty is one and the same for both imitational and nonimitational art. Of course, here, the meaning of ‘abstraction’ is: the resemblance of the painting to the internal reality present in the mind of the painter” (259). On the previous page, he defines “abstraction” as “the elimination of whatever is not required for the actual realization, under the form of a painting, of the germinal form present in the mind of the painter” (258).

Gilson’s discussion of abstraction as the paring away of what is extraneous to the realization of form evidently appealed to O’Connor. She writes Ashley Brown on April 14, 1958 with the breathless excitement of one eager to share a startling discovery: “Did you read the footnote in the Gilson book (that you suggested I get to review and that I finally got) about Van Eyck’s abstractionism, quoted from Bazaine? I think this has some analogy to the grotesque in fiction” (*HB* 277). It is a revealing moment when we see, in a flash, how O’Connor could assimilate Gilson’s visual theory to nourish her own

thinking about form in fiction, particularly with regard to the grotesque.¹¹⁴ This is typical for the way O'Connor approached everything as grist to grind into her fictional grain. As she said, she had a "food-chopper brain."

O'Connor wrote to Brown at a time when she was contemplating her itinerary for her expedition in the spring of 1958 to Lourdes and other cultural sites in Western Europe with her aunt Katie Semmes and Regina the following spring. It was to be the only time she crossed the Atlantic.¹¹⁵ Though she expressed her anxiety about the feasibility of this trip in her debilitated state, she was evidently pleased with the prospect of viewing Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* portrait in London. She hoped, too, to visit the Matisse chapel in Vence, France, which opened to the public in 1951 (Gooch 299). In the event, the weakening in her bones (she could only get around on crutches at this point) meant that her travel itinerary had to be scaled back considerably. She caught a cold at the Fitzgeralds' villa south of Genoa (where Robert was working on his translation of the *Odyssey*) and spent her week in Paris not visiting the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay, but cooped up in her hotel room near the Paris Opera.

A year before her death, in June 1963, O'Connor wrote to her new friend Janet McKane, reminiscing about the four months she lived in New York City fourteen years earlier, in 1949. It was after Yaddo and before the onset of her lupus, when she "could get around" (*HB* 522). Still, the frenetic pace of New York overwhelmed her: "I didn't go to a single play or even to the Frick museum. I went to the Natural History Museum

¹¹⁴ It should be noted that the "grotesque" is itself a term borrowed from the visual arts, originally used to describe the fanciful designs of Roman mosaics (*grottesche*).

¹¹⁵ To Betty Hester she wrote on June 28, 1956, two years before her trip to Europe: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe" (*HB* 163).

but didn't do anything the least cultural. The public library was much too much for me" (525). However, she did visit the recently-opened medieval extension of the Metropolitan, the Cloisters, where she stood for some time, enrapt, in front of a small medieval statue. Fourteen years later she can still inhabit the wonder of the moment:

I went to the Cloisters twice and I particularly remember one statue that I saw there. As I remember it was about four feet high and on a pedestal. It was the Virgin holding the Christ child and both were laughing; not smiling, laughing. I've never seen any models of it anywhere but I was greatly taken with it and should I ever get back to the Cloisters, which is unlikely, I mean to see if it is there. (523)

She would never return to New York, and she knew it. Thus we can imagine her delight when McKane mailed her a large photograph of the laughing Virgin and Child (542).

There is plenty such evidence to establish that O'Connor's appreciation for visual art went deep. Distrusting the meretricious airs of "artiness," she was guarded about expressing her taste. She invests Asbury Fox with the ugly fatuousness and indolence of the modern romantic pseudo-artistic in "The Enduring Chill." Perhaps she saw enough of herself in the image of Asbury to fear it. No doubt, too, the aspect of painting as a "mute art" tended to encourage a judicious reticence on the subject. All we have now are her written words, which testify that in her understated way, she commented on art with interest and insight throughout her life. How much did her appreciation for visual aesthetics influence her fiction? It is an interesting question. Barry Moser ends his discussion of her linoleum prints by wondering "how much time she spent looking at the work of other artists and, if she did, just how much of it rubbed off on her without her

being bothered knowing how?" (Moser ix). The suggestion we gain from her correspondence is that the habit of "looking at the work of other artists" was no small part of her developing habit of art. She not only drew and painted, she thought perceptively about visual art problems. Can we doubt that it strengthened her visual acuity that for all but the last three years of her life, she lived without a television set?¹¹⁶

III

Not surprisingly, when O'Connor sought to explain her approach to fiction writing in various settings, "the visual arts became one of her favorite touchstones to explain the process" (Gerald 101). In view of her constant struggles to manage the rampaging lupus, it is astonishing that she managed to give over sixty lectures and readings in such far-flung venues as Michigan, Indiana, Virginia, and Texas during the decade following *Wise Blood's* publication (Gooch 13).¹¹⁷ She wanted to connect with her readers, and she longed to clarify the motivations, the theological motivations in particular, behind her odd and sometimes terrifying stories. The occasional essays, manuscript speeches, and other fragments O'Connor's friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald pulled together to create the volume *Mystery and Manners* bear eloquent witness to the prominence O'Connor gave to the visual faculty in her approach to the art

¹¹⁶ Ironically, her first television set was a gift from nuns who were grateful that O'Connor helped them to find a publisher for their *Memoir of Mary Ann*, for which she wrote the introduction. O'Connor's wry comment on the gift was, "So me and ma have entered the twentieth century at last. I can now tell you all about Geritol, Pepto-Bismol, Anacin, Bufferin, any kind of floor wac, etc. etc." (HB 435). The comments suggest that she would have warmed to Neil Postman's critique of the mind-numbing "howdie-doodie" message of the medium in his *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985).

¹¹⁷ She joked about these readings, for which she developed quite a talent: "the element of ham in me seeks release. I have a secret desire to rival Charles Dickens on the stage" (HB 265).

of fiction. Before we come to Rouault, we should take note of this dominant feature of her poetics.

We should notice first that O'Connor was deeply impressed with the fiction writer's burden to show rather than simply to tell. She received this stimulus from a number of sources. Her instruction at the Writer's Workshop centered around Cleanth Brooks' and Robert Penn Warren's 1943 New Critical text *Understanding Fiction*, a brand-new book when O'Connor read it in Paul Engle's classroom in 1946. She later praised the book as having been "of invaluable help to me" (HB 83). Brooks and Warren lay great stress on the importance of presenting, rendering, showing, dramatizing characters in concrete ways through their action and speech.¹¹⁸ At the same time that she received this instruction in the classroom, and no doubt with the warm recommendation of her professors, she immersed herself in the corpus of Henry James novels, with their "felt life," where she found Brooks' and Warren's teaching put into practice. And finally, one of her great living mentors in the art of fiction was Caroline Gordon, the wife of the Vanderbilt Agrarian poet Allen Tate who after 1946 taught fiction workshops at Columbia University. Beginning in November 1951, O'Connor entered into a running correspondence with Gordon that Sally Fitzgerald called "a master class" (Gooch 199). Gordon was often the first reader O'Connor approached with the draft of a new story, and perhaps her greatest contribution to American letters was not in her own fiction writing,

¹¹⁸ It should be noted that Brooks' and Warren's classic text continues to impact students long after it has passed from the scene. The textbook I have used for 16 years to introduce college freshmen to the elements of literature, *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*, emphasizes the importance of dramatizing characters by showing rather than telling: "In order to involve the reader in a character, the author must show the character in action; the axiom "show, don't tell" is therefore one of the basics of fiction writing. If characters are merely described, then the story will read more like an essay" (Arp and Johnson 163).

which has largely been dropped from anthologies, but in how she drove this need to show and dramatize home, time and again, in the young O'Connor.¹¹⁹

That O'Connor fully absorbed this lesson of showing is evident in the letter she wrote to the young writer Ben Griffiths on June 8, 1955. After having read a draft of a story he sent her, she put on her "writing teacher hat" and bore down on the importance of seeing and showing:

The first thing is *to see the people at every minute*. You get into the old man's mind before you let us know exactly *what he looks like*. You have to learn to *paint with words*. . . . This is something that has taken me a long time to learn. Ford Maddox Ford said you couldn't have somebody sell a newspaper in a story unless you said *what he looked like*. . . . The old man thinks of the daughter-in-law and son talking and recalls the conversation—well he *should see them*, the reader *should see them*, should *feel from seeing them* what their conversation is going to be almost before he hears it. (*HB 83*, my italics)

She continues to press her case: "The deaf and dumb child should be seen better—it does no good just to tell us she is seraphically beautiful. She has to move around and make some kind of show of herself so we'll know she's there all the time" (84). One sees in these exhortations something of the instruction O'Connor herself received.

¹¹⁹ O'Connor was first introduced to a Gordon story when she read "Old Red" in her *Understanding Fiction* textbook at the Iowa Workshop. Gordon's most important novel was *The Malefactors*. When I spoke with Ashley Brown on the phone before he died, he stressed the importance of Gordon to O'Connor (Brown wrote his doctoral dissertation on Gordon's work). O'Connor often credited Gordon with her help, particularly in pointing out the importance of consistency with narrative voice and point-of-view, which O'Connor acknowledged to be her consistent *bête-noire*.

O'Connor's advice to Ben Griffiths, "you have to learn to paint with words," explains why her first recommendation when addressing groups of aspiring fiction writers was typically to urge them to discipline themselves to see, even to stare, by taking up drawing and painting: "Now learning to see is the basis for learning all the arts except music. I know a good many fiction writers who paint, not because they're any good at painting, but because it helps their writing. It forces them to look at things. Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things" (*MM* 93).¹²⁰ For O'Connor, stories that rely on telling rather than showing are little more than thinly-disguised essays. This crucial ability to see and show separates the true fiction writer from the many dilettantes who ought to pursue another trade. In her view, writing teachers should discourage more of the ungifted "essayists" from writing fiction.¹²¹

Now we come to the question of why O'Connor considered *seeing* a necessary component of fiction writing and reading, on par with the formation of idea in the mind. Her approach to seeing had both passive and active aspects, both of which she considered crucial. Passively, to see is an act of humble "creatureliness" that recognizes the givenness, the *données*, of creation.¹²² For created beings to take stock of "what is," including their limitations within the created order, is the first step to receiving with gratitude what has been given as a gift (the French *don* in *donnée* emphasizes the gift of reality). She writes that "the eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete

¹²⁰ On another occasion, she recommended "anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn't require his attention" (*MM* 84). It is intriguing that her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, contains a great deal of *telling*.

¹²¹ "Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them" (*MM* 84).

¹²² See, for example, Marilyn Robinson's 2015 collection of essays, *The Givenness of Things*.

circumstances, and the imagination reproduces what, by some related gift, it is able to make live” (*MM* 195).

But for O’Connor, the eye does not merely receive in a state of passivity. And here is where she parts ways with the restrictive naturalism of the Impressionists, for the eye is also the organ of judgment that “involves the whole human personality.” Perhaps the most important paragraph she wrote on this matter can be found in the essay “Writing Short Stories”:

For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is the organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it. It involves judgment. Judgment is something that begins in the act of vision, and when it does not, or when it becomes separated from vision, then a confusion exists in the mind which transfers itself to the story. (*MM* 91)

Perhaps O’Connor has in mind Christ’s words in the Gospels that “the eye is the lamp of the body.”¹²³ We might also recall something in these passive and active modes of seeing of M. H. Abrams’ famous metaphors of the mirror and lamp.¹²⁴ For O’Connor, the eye receives *and* illumines: it sees what it is given to see, but it also judges. Thus, if as Maritain says the judgment of aesthetic beauty is a function of beauty’s intelligibility, we can say that for O’Connor, seeing and intelligibility are inseparably bound together. The

¹²³ “Your eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt. 6:22 ESV).

¹²⁴ M. H. Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953. The book, which distinguishes Enlightenment from Romantic aesthetics, was published, intriguingly, the same year O’Connor wrote the story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

eye involves the whole personality; “everything has its testing point in the eye.” Thus she writes in “The Fiction Writer and His Country” that “in the greatest depth of vision, moral judgment will be implicit” (*MM* 30).

We must examine this matter more closely. What emerges from the essays in *Mystery and Manners* is that O’Connor approached vision not from the modern positivist standpoint of a Courbet or Monet—that is, in strictly physiological and material terms.¹²⁵ To borrow Hamlet’s critique of Horatio’s worldview, O’Connor thought that “there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of” in the naturalism of advanced modernity.

Her approach to vision is distinctively Christian, and, to use Chesterton’s evocative word in his *Orthodoxy*, “stereoscopic.” In the opening chapter of that 1908 spiritual autobiography and Christian apology, Chesterton takes Enlightenment rationalism to task for its reductive attempt to exclude all mystery from its narrow logical circle. Chesterton writes that “stereoscopic vision” is a mark of the healthy man, for it admits the paradoxes that fit the strange contours of reality:

If he [the healthy man] saw two truths that seemed to contradict one another, he would take the two truths that the contradiction along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that. . . . It is exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man. The whole secret of mysticism is this: that

¹²⁵ The entire movement of French Realism can be seen in Courbet’s defiant cry, “Show me an angel and I will paint one!” Monet and his fellow Impressionists work out the logical implications of this positivism. Cézanne said about Monet, in evident appreciation but also to mark the limits of the Impressionist project, “Monet is just an eye.”

man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. (Chesterton 33)

This last statement, “that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand,” is the noticeably Pascalian argument Chesterton develops in the chapter: the modern rationalist begins to go wrong in his logical syllogisms because he does not begin his argument with the problem of original sin.

O’Connor also insists on two ways of seeing, on what she calls “two sets of eyes” (*MM* 180), which for those whose sight has been restored by grace work together. This is physical sight, on the one hand, and spiritual sight (what she called, following the medieval exegetes, “anagogical vision”) on the other.¹²⁶ O’Connor finds an important link between these two sets of eyes and the central Christian mystery of the incarnation, which insists on affirming the value of the material and the spiritual creation. The writer who is a Christian must see and render with both sets of eyes, the physical eye and the prophetic eye of faith, the “realism of distances.”

Her vision is stereoscopic in another sense, too, as it is for Chesterton: that is, in the Augustinian and Pascalian way of holding in dramatic tension the wretchedness of original sin after the fall and the glory of the work of grace in the redemption of Jesus Christ on the other. Here too, she considered that the Christian writer could not help but recognize and render both, in the dramatic tension of paradox: the corruption of depravity and the redeeming action of grace. These two essential operations of stereoscopic vision, the *physical/anagogical* operation as well as the *depravity/grace*

¹²⁶ This “anagogical” vision refers to the apprehension of God and our participation in the divine life beyond the realm of physical sensation. It is the sight of faith that is accorded to those who have been redeemed by grace, who have had the eyes of their heart (to use the Pauline phrase) opened, as Paul’s were on the road to Damascus.

operation, are the critical reference points that mark out the distinctive form of O'Connor's fiction. The first of these may account for the depth of her stories, particularly in their use of symbol at the physical and anagogical level; the second explains the conflict of violent extremes when sin and grace collide. Together, they account for the unique stress O'Connor's project places on the visionary impulse.

Thus we have two levels of vision O'Connor always insists on holding together in dramatic tension: mystery and sense experience, faith and sight. "The fiction writer is concerned with ultimate mystery as we find it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience" (*MM* 125). Sense experience, and especially the experience of seeing "the visible universe" through physical eyes, is for O'Connor indispensable for rendering the experience of what Henry James called the "felt life" in imaginative writing. This is because, for her, fiction is the most "incarnational" of the arts. It is composed of dust; it is earthy. And it is here—in this emphasis on the eyes and the grit and grime of a fallen world, but one that is redeemable by grace—that we discern how the broad outlines of her aesthetic complement that of the most prominent *renouveau* visual artist of her time, Georges Rouault, to whom we now turn.

CHAPTER 4

O'CONNOR AND GEORGES ROUAULT:

“IF HE SAID ANYTHING ABOUT ROUAULT NOT BEING
A GOOD RELIGIOUS ARTIST, HE'S PURE NUTS”

Précis

Rouault's memory has fallen on hard times. In O'Connor's generation he was considered one of the pre-eminent modern artists and one of the greatest Christian artists of all time. He was the great *renouveau* painter and printmaker. But in the decade after O'Connor's death, Rouault seemed to vanish from museums and critical discussion.

Almost nothing has been written O'Connor's connection to Rouault, yet the connections are striking. O'Connor's poetics are relentlessly oriented toward the visual. The artists endured the same criticisms: their work was too repetitive, too religious, too dark, too violent, too ugly. Both were considered “artists of original sin.” Both sought a full-orbed beauty that did not shy from grotesque distortion. She wrote, and he drew and painted, with “an outrageous lyricism.” They were exacting craftsmen. Both artists began with the data of the natural world, but sought to portray the mystery behind it. Both were Christocentric, emphasizing the incarnation and crucifixion. Rouault was a close friend of Léon Bloy and Jacques Maritain, two of O'Connor's major mentors. Finally, Rouault's visual aesthetics display the stamp of his favorite author, Blaise Pascal.

Thus we have established that O'Connor from her earliest years exercised her talent as an amateur visual artist; indeed, that in high school and college she seriously considered a career in art journalism. She found in her drawing and painting a way to practice the discipline of careful observation essential to her storytelling, and she never tired of commending it to other aspiring writers. The angularity and distortions of her cartoons, not to mention her knack for the subtle indexical meaning of physical gesture and her shrewd eye for the comic, germinate into their distinctive formal aesthetic transposition in her mature fiction. These observations are crucial to understanding the visual bent of her poetics. They set the context for what we turn to in this chapter: the ways her visual approach to fiction may be compared to the no less arresting visual aesthetics of the most prominent Catholic painter of her day, Georges Rouault. The gaping hole in O'Connor criticism with regard to Rouault confirms that this connection has not been obvious to her readers, but I will argue in this chapter that juxtaposing the two proves mutually revealing. It answers Robert Donahoo's call for O'Connor studies that "open up and deepen awareness of the mystery of her work" and that are "generative rather than mummifying" (Donahoo 243).

The conspicuous silence on Rouault can be explained in light of three major factors, which I will briefly set out here. Perhaps the most obvious is that "interarts studies" poses a daunting hurdle for many critics. The activities of reading fiction and interpreting visual art draw on distinct competencies which take a long time to master. It is not that literary critics do not visit art galleries, but they are generally happy to leave the task of writing about visual art to their art history colleagues. We should note, too, that over the past two or three decades the old *belles-lettres* comparatists with names such

as Jacques Barzun, Suzanne K. Langer, and Georges Steiner—scholars who moved with dexterity across borders in the humanities, tracing the interdisciplinary arcs specialists could miss—have largely passed from the scene.¹²⁷ The evaluation of O’Connor’s legacy has for half a century been the exclusive domain of literary critics who by their training and the expectations of their guild understandably find it easier to write about words on a page than daubs of color on a canvas. It is no wonder that comparatively few O’Connor scholars have made the cross-disciplinary move to consider how the visual arts might throw open a window on the author’s work. Thus even Jill Baumgaertner’s stimulating early work on visual emblems and her more recent recommendation of Protestant and Catholic visual catechisms register in the O’Connor literature as a minority report, a departure from the familiar path of analyzing words on a page.¹²⁸ Understandably, critics may avoid venturing *hors-piste*, where the snow is piled fresh and deep and the familiar guideposts are gone.

The second factor that could explain the absence of Rouault from O’Connor scholarship is that O’Connor in her letters and occasional prose did not point to Rouault as evidently as she pointed, for example, to mentors such as Aquinas, Hawthorne, Henry James, or Maritain. She left a trail of bread crumbs, large and small, to guide her

¹²⁷ In their place, especially now that the “industry” and “business” of academia has been shaped, as it has never been before, by the pressures of technocratic pragmatism—we have for some time been building an education system that resembles a hive of worker bees buzzing in ever-smaller and more insular cubicles. This is not here to criticize, but to state a reality. The change has happened so quickly there has been little time to lament or even to register fully what has been lost.

¹²⁸ I refer to Baumgaertner’s 1988 book, *Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring*, which was the first book to print some of O’Connor’s juvenile cartoons and compare the striking tableaux in her work to visual “emblems.” Her follow-up study on visual catechisms, “Flannery O’Connor and the Cartoon Catechism,” appeared in the 2007 collection, *Inside the Church of Flannery O’Connor*. Baumgaertner relied on the pioneering efforts of Kathleen Feeley, who contributed an essay on O’Connor’s cartoons in the 1985 collection, *Realist of Distances* (“Mine is a Comic Art...”). Kelly Gerald’s study “Flannery O’Connor’s Art” in the 2006 *Flannery O’Connor’s Radical Reality* is a prelude to her larger essay which accompanied the publication of *Flannery O’Connor: The Cartoons* in 2012.

interpreters on paths of reasonable interpretation through the challenging thicket of her fiction. Some critics have voiced their displeasure with such authorial assistance, charging her with a heavy-handed “intentional fallacy” and proposing various “heterodox” readings they consider more appealing, but many have gratefully spun O’Connor’s hints into the essays and books that make up the bulk of the critical literature. As we have seen, O’Connor was voluble about her appreciation for Maritain’s guidance. Her gratitude for Rouault can also be found, but it is more muted. One has to run a finer comb through her writings to find it. And even in Kinney’s catalogue of her personal book collection Rouault’s presence may be kept hidden from the untrained eye. It is there, without question, but one must know where to look. We will return to this matter shortly, but here it is enough to note that the relative paucity of Rouault references in her work can explain why scholars have pursued more apparently fruitful lines of investigation.

The third factor, a historical one, is to my mind the most intriguing. It has to do with the puzzling story of the vagaries of Rouault’s reputation over the past half-century, and specifically with its precipitous fall from the heights of critical acclaim his work enjoyed in O’Connor’s day. It is a safe bet that many who read O’Connor’s fiction today, even those who take an interest in the story of modern art, have never heard the name of Rouault, much less encountered his paintings on the walls of a museum.¹²⁹ A massive cultural amnesia has set in. Not too long ago, and certainly at the time of O’Connor’s death, Rouault was widely considered one of the two or three greatest artists of the

¹²⁹ My very unofficial evidence for this is that when people ask about the subjects of my dissertation, they nod at the mention of O’Connor and Pascal, but the two I invariably need to explain are Rouault and Mauriac.

twentieth century. His visibility in the art world peaked dramatically in the two decades bracketed by the end of World War II and Vatican II (1945-1965). For one who had labored in solitude and obscurity for so many years, the enthusiastic international response to his vision in his twilight years must have come as a kind of vindication. Rouault was 87, and still working, when he died in 1958, just as O'Connor was finishing her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. No more than a decade later, Rouault's art would virtually disappear.

It is not difficult to find an obvious material explanation for the dramatic downturn. The shock waves of Pop Art, Conceptual Art, and Minimalism so radically altered the field of engagement that the artist's painterly concerns, his expressionist "language," and his traditional subject matter (landscapes, clowns, judges, nudes, crucifixions) widely came to be considered superannuated. Rouault stands in the line of Grünewald, Rembrandt, and Cézanne; his art, with its grotesque distortions and phosphorescent textures, is best approached, as he himself insisted, in a long dialogue with the painterly tradition of the Old Masters. And Rouault's roots in tradition lie deeper than that, for he connected his craft to that of the medieval cathedral builders. Rouault had been born in a cellar under Prussian bombardment at the end of the Second Empire (1871). He lived through the human deprivations and atrocities of two World Wars. Needless to say, a vast chasm separates him from the temperament and aesthetic of Rauschenberg, Johns, Liechtenstein, and Warhol, the merchants of Pop. Next to Warhol's ironic commercial icons, Rouault's richly-encrusted autumnal landscapes must have seemed downright *avuncular*.

Such is the fragility of artistic fame, which Warhol clocked at fifteen minutes. The art world which, chastened by the human losses of war and hungering for spiritual meaning, hailed Rouault's oeuvre with loud *hosannas* in worldwide retrospectives in one decade, largely purged it from museum walls and critical discussion in the next. The great modern bellwethers of taste such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which in the 1940s and early 1950s under its Rouault-enthusiast curator James Soby had purchased and displayed a great number of the artist's works, began the unceremonious process of removing his paintings and prints from the galleries and shuttling them across the Hudson to its New Jersey storage vaults, that mass-grave for moderns who succumb, as they must, to the "shock of the new."

In certain special enclaves—in groups of educated Catholics and art historians, or further afield among his devoted Japanese admirers who had begun quietly stockpiling his paintings and prints since the 1920s, exhibiting them in permanent collections that survive to this day—Rouault would go on being prized as a "painter's painter" and one of the pioneers of modern art alongside Matisse and Picasso, arguably the most accomplished and dedicated craftsman of the three. But after the revolutions of the late 1960s, the art world moved on to flashier stars—to artists less exacting and troubling, perhaps, and certainly more secular in their aims, than Rouault.¹³⁰ Even in his lifetime, the quiet workman had never cared about marketing either his work or his image.¹³¹ Perhaps he had learned the early lesson from his tradesman father, who varnished pianos

¹³⁰ The tale of Rouault's fall from grace is uncannily foretold in Kafka's parable "The Hunger Artist," where the superannuated artist is replaced in the circus cage, to no one's regret, by a sleek black panther.

¹³¹ For example, after he regained 700 canvases deemed unfinished in his lawsuit with Vollard's estate in 1947, he consigned 315 of them to the flames because he knew he would not live long enough to see them to completion.

at the Pleyel factory, simply to go about “the good of what is made.” Warhol, on the other hand, was an expert at the business of self-promotion, and Warhol changed the business of art.¹³²

In an insightful analysis of these forces in the New York art world, “Rouault in New York: Art and Reputation in the Mid-Century United States,” historian David Quigley shows how Rouault was an important part of the growing reputation of the Museum of Modern Art, and during its first quarter-century (1929-1954), with no less than three major shows devoted to his work (Quigley 424). The first gallery show of Rouault’s work in New York opened in 1930, just a year after the MoMA was founded. Eight years later the MoMA gave the first exhibition of his prints, which was followed in the 1940s by James Thrall Soby’s curated retrospective in the spring of 1945 (424). Soby, who in 1946 became the chair of the department of painting and sculpture at the museum, would write with evident enthusiasm in his exhibition catalogue essay that “Rouault emerges as one of the few major figures in twentieth-century painting” (424).

However, even Soby’s ardor for Rouault would cool over time. At the end of his life, in an unpublished memoir, he wrote: “Rouault was incense, Picasso quicksilver, and I prefer the latter substance” (qtd. in Quigley 424). Increasingly, Rouault came to be seen as an odd solitary, an anachronism of a bygone era. Critics found him difficult to fit into the preferred narrative of the modern, the one that favored the sleek “geometric” line of abstraction that can be traced through Cubism to Mondrian. The caustic words of the self-appointed High Priest of this neo-Kantian version of the Modern, Clement

¹³² It could be that Warhol’s most successful work of art was the large silkscreened image he fashioned of himself. To be fair, the marketing of the artist’s image did not begin with Warhol. The seeds can be found in Courbet over a century earlier, and in Dali and Duchamp earlier in the twentieth century.

Greenberg, certainly did no favors to Rouault's reputation. Greenberg's damaging review, written in the 1940s at the height of Rouault's fame in New York, reads like a prophecy of what would eventually harden into scholarly consensus:

Rouault looks like, and may even be, a remarkable phenomenon, but it ought to be clear by now that he is not a major artist. He is, on the contrary, a rather limited one who masks a conventional sensibility behind modernist effects, and a certain studiedness behind attitudes of spontaneity. I myself must confess a real distaste for the artistic personality I discern in his pictures, and I must also confess that I tend to suspect the unconscious motives of those who praise him. Only guilt about emotional impotence could make one accept uncritically such strident assertions of deep and intense feeling as his art makes.

(Greenberg 84)

"Guilt about emotional impotence." In no uncertain terms Greenberg dismisses not just Rouault's art, but those who praise it and whose "unconscious motives" for doing so he "tends to suspect." Greenberg, the H. L. Mencken of art critics at mid-century, took evident delight in his role as gadfly. He had a big pulpit for these views. The MoMA would devote its third great exhibition to Rouault's work in 1953, the year before its 25th anniversary, but that would be a kind of swan song.¹³³ The museum, and New York as whole, seemed to prefer to cultivate a different image of the modern in its second quarter century, which meant parting ways with the gritty sensibility of Rouault.

¹³³ Maritain's 1954 book *Rouault*, published in the Pocket Library of Great Art series and a warm personal tribute to his longtime friend, coincided with this major traveling exhibition of his work. At this time, O'Connor had just published "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and was hitting her stride as a writer.

The evidence for the gap which opened up in Rouault scholarship over the last three decades of the twentieth century can be gathered from the stacks of any research library. The folio-sized monographs and *catalogues raisonnées* of the artist's work—the venerable Courthion, Venturi, and Dorival tomes—are now over half a century old. These warhorses are still an indispensable starting point, but they have languished in neglect and their imperfections cannot be overlooked.¹³⁴ Three contributions, all published in 1971, still breathe the verve of the post-war Rouault boom, but now we can see that they signaled its end. They are William Dyrness' brilliant monograph, *Rouault: A Vision of Suffering and Salvation* (1971); Bernard Dorival's collection of the artist's essays and poetry, *Sur l'Art et Sur la Vie* (1971); and Waldemar George's quirky *Rouault* (1971), which concludes with a testimonial written by the artist's eldest daughter, Geneviève Nouaille-Rouault. When these books went to press, all in the same year, their authors may not have been aware that the "great turn" from Rouault had already set in. After them, a black hole of some thirty-five years opened up in Rouault scholarship.¹³⁵ As if on cue, the chirping critics fell silent; Rouault's star appeared to have set.

This may be the most plausible explanation for Rouault's absence in the critical debates surrounding O'Connor's work, for the three decades in which Rouault seemed to fall off the grid of scholarship coincide with the period which saw the rise of O'Connor studies, spurred by the appearance of the crucial scholarly tools which included *Mystery and Manners* (1969), *The Complete Stories* (1971), and *The Habit of Being* (1979).

¹³⁴ Namely, writing that tends toward the hagiographic as well as suspect quality of reproductions. With Rouault, reproduction quality is especially important, since so much in his painting depends on the effusions of color. Also, needless to say, Rouault's famous textured surfaces are lost in the

¹³⁵ There are, of course, a few notable stand-alone exceptions, but they only serve to prove the rule.

Frederick Asals' *Imagination of Extremity*, the bombshell that opened the 1980s, can be taken as inaugurating the era of serious critical discussion of her work. The dates tell the crucial story; thus it makes sense that in light of Sessions' comment about a dearth of work on O'Connor's contexts, the contextual studies that have appeared do not mention Rouault.¹³⁶

Rouault may have gone "off the grid" for some 35 years, but the first decade of the present century has brought signs that the reports of Rouault's demise have been exaggerated. Two scholars deserve thanks for keeping the Rouault flame lit: they are Soo-Yun Kang and Stephen Schloesser. The evidence of what appears to be a modest Rouault revival in the past decade must be tied to the publications of Stephen Schloesser's two volumes *Jazz Age Catholicism* (2005) and *Mystic Masque* (2008).¹³⁷ The latter book, a lavishly-produced 600-page exhibition catalog and essay collection occasioned by a major Rouault retrospective at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, is (with just one exception I can find) the first catalog of a major Rouault exhibition to be published after the 1960s.¹³⁸ Schloesser's efforts to revive interest in Rouault can be situated in a broader cultural phenomenon. The tradition of *painting*, in some critical circles in the last decades of the twentieth century considered a relic of the past, has made a surprising return in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This

¹³⁶ The singular exception I have encountered is Sarah Gordon's 2006 essay, "Seeking Beauty in Darkness," and Rouault appears in this essay only as an afterthought.

¹³⁷ Kang's *Rouault in Perspective: Contextual and Theoretical Study of His Art* (2000) should also be noted here, but the poor formatting of this book shows that it is the publication of a dissertation.

¹³⁸ That exception is the catalog *Georges Rouault: The Early Years* (1903-1920), with essays by Fabrice Hergott and Sarah Whitfield, which accompanied the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (March-June, 1993).

revival of painterly concerns has coincided with a renewed permission critics have sensed in the realm of aesthetics to discuss the properties of *beauty*, a word that had been pilloried under the reign of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that tightened the arena of discourse in the 1980s and 1990s.¹³⁹ Over the last ten years, I have personally witnessed other refreshing signs of a return to Rouault in this generation.¹⁴⁰ But even so, ten years after *Mystic Masque*, Rouault largely remains a well-kept secret to the general public and even many historians of modern art, who still have a tendency to omit him from the preferred narrative. The omission is understandable, considering that even in his own lifetime, beginning with his distance from the Fauves at the 1905 *Salon d’Automne*, where he exhibited alongside Matisse and Vlaminck but clearly did not share their epicurean exuberance, Rouault was always a man apart, not beholden to a manifesto or program, an *antimoderne* modern. This is no doubt one of several reasons he and Maritain became fast friends.

There is a fourth factor that may explain the absence of Rouault in O’Connor scholarship, but it need not detain us here. It could be that some critics have considered Rouault, only to dismiss the possibility that anything profitable could come from comparing his art to O’Connor’s fiction. As I hope to show, I think the other factors are plausible explanations; this one is not.

¹³⁹ One book that can be taken as heralding this welcome “thaw” in critical discourse is Denis Donoghue’s *Speaking of Beauty* (2003), a *New York Times* Notable Book.

¹⁴⁰ In 2005 I attended an exhibition of some of the prints of the *Miserere* at the Museum for Biblical Art in New York. This show resulted in a handsome exhibition catalogue. Also in New York, at the Dillon Gallery in 2009, Japanese-American artist Makoto Fujimura displayed his “Nihonga” paintings jointly with a fine selection of Rouault paintings. I was privileged to interview the artist about his long fascination with Rouault’s work at that time. More recently, on a visit to the Upper Basilica at Assisi in Italy in the spring of 2015, I made the serendipitous discovery that the entire run of prints of the *Miserere* was on display.

Before beginning this investigation, I will again emphasize that it is not necessary to make this a study of influence. O'Connor may or may not have been influenced by Rouault's art. We cannot know; nor does the matter hold much pertinence. More intriguing is how the two artists may be compared—as artists in their own right, but sharing some elective affinities.

I

Even though Flannery O'Connor did not write much about Rouault, the handful of comments in her letters leaves little doubt that she followed his art with interest and admiration. It is enough to point to the fact that from the mid-1940s to her death in 1964, Rouault was widely considered the rival of Picasso and Matisse for the palm of “great artist of the century,” and with Fra Angelico and Rembrandt, he was thought to be one of the great Christian painters of all time. “One of the greatest painters of all time” is the testimony of Raïssa Maritain's memoir *We Were Friends Together*, which had such a seminal impact on O'Connor's circle of friends (130). Maritain repeats the commendation in her sequel, *Adventures in Grace*: “Rouault . . . became the greatest religious painter of our time, one of the greatest painters of all time” (191). In the 1940s and 1950s, when these views were published and widely discussed among O'Connor's friends, this judgment would not have surprised anyone; Rouault was a key part of the culture of mid-century Catholicism.

It is likely that O'Connor discussed Rouault more amply in her leisurely afternoon front-porch conversations than she did in her published correspondence. But we should note that she alluded to Rouault's art in a letter dated just one week before her death, on

July 14, 1964 (HB 592). The *in extremis* constraint under which she wrote anything during her final weeks make these letters stand out, if for no other reason than their brevity. The year before, she mentioned Rouault à propos a piece she read on Chagall (531). In an April 19, 1958 letter to Betty Hester, she stated in her inimitable straight-shooter way, “if [Father C.] said anything about Rouault not being a good religious artist, he’s pure nuts” (279).¹⁴¹ One senses, as so often when reading the letters, that there is much behind this statement that has now been lost.

O’Connor may have brought up Rouault in the 1958 letter because the artist died that year, receiving the honor of a rare state funeral in Paris and a resurgence of critical accolades and attention rippling abroad. That year O’Connor published her story “The Enduring Chill” and was putting the finishing touches on her second and final novel, about the prophetic calling, *The Violent Bear It Away*. A survey of O’Connor’s book collection reveals a reproduction of one of Rouault’s paintings of Christ displayed prominently on the dust jacket of her prized copy of Romano Guardini’s *The Lord* (Gordon 82). It is an apt reminder of how difficult it would have been for a culturally-engaged American Catholic at mid-century to avoid Rouault’s art. Furthermore, it is likely that the time O’Connor spent in the northeast in the late 1940s, at Yaddo in upstate New York, followed by a few months in an apartment in New York City and then with the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut, would have brought her into contact with the celebrated Soby-curated exhibitions at the MoMA that were at that time the talk of the art world.

¹⁴¹ This remark comes in the context of O’Connor’s reading Gilson’s *Art and Reality*, which includes a plate of Rouault’s 1925 *Crucifixion*.

This evidence is more than sufficient to establish O'Connor's involvement with Rouault's art, but there is more. We have already noted the tremendous significance of Maritain in O'Connor's development as an artist. As Raïssa makes clear in *We Have Been Friends Together*, the volume O'Connor "cut her aesthetic teeth" on, *Art and Scholasticism*, would likely not have existed apart from Rouault's friendship.¹⁴² In the essay that accompanies that book, "The Frontiers of Poetry," Maritain refers to Rouault as the paradigmatic Christian artist of modernity: "a philosopher could study in him the virtue of art in its purest states" (R. Maritain 194). Maritain's tribute to Rouault continues, a quarter century later, in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953) and the pocket book *Rouault* (1954). In Raïssa's memoirs, which McNerny calls a "tribal history" for American Catholics and in which they found their genealogical roots in the French *renouveau*, Rouault takes a place of prominence, from the moment the Maritains make his acquaintance at Bloy's home in 1905. Rouault is a part of the roots of the movement, and thus by O'Connor's strong sense of association with the Maritains and Bloy an important part of O'Connor's aesthetic world. In Raïssa's words: "Rouault was for us above all the first revelation of the true and great artist. It was in the concrete example he furnished that we first perceived the nature of art, its imperious necessities, its antinomies and that very real and sometimes tragic conflict between opposed duties for which the mind of the artist can be the battleground" (192). The "imperious necessities" and "antinomies" of art: indeed, it is not difficult to see in these words that Rouault is O'Connor's aesthetic kin.

¹⁴² "It was with Rouault in mind that Jacques wrote *Art and Scholasticism*" (R. Maritain 194).

II

Thus, even after we account for the sudden dimming of Rouault's reputation in the late twentieth century and the methodological challenges of interdisciplinary studies, it remains surprising that no critic to date has attempted to compare O'Connor's fictional poetics to the stark visual aesthetics of this most prominent Christian modern artist of her day. The one exception I have found to this rule is Sarah Gordon's 2006 essay, "Seeking Beauty in Darkness: Flannery O'Connor and the French Catholic Renaissance."

Gordon's piece, however, is not an essay on Rouault; her focus is on Bergson and Bloy. Rouault emerges as an intriguing afterthought just two pages before the end. Thus Gordon, who for several decades was the dean of O'Connor studies in Milledgeville, shines a tentative light down a promising path she herself forbears to explore. The invitation is a tantalizing one:

Clearly O'Connor's large and startling figures are analogous to—if not influenced by—Rouault's broad strokes and simple outlines, the deliberately distorted bodies, and the wide, wounded eyes of his Christs and his clowns. There is in Rouault's thinking a real and ironic similarity between the world's derision of the clown, forced to fake buoyancy and laughter, and the world's scorn for Christ. (Gordon 82-83)

What Gordon implies in this short passage is that the two artists may be compared on stylistic grounds (broad strokes, simple outlines, deliberately distorted bodies) and common subject matter (clowns, eyes, Christ). She also points out how Bloy reacted with vehement disdain to Rouault's "outrageous lyricism," noting in Bloy's rejection "parallels with the squeamish responses to O'Connor's work, certainly in the early days

and even among some readers today” (83). She relies on a single source, Frank and Dorothy Getlein’s *Georges Rouault’s Miserere*, published in the year of O’Connor’s death. In 2005 or 2006, when Gordon’s wrote the essay, Schloesser’s *Mystic Masque* had not yet appeared, and there is no indication she was acquainted with Schloesser’s 2005 work, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, with its chapter on Rouault.

Here I want to take up Gordon’s gauntlet and begin to lay out some fruitful grounds for comparative work on O’Connor and Rouault. What I envision is less a set of readings than a theoretical prolegomenon to readings. Because of certain technical challenges of dissertation formatting which make the reproduction of artwork difficult, I will not in these pages provide photocopied images of Rouault’s art.¹⁴³ Anyone who has experienced the vibrant colors and deeply encrusted surface textures of a Rouault painting in an exhibition space will understand how much is lost in translation in even the best colored reproductions, such as one finds in the glossy pages of *Mystic Masque*. What Walter Benjamin has called the unique “aura” of a work is lost in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. It is a problem that attends all coffee-table art books.

More of an opportunity than an obstacle is the age-old problem of the inexact metaphorical transfer of meaning involved in any conversation about the verbal and visual arts. The theory of “interarts studies” has a rich history: one thinks of classic statements such as Horace’s celebrated and much-misconstrued *ut pictura poesis* and its Enlightenment rejoinder in Lessing’s *Laocöon*.¹⁴⁴ In his 1957 A. W. Mellon Lectures

¹⁴³ For this I will refer the reader to the Courthion, Venturi, and Dorival collections cited in the bibliography, as well as to the more recent *Mystic Masque*, which enjoys demonstrates the improved technical means of reproduction of the intervening four or five decades.

¹⁴⁴ Of course, Horace is not the beginning, but his phrase in *Ars Poetica* is perhaps the *locus classicus* as well as the *bête noire*. Plato is probably the first theoretician of interarts studies in the *Ion* and *Republic*,

Painting and Reality, a volume O'Connor read with interest, Etienne Gilson devotes a perceptive chapter to sorting out the complicated relationship between "Painting and Language." Rouault himself was reticent, when interviewed about his art, to discuss the meaning of his prints and paintings in words. He liked to repeat Poussin's dictum that he made "a mute art": *on fait un art muet*. Paintings can do many things, but Rouault knew well that they cannot be coaxed into speech. Any attempt to describe them by a set of verbal statements is to make them into what they are not. Apart from such "translations" the only commentary on a work of art could be made by another work of art, and academic discourse has always been transacted in language.¹⁴⁵

Lessing reminds us that paintings occupy space and do not unfold over time, except in the moments it takes to "read" them with the wandering eye.¹⁴⁶ The plot elements and characters of literary fiction develop over time, but they do not occupy physical space—more space, that is, than the few pages on which the story is printed. Lessing's distinctions between synchronic (spatial) and diachronic (temporal) media expose Horace's similitude as a clever ruse: paintings and poems are not very much alike. Pictures are not *mute poems* and poems are not *speaking pictures*. Still, the dynamic "meta-ferrying" of tropes in the previous sentence is what makes comparing the arts—as Homer, Virgil, Horace, Keats and their tribe have shown—so inviting.

O'Connor could not resist the comparison. She advised the aspiring writer Ben Griffiths,

and before Plato, the matter of a "speaking picture" is broached poetically in Homer's *ekphrasis* of the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*.

¹⁴⁴ A number of modern artists, perhaps most famously Picasso and Miro, commented on the Old Masters by "translating" their paintings into their modern idiom.

¹⁴⁶ Another way they do unfold in time is that the colors and painting surfaces tend to change with the accumulation of years. This has been very apparent in the case of Delacroix's paintings, which have darkened, and Da Vinci's Last Supper, which has faded and flaked.

“you have to learn to *paint with words*” (HB 83, my italics). Interarts studies is an inexact science, but as Matisse put it, exactitude can be overvalued: “*l’exactitude n’est pas la vérité*” (Chipp 137).¹⁴⁷

Thus from a technical standpoint it seems prudent to acknowledge that what Rouault does when he manipulates the “mute” visual elements of line, color, texture, and form is obviously not the same as what O’Connor accomplishes when she works up plot and character through letters, words, and paragraphs as her fingers peck the keys of her typewriter. They are artistic creations, but creations that differ markedly in technique and in kind. It is not unwise to venture into these comparative realms with caution, as William Dyrness reminds the reader in the preface to his book on Rouault. With visual art, more so even than with prose fiction, the interpreter enters a more mysterious realm of oblique, indirect meanings and inferences:

Rouault as a painter does not deal primarily with language. He is less able than a writer or a poet to scrutinize and analyze his inner experience. We will need to appeal, as Maritain reminds us, to “external, indirect and so to speak oblique indications, whose complete meaning is up to us to infer.”

(Dyrness 17-18)

A man of few words, Rouault stated it rather more bluntly: “It is too simple a game that is often false to compare artists who practice different arts” (Rouault *Souvenir* 58). We should be no less cautious about making an argument for translation or even influence.

¹⁴⁷ This aphorism appeared in an exhibition catalogue for a major retrospective of Matisse’s work exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1947, the same year O’Connor received her MFA and began writing *Wise Blood*. Matisse’s quote might be compared to Emily Dickinson’s “Tell the truth, but tell it slant,” or to Picasso’s famous 1923 statement, “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth” (Chipp 264).

O'Connor does not engage in *ekphrasis*: with the possible exception of the tattoo of a Byzantine portrait of Christ on Parker's back in the eponymous story, she does not attempt to reproduce a Rouault painting in a verbal idiom.¹⁴⁸ Nor do we have any evidence that she set out to imitate Rouault's subject matter or style. Influence studies have their problems and their limits. Thus, while it is evident that O'Connor knew and admired Rouault's art, the more fruitful argument we will pursue here looks for analogies or "elective affinities" that need not be predicated on influence. It requires no great stretch of the imagination, for example, to find in O'Connor's ungainly description of Leora Watts in *Wise Blood* an answering form, in prose, of a Rouault *filie*.¹⁴⁹

In the case of O'Connor and Rouault we must also consider the fascinating matter of what German comparatists have called *Doppelbegabung*: the gift some artists have to work with some degree of competence in more than one artistic medium. The paradigm for this artist of many accomplishments, of course, is the *uomo universale* of the Renaissance, super-artists like Michelangelo or Leonardo who could write sonnets, paint, sculpt, and design buildings with the *sprezzatura* Castiglione praised in the ideal courtier. One of the interesting features O'Connor and Rouault share is that though they made their mark in the verbal and visual arts respectively, they both took a hobbyist's delight in trying their hand at the other art in their spare time. Thus O'Connor, as we have noted,

¹⁴⁸ In the last story she completed before her death, the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ on Parker's back, with its all-demanding eyes, could be interpreted as an *ekphrasis* of one of Rouault's *têtes du Christ*.

¹⁴⁹ In turn, the Rouault *filie* can be read as a pictorial representation of the prostitute described in Bloy's *La femme pauvre*. Here is O'Connor's portrait of Leora Watts: "Mrs. Watts was sitting alone in a white iron bed, cutting her toenails with a large pair of scissors. She was a big woman with very yellow hair and white skin that glistened with a greasy preparation" (WB 29). Mrs. Watts also recalls the menacing angular features of one of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*: "Mrs. Watts grin was as curved and sharp as the blade of a sickle" (WB 56).

was not a bad cartoonist and painter, and Rouault wrote a number of poems. Raïssa Maritain in *Adventures of Grace* takes pains to point out Rouault's literary achievements, which in the 1940s were not generally known.¹⁵⁰ Neither O'Connor nor Rouault can be said to have gone beyond dilettantism in these secondary fields, but that is beside the point. These ventures into other media seem to have enriched their work in the medium they excelled in. Thus readers have been struck by the visual qualities of O'Connor's fiction, and the Maritains have not been the only critics who have commented on the poetic nature of Rouault's *oeuvre*.¹⁵¹

Writing and drawing are not the same, *pace* Horace. Nevertheless, juxtaposing the visual orientation of O'Connor's fiction with the poetic sensibility of Rouault's paintings and prints may prove that though the Horatian similitude may not be correct logically, it seems right poetically, that is to say, inexactly. "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" the wide-eyed Mad Hatter asks Alice (Carroll 95).¹⁵² Perhaps it is not much different from asking, "How can an O'Connor story be compared to a Rouault painting?" It is an inviting question.

¹⁵⁰ "It is perhaps known that this great painter also wrote an incalculable amount of verse. . . . Rouault always hesitated to publish them. He was diffident about doing so, not feeling himself to be a master of poetic technique as he was a master of painting technique" (R. Maritain 196). Only in 1971 were many of Rouault's unpublished essays and poems made available to the public, in Bernard Dorival's still-untranslated *Sur l'Art et Sur La Vie*.

¹⁵¹ The poetic term, "outrageous lyricism," was applied to his work as early as the 1905 exhibit with the Fauves at the Salon d'Automne. Rouault had a strong inclination to adopt poetic titles for his paintings and prints. And, of course, *Miserere et Guerre* was intended to be a collaborative work with Rouault's poet friend André Suarez. Dorival comments on Rouault's poetic bent in his introduction to *Sur l'Art et Sur La Vie* (1971).

¹⁵² Looking back on herself as a young reader, O'Connor writes that she found *Alice in Wonderland* to be "a terrifying book" (HB 288).

III

Before I suggest some grounds for comparison, perhaps Rouault needs a brief introduction. The matter of his birth in a cellar during the bombardment of Paris in 1871 is legendary. In O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, Francis Marion Tarwater tells people that he "was born in a wreck." Rouault had a similar story: he was born in a cellar in the Paris suburb of Belleville where his mother had to escape the shelling of the Franco-Prussian war. As a teenager he was apprenticed to a stained-glass maker, and he entered the studios of Delaunay before the age of twenty. Delaunay died the following year. Rouault became the favorite pupil of the Symbolist master Gustave Moreau, who impacted an entire generation of students, including Rouault's classmate Henri Matisse. With Moreau he studied the Old Masters in the Louvre, including his favorite, Rembrandt. He became acquainted with the art of Cézanne (Rouault's favorite post-impressionist), and he imbibed Moreau's literary tastes as well, perhaps chiefly his master's delight for Pascal's *Pensées*.

* * *

A number of aesthetic streams can be seen to converge in Rouault's idiosyncratic visual art. He names some of them in his *Souvenirs Intimes*, a series of short tributes to his heroes. As a young boy whose maternal grandfather passed on his passion for buying prints along the Seine, Rouault was impressed with the ingenious caricatures and dramatic gestures of Daumier, which attests to his rootedness in the modern idioms of the nineteenth century, beginning perhaps with the low subject matter and grit that militated against academic canons of beauty and decorum beginning in the late Romantic period with Daumier's genius for journalism and caricature and continuing with Courbet's

separation from the official *salons*. Especially in Rouault's early *filles* and *pierrots*, we sense some kinship with the Montmartre *demi-monde* that Toulouse-Lautrec chronicled at the *fin-de-siècle*, even if Rouault's sensibility in approaching these subjects is far different.

One of the secrets moderns sometimes try to hide is their rootedness in tradition. Not so Rouault. What sets Rouault's aesthetics apart, but which also connects him to the "anti-modern modern program of Maritain and O'Connor, is how he connects his modernist idiom to the pre-modern iconographic tradition of medieval art, the world the historians of thought and Rouault's contemporaries Gilson and Erwin Panofsky so meticulously documented. Throughout his life Rouault admired the devotion to craftsmanship of the anonymous cathedral builders.

Trained in Moreau's studio, Rouault would have been introduced to the hermetic world of late nineteenth century Symbolism—the mystical aestheticism that calls to mind the J. K. Huysmans of *A Rebours*. But Moreau apparently had the wisdom as a teacher not to force his own neo-Romantic style on his pupils. He exhibited early with the Fauves at the famous *Salon d'Automne* of 1905 and was throughout his career lumped into the broad category of the Expressionist movement, probably because critics did not know what else to do with him. But his appeal to this day is that he was always an aesthetic movement to himself: a true original, comparable (in his originality and appetite for work) to his more famous contemporary, Picasso, though without the insatiable flamboyant ego of the Spanish master.

Rouault painted a sordid gallery of heavy prostitutes, sad clowns, preening socialites, and draconian judges. He distorted, distended, smeared, and encrusted them in

thick layers of paint, the caked sediment and crude violence of his stroke supplying striking evidence that the human race, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “wear’s man’s smudge and shares man’s smell.”¹⁵³ But in this grim litany that mingles oppressor and oppressed in a common woe, again and again he places in their abject company the “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” who like them was “despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:5): the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Suffering Servant, the sin-bearer Jesus Christ.

And the inexplicable wonder of those colors! Rouault boldly announced the richness of his palette in his earliest works; and it is his heavily saturated color that dyes the viewer’s memory in those revelatory late landscapes, with the sun suspended like a luminous host in the sky and a symphony of hues throbbing *gloria in excelsis*. Against the *basso continuo* of Rouault’s ugly depiction of depravity it is the pulverized colors of the Passion—the rich reds, burnt umbers, deep blues, and bruised purples—that plead the mercy of a “Christ-haunted” art as his prophetic witness to the modern world.

* * *

¹⁵³ The full quatrain runs: “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; / And all is seared with trade; bleared, seared with toil; / And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod” (Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”)

CHAPTER 5

O'CONNOR AND FRANÇOIS MAURIAC:

“BUT THEN MAURIAC IS ONE OF MY ADMIRATIONS”

Précis

O'Connor owned fifteen books by the prolific French *renouveau* novelist and essayist Mauriac. She confessed that “Mauriac is one of my admirations” (*HB* 356). Yet surprisingly little comparative work has been done on the two authors. In the seasoned Nobel laureate she sensed the kinship and encouragement of a modern Catholic novelist, forty years her elder, who embodied values that resonated deeply with her own. Both authors pursued creative writing as a God-given vocation, devoting themselves to producing an art of integrity, whatever the cost. They articulated the mystery of life through their Christian faith, while not compromising the integrity of physical vision. They had a distaste for the hypocrisy of sentimentalism and marketing schemes, and portrayed man's wretched degradation in a fallen world beset by evil, but also a world never beyond the surprising transformations of the relentless pursuit of God's grace.

Mauriac, like O'Connor, was a man of the country. His novels are often set in rural France, especially in his beloved Bordeaux region. Mauriac was deeply influenced from a young age by Pascal's *Pensées*, with its stark contrast of sin and grace, and may be another indirect way O'Connor would have engaged the revival of Pascalian thought.

One of the intriguing threads a reader might trace through the letters collected in *The Habit of Being* is the unqualified admiration O'Connor expressed throughout her writing career for the literature of French Catholic and Nobel laureate François Mauriac, which she read in the translations that were appearing in the postwar decades at the remarkable clip of several volumes a year. O'Connor left no doubt that she looked up to Mauriac as something of a role model in the craft of fiction. Writing to Betty Hester about the 1959 *Kenyon Review* interview with Mauriac, she commented simply, "I found it very moving, but then Mauriac is one of my admirations" (HB 356).¹⁵⁴ From her early twenties, before the onset of lupus, right up to her *in extremis* state just a month before her death at age 39—in other words, the entire roughly sixteen-year span of her creative career—O'Connor seems to have read as many of Mauriac's works as she could lay her hands on, and her approving remarks testify that she sensed a kindred spirit in her elder French contemporary. At her death, O'Connor's private library featured no fewer than fifteen volumes by the Frenchman—quantitatively more books, it should be noted, than by any other author.¹⁵⁵ She reviewed two of Mauriac's books for her diocesan journal,

¹⁵⁴ The numerous references she makes in her letters to her favorite contemporary French novelist begin in August 1955 and extend to the month before her death, July 1964.

¹⁵⁵ By 1957, she could write to Betty Hester that she already possessed eight of his novels (HB 237). O'Connor read all of her European literature in their English translations. Lorine Getz, the first to publish an annotated list of the contents of O'Connor's personal library, records these translated Mauriac volumes (dates of English translation in parenthesis) as follows: *Flesh and Blood* (1955), *The Frontenacs* (1961), *Great Men* (1949), *The Lamb* (1955), *Lines of Life* (1957), *The Loved and the Unloved* (1952), *Memoires Interieures* (1960), *Questions of Precedence* (1958), *The Son of Man* (1960), *Therese: A Portrait in Four Parts* (1947), *The Unknown Sea* (1948), *Viper's Tangle* (1957), *The Weakling, and the Enemy* (1952), *What I Believe* (1963), and *Words of Faith* (1955). All but three of these works in her library were translated into English (some freshly translated) after 1952, when Mauriac received the Nobel Prize (Getz 104). These books are also listed in Kinney's *Flannery O'Connor's Library*. Since O'Connor frequently received and sent away books she read but did not keep, she most likely read more works by Mauriac than she kept in her two bookcases at home, where space was at a premium.

The Bulletin: the novel *Lines of Life* (freshly translated by Gerard Hopkins in 1957), and *The Son of Man* (translated in 1960), a personal meditation on the life of Christ.¹⁵⁶

What O'Connor might have discovered and incorporated into her own writing craft from her long admiration for Mauriac's art constitutes a field of comparative study that has yet to be fully explored. Sarah Gordon in her "Seeking Beauty in Darkness" essay suggests a link between O'Connor and Mauriac, only to leave the specific nature of the link unexplored.¹⁵⁷ More recently, Georgia College and State University professor Henry Edmondson III, in his plenary address at the 2009 international O'Connor conference in Rome, suggested some points of contact between O'Connor and Mauriac. These are helpful first steps down a largely untraveled research path.

Especially in the instance of an author so eclectically read as O'Connor, whose natural talent it was to weave disparate strains of thought into the rich texture of her fiction, or to chop things up in her "food-chopper" brain, we should note again that the attempt to isolate and delineate a single author's influence on her work can be fraught with peril. In the case of two such independently accomplished authors as O'Connor and Mauriac, it once again seems a more useful heuristic to explore their elective affinities—sympathetic areas of resonance in matters of craft, vision, and sensibility. Obviously, the fact that both authors were committed Catholics who wrote their fiction in a modern age characterized by widespread religious skepticism would seem *prima facie* to place them on the same playing field. And it certainly does, though we should remember that there

¹⁵⁶ Her review of *Lines of Life* was published in *The Bulletin* on October 26, 1957 (PG 44-45); her review of *The Son of Man* on Sept. 3, 1960 (PG 95-96).

¹⁵⁷ Gordon writes: "Scholars of O'Connor's works have repeatedly acknowledged the possible influence of both Bernanos and Mauriac, for O'Connor held in high regard both Bernanos' *The Diary of a Country Priest* and Mauriac's novels, as each explored the conflict between good and evil" (Gordon "Seeking" 77).

was a coterie of postwar Catholic novelists—who responded to the popular call for uplifting, sentimental “religious fiction” and easily obtained the blessing of the Church’s *nihil obstat* imprimatur—from whom O’Connor took considerable pains to distance her art, as did Mauriac. In my view, it is not difficult to locate certain strong compatibilities that run between the two authors. Even a cursory parallel reading shows that Mauriac’s craft resonates with O’Connor’s on several levels that readily serve to explain why she should have felt so attracted to the older Frenchman’s body of work.

My purpose here is to offer some preliminary thoughts toward a comparative analysis of O’Connor and Mauriac’s fiction. Mauriac’s vast literary *oeuvre*—two dozen novels and an astonishing total of nearly one hundred published volumes (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 366)—makes it impossible to work out more than a rough sketch in the confines of this chapter. Because Mauriac’s legacy appears in the past decade to have been consigned to the quiet resting ground of university library stacks, it will be necessary to dust him off and situate him in the eminence that would have appeared to the young O’Connor half a century ago: a newly-minted Nobel Prize winner at the height of his international acclaim. Following this brief overview of Mauriac and his work, we will examine what we can learn about O’Connor’s reception of the French author from the comments she made directly about his work in her letters, essays, and book reviews. The last part of the chapter will suggest some general areas where a resonance of Mauriac might be discerned in O’Connor’s work. This will lead into the argument that the insistent presence of Pascal’s thought in Mauriac’s fiction could well have provided an influential window for O’Connor into the world of the *Pensées*, and that Mauriac’s

engagement with Nietzsche would likely have encouraged O'Connor in her own critique of the atheistic modern religion of the human will.¹⁵⁸

I

By any account one of the giants of twentieth century French letters, François Mauriac (1885-1970) was forty years older than O'Connor and survived her by six years, dying a month before his 85th birthday at the end of a prolific writing career as a poet, novelist, playwright, political essayist, literary critic, biographer, and author of spiritual works that spanned seven decades and the dramatic upheavals of the century's two World Wars. Though his long catalogue of published fiction and nonfiction appears in recent decades to have fallen into scholarly neglect as a venerable but dated museum piece of French Catholic humanist "anti-modern modernism," we should note that like his Catholic artist countryman Georges Rouault (with whom he can be compared, and whose cultural legacy has similarly declined sharply after the 1970s), Mauriac's international popularity crested in the postwar decades when O'Connor came into her maturity as a writer.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, the 1950s era of the French Fourth Republic's reconstruction (1946-1958) proved to be the decade of rolling accolades for Mauriac, which seems to have surprised him given the fact that throughout much of his life he took contrarian positions that left

¹⁵⁸ See Henry Edmondson III insightful study of O'Connor's critique of Nietzsche: *Return to Good and Evil*. Regrettably, the book often appears to be overlooked in the critical literature.

¹⁵⁹ Ralph McInerney opens his biographical sketch of Mauriac as follows: "In the days when Catholics had a livelier sense of their co-religionists in other countries, François Mauriac would have shown up on anyone's short list of great Catholic novelists" (*Some Catholic Writers* 91).

him standing apart from the mainstream.¹⁶⁰ He was awarded the world's top literary honor, the Nobel Prize, "for the deep spiritual insight and the artistic intensity with which he has in his novels penetrated the drama of human life," at the age of 67 in 1952, when O'Connor at age 27 was just coming into her brief writing prime ("The Nobel Prize"). In France his collected works were published in twelve hefty volumes between 1950 and 1956, and in recognition of Mauriac's wartime services on behalf of his country, President de Gaulle presented him the Grand Cross of the *Légion d'honneur* in 1958.¹⁶¹ Also in that year, Mauriac wrote his poignant forward to Elie Wiesel's *Nuit*, that slender giant among Holocaust memoirs which owed a great deal to Mauriac's personal encouragement.¹⁶² With the initial prodding of Mauriac's friend and novelist co-adjutant Graham Greene, British translator Gerard Hopkins (the nephew of the great Victorian Jesuit poet) completed many of his fine translations of Mauriac's works during the final decade of O'Connor's life, with the effect that even though many of the novels had been written, and several of them translated, decades earlier, in the 1950s and early 1960s they came across as fresh publications to an English-speaking audience.¹⁶³ Most of these new

¹⁶⁰ Cecil Jenkins begins his monograph on Mauriac by noting this irony: "'My life,' noted Mauriac humorously a few years ago—he had on this particular occasion been made an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters—'has turned out to be one long prize-giving.' And it is true that, while as a writer and as a journalist he has often seemed a controversial and even a lonely figure, his career as man of letters in the French manner has indeed been the spectacular one which Maurice Barrès predicted for him more than half a century ago" (Jenkins 1).

¹⁶¹ The relationship with De Gaulle proved to be one of mutual admiration and respect. One of Mauriac's last publishing efforts was a biography of De Gaulle in 1964.

¹⁶² This foreword still appears in new paperback editions of the book today. Ironically, this short preface is probably the only point of access most people today have to Mauriac's work.

¹⁶³ This translation achievement by Gerard Hopkins—some seventeen of Mauriac's novels in as many years (1946-1961), all of a fine literary quality—is an astonishing feat. The initiative to present a large number of Mauriac's works in fresh translation to the English-speaking world following WWII owed much to the efforts of Graham Greene, who worked as a literary director for Eyre & Spottiswoode. The publisher's note at the beginning of the 1961 translated edition of *Young Man in Chains* is worth quoting in full for the interesting story it tells:

translations were reprinted for an American readership by the same publishers that became the literary trustees of O'Connor's fiction and posthumous nonfiction: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy (Cudahy soon to be replaced by Giroux, O'Connor's editorial mentor). At the end of the 1950s, Mauriac was elected an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It is no exaggeration to claim that in the trans-Atlantic world of letters, and certainly in the more specialized milieu of modern Catholic letters that held special interest for O'Connor, few authors were considered more important or influential in her day than Mauriac.¹⁶⁴

It was in December 1943, when France was still enemy-occupied territory, that the English publishers [Eyre & Spottiswoode], at the instigation of Mr Graham Greene, who was then their editorial director, tried to acquire the translation rights of the novel which, it was rumoured, Francois Mauriac had recently published, *La Pharissienne*. The book could not be obtained in London but when, after the Liberation, communications with Paris became possible once more, it was decided to extend the original proposal and issue a collected edition in English of all Mauriac's novels, and to commission Mr Gerard Hopkins . . . to do it. One or two of Mauriac's novels had been translated in England and America during the twenties and thirties without attracting much attention from the general reading public. Yet everyone interested in French literature recognized Francois Mauriac as the greatest of living French novelists.

It is important to note that the schedule of Hopkins' post-war translations of Mauriac's novels does not at all match the order in which they were published in French. Thus, after WWII, the first book to be translated was the only novel Mauriac had written during the War, *The Woman of the Pharisees* (trans. 1946, *La Pharissienne* 1941). This was followed by *Thérèse: A Portrait in Four Parts* (trans. 1947, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* 1927, *La fin de la nuit* 1935), *The Unknown Sea* (trans. 1948, *Les chemins de la mer* 1939), *The Desert of Love* (trans. 1949, *Le désert de l'amour* 1925), *The Enemy* (trans. 1949, *Le mal* 1924), *A Kiss For the Leper* (trans. 1950, *Le baiser au lèpreux* 1922), *The Dark Angels* (trans. 1951, *Les anges noirs* 1936), *That Which Was Lost* (trans. 1951, *Ce qui était perdu* 1930), *The Knot of Vipers* (trans. 1951, *Le noeud de vipères* 1932), *The Loved and the Unloved* (trans. 1952, *Galigai* 1952), *The Weakling and the Enemy* (trans. 1952, *Le Sangoin* 1951), *The Frontenacs* (trans. 1952, *Le mystère Frontenac* 1933), *The Stuff of Youth* (trans. 1953, *La robe prétexte* 1914), *The River of Fire* (trans. 1954, *Le fleuve de feu* 1923), *Flesh and Blood* (trans. 1954, *La chair et le sang* 1920), *The Lamb* (trans. 1955, *L'Agneau* 1954), *Lines of Life* (trans. 1957, *Destins* 1928), *Questions of Precedence* (trans. 1958, *Préseances* 1921), and *Young Man in Chains* (trans. 1961, *L'Enfant chargé de chaînes* 1913). Mauriac was already 60 years old in 1945. We should note that before World War II, when Mauriac had already completed the bulk of his work as a novelist, he was known to English readers only for four major works: *The Kiss to the Leper* (trans. James Whitall, 1923), *Thérèse* (trans. Eric Sutton, 1928), *Destinies* (trans. Eric Sutton, 1929), and *Viper's Tangle* (trans. Warre B. Wells, 1933). During his marathon run of Mauriac translations after the War, the only books Gerard Hopkins translated within a year of their French publication dates were *The Loved and the Unloved*, *The Weakling and the Enemy*, and *The Lamb*.

¹⁶⁴ Indeed, in 1961, just three years before O'Connor's death when she was at the height of her craft, the English publishers of Gerard Hopkins' translation of Mauriac's first novel, *Young Man in Chains*, could

Much like Rouault in the 1950s, Mauriac had come by his international recognition gradually, by dint of a long and steady output of creative workmanship. He was the youngest of five children born into a landed bourgeois family in the southwestern port city of Bordeaux. His father, a banker of some means, died suddenly the year after he was born. The children were raised by their devout Catholic mother who was strongly influenced by Jansenist principles. Thus, the lifelong impact Pascal and Racine had on Mauriac's thought and art took root in his childhood years.¹⁶⁵ Graduating from the University of Bordeaux with a literature *licence* in 1905, the year of France's official separation of church and state, he moved to Paris, where he soon abandoned his intention to study paleography and medieval archeology in order to pursue creative writing, at first—consistent with the dominant Symbolist aesthetic of his day—in the area of lyric poetry. His first publication was a collection of poems, *Les Mains jointes (Joined Hands, 1909)*.¹⁶⁶ He married in 1913, the year he published his first novel, *L'Enfant chargé de chaînes (Young Man in Chains)*, and eventually fathered four children.¹⁶⁷ During the First World War he served in the army's medical division in the Balkans but was discharged early due to his poor constitution.

write without hyperbole that “everyone interested in French literature recognized Francois Mauriac as the greatest of living French novelists” and name him “one of the few twentieth century masters of the novel” (Mauriac *Young Man* v-vi).

¹⁶⁵ Mauriac often acknowledged his debt to Racine and Pascal, by frequently incorporating them into his fiction and publishing appreciations of both men: *La vie de Jean Racine* (1928) and *Les pages immortelles de Pascal*.

¹⁶⁶ Mauriac, echoing the esteemed heritage of nineteenth century French poetry, throughout his career would see himself first as a poet and secondarily as a novelist. But his poetry has not survived as well as his novels, and has largely been passed over in silence by critics.

¹⁶⁷ It is interesting that both Rouault and Mauriac had four children, and appear to have been devoted family men in addition to pursuing their work as artists.

Starting with *La Chair et le sang* (*Flesh and Blood*, 1920), he established the astonishing writing pace that allowed him to publish a novel a year for nearly two decades (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 366). It was with his fifth novel, *Le Baiser au lèpreux* (*A Kiss for the Leper*, 1922), that he found his characteristic “Mauriac” voice and atmosphere and achieved his breakthrough in the Parisian literary world. The *Académie Française* awarded him the *grand prix du roman* for his seventh novel, *Le Désert de l’amour* (*The Desert of Love*, 1925). These interwar years were to prove the most fertile creative period for his fiction, though they were not without controversy. In 1927, the year in which he published his portrait of the degenerate, trapped woman *Thérèse Desqueyroux*—the novel that a literary jury honored as one of the five great French novels of the century—Mauriac experienced a “dark night of the soul” period of intense spiritual crisis that lasted for three years. In particular, it was a stinging remark by André Gide along with the criticism of many of his Catholic readers that prompted Mauriac’s renewed commitment to “purify the source” and integrate his faith more consistently with his fictional vocation. Following the novel some consider his masterpiece, *Le Noeud de vipères* (*The Knot of Vipers*, 1932), he was elected to the *Académie Française* in 1933. Although he focused his efforts more on polemical journalism during and after the Second World War, he wrote more than twenty novels over the course of his career, and even if he always maintained his first passion for poetry and tried his hand as a playwright, it is primarily as an innovative novelist that he made his literary mark, and that was how O’Connor approached his work.

From his emergence on the Parisian literary scene of the early 1920s to his death half a century later, Mauriac travelled back and forth with his family between the two

very different cultural worlds which form the unique dual backdrop for all his fiction: the metropolitan capital of Paris and the countryside surrounding the Atlantic port city of Bordeaux in the southwest region of Gascony. Here in the country he repeatedly fictionalized the two places most familiar to him: his country family estate at Malagar, a quiet provincial retreat nestled in the rolling vineyards, surrounded by the local “aristocracy of the vine”; and his other home at St. Symphorien, abutting the vast pine forests of Les Landes fifty miles southeast of Bordeaux.

The Second World War had the effect of furthering Mauriac’s platform of influence and literary reputation. He began publishing columns boldly denouncing the rising Fascism in *Le Figaro* during the 1930s. During the German occupation of France he wrote scathing attacks on Fascism and the French collaborationist regime under the *nom de plume* Forez. *La Pharisienne* (*The Woman of the Pharisees*, 1941), a novel that takes aim at religious hypocrisy and the only extended work of fiction he wrote during these war years, was widely read as a veiled allegorical indictment of Vichy France’s capitulation to the Nazis. His strongest work of political protest during these years, *Le Cahier Noir* (*The Black Notebook*, 1943), forced him into hiding and was used outside France as propaganda to fuel the Allied cause. After the war he had a strong public disagreement with Camus over the treatment of collaborationists. Under the regime of General de Gaulle, he was widely respected as a dean of French letters. He became the founding editor of a postwar Catholic journal called *Le Table Rond*, which he conceived as a cultural replacement for the discredited collaborationist *Mercure de France*.

The volumes of nonfiction Mauriac published after the War reveal that he was widely regarded as an accomplished literary artist who had earned the right to speak with

some authority on matters of Christian faith and art.¹⁶⁸ So popular had he become with his American readership late in his life that when a Sunburst Books¹⁶⁹ edition of four of his novels was published by O'Connor's publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1968, just two years before Mauriac's death, the author of the introductory appreciation, Duke French professor and Mauriac translator Wallace Fowlie, predicted that Mauriac's fiction would outlive that of Camus and Sartre.¹⁷⁰ Coming just a few years after Camus' Nobel Prize and untimely death, this may seem from our vantage point to be a startling prediction. That it appears not to have held up four decades later does not, however, diminish the sincerity by which Fowlie spoke it at the time. The cultural revolts of 1968 were manifestations of a continental divide in the western world. Much of the traditional landscape changed dramatically; in many ways, it was the end of the epoch the art of Mauriac and Rouault inhabited, and to which it was addressed. Among the casualties of the end of the postwar era and the entrenchment particularly in the French academy of a secular anti-humanist poststructuralism has been, apparently, the continuing cultural memory of Mauriac's achievement.¹⁷¹ But this seismic shift in the literary landscape

¹⁶⁸ In the 1950s, these works included *Mes Grandes hommes* (*Men I Hold Great*, 1950), *La Pierre d'achoppement* (*The Stumbling Block*, 1951), *Lettres ouvertes* (*Letters on Art and Literature*, 1952), *Paroles catholiques* (*Words of Faith*, 1954), *Le Fils de l'homme* (*The Son of Man*, 1958), and *Mémoires intérieures* (*Mémoires Intérieures*, 1959).

¹⁶⁹ From the back cover: "Sunburst Books are designed to display the complete artistry of authors of unquestionable stature" (*A Mauriac Reader*).

¹⁷⁰ Professor Fowlie, an authority on Rimbaud (arguably Mauriac's favorite Symbolist poet), was well acquainted with Mauriac's *oeuvre*, having translated the author's *Ce Que Je Crois* into English in 1963. He simply believed Mauriac to be a better creative writer than Camus and Sartre: "His [Mauriac's] chances for literary survival seem superior to those of such currently successful writers as Sartre and Camus who are better equipped philosophers than Mauriac. The best effects of Sartre and Camus are those of intellectual abstraction. The effects of Mauriac are those of creation" (Fowlie "The Art" xx.).

¹⁷¹ I refer to the academic hegemony in the last three decades of the twentieth century represented by the poststructuralist and anti-humanist *troika* of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, who made no secret of attacking the tradition of Christian humanism older authors like Mauriac represented.

happened only after O'Connor's death. From her vantage point in the 1950s and early 1960s, Mauriac would have appeared to her as a culturally-engaged Catholic and innovative fiction writer at the forefront of the literary world.

II

The paradox of this long public festooning of Mauriac's sunset years is that he has not been without his detractors, both during and after his lifetime. As is often the case with one so prolifically published, it is not surprising that the quality of his fictional *oeuvre* is uneven (as Mauriac himself, who in later years cast a critical eye over his work, readily acknowledged). Four decades after his death, it now seems likely that a large part of his novels will not survive the exacting critical censure of the jury of time. Especially later in life, with novels such as *The Lamb*, his efforts could seem inartistically stilted and didactic, noticeably lacking the dramatic characterization and atmosphere of his earlier masterpieces. Perhaps only a handful of his two dozen novels (*A Kiss for the Leper*, *Genitrix*, *Thérèse Desqueroix*, *The Desert of Love*, *The Knot of Vipers*, and *The Woman of the Pharisees*) can claim the enduring merit to qualify as literary classics of the 20th century. And to the extent that his novels are still read today, Mauriac continues to polarize his readership. Always something of a loner and controversialist, he frequently rubbed against the grain of various sectors of his society. He could be a lightning rod for criticism, and at various points in his life he either seemed to be crushed by his status as Socratic "gadfly," or to relish it. Much of his nonfiction (*The Anguish and Joy of the Christian Life*, *The Stumbling Block*, and *What I Believe*, among others) can be read as his attempt to clarify his fiction for a sometimes confused, and at times openly

antagonistic, readership. It bears mention that a great part of O'Connor's letters, speeches, and essays were devoted to the same impulse: to provide her perplexed readers an interpretive and apologetic context for approaching her work. Both Mauriac and O'Connor had a great concern for communicating through their writing, and both authors were irked when they found their work grossly misread.

Several of Mauriac's literary controversies stand out and deserve brief comment. First, as has been noted, Mauriac often found himself isolated as one of a very small group of French Catholic novelists writing outside the mainstream of what in the prevailing climate of religious skepticism from the Enlightenment forward had become an increasingly secular and anti-clerical France. With Claudel, Péguy, Bloy, and Bernanos he was not the only novelist to challenge the dominant cultural ethos of atheistic positivism in French modernity, but from the beginning of his career he understood his voice to be in opposition to the regnant intellectual fashions of his day. Certainly, the central theme of all his fiction—the drama of the fallen human soul pursued and redeemed by God's grace—was met by many modern readers with incredulity, if not outright scorn. This opposition of *grands récits* between the Christian author's supernatural framework (God, the devil, the eternal significance of man's moral soul, sin, judgment, heaven, hell, grace, the redemptive work of Christ's incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection) and the dominant secular materialism of modernity (which denies this framework in favor of a naturalist account) is basic to understanding the peculiar tensions of Mauriac and O'Connor's fiction. This great presuppositional conflict explains in large part the lifelong controversy both authors faced with the culture

of modern religious skepticism they inhabited, and both were well aware of the peculiar difficulties this created for their readers.

The second of Mauriac's lifelong conflicts came, paradoxically, from the opposite end. From the days of his earliest efforts to the end of his career, Mauriac faced persistent criticism from readers within the Catholic church who considered his fiction too dark, too unremittingly pessimistic in its analysis of human nature, too sparing in its representation of God's presence and grace. He was frequently taken to task for not writing spiritually "uplifting" fiction. There may be something of this behind Gide's comment that in the last analysis, Mauriac may have presented himself as a Christian, but that his novels—more focused on portraying sin than redemption—demonstrated that he preferred Mammon to God. Of all the controversies surrounding his art, this one appears to have stung Mauriac with the greatest force. In any case, it came at the beginning of his three years of spiritual crisis and precipitated a lengthy rebuttal in *Dieu et Mammon*, culminating in his famous resolve to "*purifier la source*." It is important to note that the same line of criticism bedeviled O'Connor throughout her career. A vocal group of readers within the Catholic community, and more locally within her "southern gentility" family circle, were scandalized by her grotesque, hard-nosed stories and clamored for an art of "instant uplift" and spiritual comfort. Her novelist friend John Hawkes, who admired her black humor, even echoed Blake's famous Romantic misreading of Milton in his view that O'Connor's dark-hued fiction proved that she was of the devil's party without knowing it. For both Mauriac and O'Connor, this appeared to be the most vexing controversy they faced: the fact that readers from within their own theological

camp, who ostensibly shared their fundamental convictions, often violently rejected their art without attempting to understand it.¹⁷²

A decade after Gide's suggestion that Mauriac preferred Mammon to God, Mauriac sustained his most vicious attack at the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1937, Sartre published an article entitled "Francois Mauriac and Freedom," in which he accused Mauriac in deliberately harsh terms of abusing the omniscient-narrator point of view. Sartre directed his criticism to Mauriac's recently-published final installment in the saga of Therèse Desqueroix, *La Fin de la nuit*, which depicts Therèse as an old, wasted woman approaching the end of her tragic life. Sartre's argument can be summarized as follows: only characters whose wills and actions are free can be said to live in novels; deprived of their freedom, they are static and the novel is divested of the mystery that gives it life (Sartre 7). In Sartre's view, despite the intent Mauriac stated in the novel's preface to "penetrate the inmost depths of a woman's freedom" (8) Mauriac's Therèse is not free, but constrained by the strict law of her own character flaws and the primal curse of original sin (10-11). Mauriac observes her coolly from an elevated distance, like a judge outside time, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Her end is a foregone conclusion; the author is a puppet-master moving his limp marionette along her predetermined path (14-16). Thus the novel has no duration in time, since "the future is spread out like the past and simply repeats it" (20). Not free, the characters don't live; they become *things*, not human beings. Even their conversations are cut short by the author, who is in too great a

¹⁷² Here we might compare Léon Bloy's famous violent rejection of his friend Rouault's movement toward "a violent lyricism" around 1914. If Bloy had better understood Rouault's aesthetics, he might have seen that Rouault was simply doing in painting what Bloy had done in fiction—employing the grotesque for a specific visionary purpose. But trained on the Impressionists, Bloy couldn't understand this art. Rouault was particularly crushed by Bloy's rejection of his painting, feeling it as a kind of betrayal after the good will that had previously passed between them.

hurry to *tell* rather than *show* (21). Without living characters, the novel is not a novel, and Mauriac is no novelist. Mauriac suffers from the great sin of pride: he ignores the polyphonic relativism of viewpoints and arrogantly puts himself in God's place as an omniscient narrator. The result, in Sartre's view, is "angular, glacial, theatrical, motionless" (24). And finally, with calculated blasphemy, Sartre brings down the gavel in contempt: "God is not an artist. Neither is M. Mauriac" (25).

For those familiar with reading Sartre, the essay's rhetorical bluster comes as no surprise. This appraisal early in the essay conveys the bitter flavor of the whole piece: "M. Mauriac, subtle, sensitive and narrow, with his immodest discretion, his intermittent good will, his nervous pathos, his bitter and fumbling poetry, his pinched style, his sudden vulgarity" (Sartre 9). Mauriac was not impervious to such attacks; indeed, the blunt force of Sartre's vituperative screed seemed to hit home. One evidence that Mauriac was affected by this very public condemnation of his authorial technique was that after turning out a novel a year in the 1920s and 1930s, in the subsequent decade Mauriac published only one novel, *The Woman of the Pharisees*, directing the majority of his writing efforts toward the journalism that would occupy the greater part of his energies in the latter years of his career. And it is worth noting that in *The Woman of the Pharisees*, Mauriac inserts a curiously stilted justification of his narrator's omniscient viewpoint, apparently as a defensive parry to Sartre's criticism.

Beneath the overstated *ad hominem* rhetoric of his essay, Sartre's underlying critique of Mauriac's narrative technique still warrants a response. Sartre puts his finger on a weakness Mauriac intriguingly shared with O'Connor—namely, that of both authors' often awkward management of point of view. Mauriac as well as O'Connor

seemed to gravitate toward the greater flexibility of the omniscient viewpoint for the purposes of opening the possibility of ironic commentary. And yet, if Sartre's proposition holds, all novels that do not exhibit Dostoevsky's polyphony of viewpoints and apparently "free," mysteriously erratic and fully self-motivated characters who surprise even their authors, are not novels. This would eliminate all but a handful of late nineteenth and early twentieth century efforts from Sartre's category of fiction. The question is rather whether what Sartre idealizes as radical existential "freedom" is not itself a chimera. Even Dostoevsky and Hemingway, for all their modern narrative strategies Sartre so admires, stand above their work and actively direct their characters. More to the point, Sartre would be disingenuous if he did not admit that he, as author, circumscribes the "freedom" of his characters. It is the nature of an author to stand apart from, and give direction to, his materials. Sartre seems to forget that the omniscient viewpoint is an old fictional construct that does not have to denote the author's prideful aspiration to deity. For authors like Mauriac and O'Connor, it was a narrative device that—though certainly not without its potential for inconsistency and abuse, as both became aware with practice—nevertheless proved serviceable as a vehicle to open the space of the temporal/eternal, material/spiritual tensions of their Christian "stereoscopic vision." Furthermore, it does not seem to occur to Sartre that it is precisely the narrowness of the character's "freedom"—the tight strictures of the bonds of sin—that Mauriac wishes to depict as that bondage which only the external action of divine grace working on the soul can loosen.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Furthermore, both authors proved that they could adapt to a more limited narrative viewpoint: Mauriac's *The Knot of Vipers* shows his expert control of third-person limited to heighten the mystery of character, as does O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, though O'Connor, who struggled with point of view throughout her career as a writer, toggles the limitation of viewpoint between Rayber and Tarwater

III

Perhaps the best place to begin studying how O'Connor read Mauriac is to examine what she wrote directly about the author in her letters, essays, and book reviews. We have already noted her profession of unqualified admiration for the author's body of work. How early in her life did this regard begin? Though it may not be possible to pinpoint the precise moment when O'Connor read her first Mauriac book, she claimed in her August 1957 letter to Betty Hester to have read Mauriac's *Lines of Life* "about ten years ago in the Skidmore College Library" (HB 237). Ten years earlier in 1947, O'Connor would have been an ambitious young 22 year-old who had just graduated from college in Milledgeville. Skidmore College, a tiny liberal arts school at the foot of the Adirondacks in Saratoga Springs, New York, is certainly nowhere near Milledgeville. This period in O'Connor's life coincides with the horizon-expanding three years of travel and MFA work, following her graduation from the Woman's State College in Milledgeville and before the onset of her lupus, when O'Connor first began to pursue her calling as a fiction writer with a serious sense of purpose. During these crucial three years she completed her writing apprenticeship among some of America's best writing teachers at the Iowa Workshop and worked on chapters of *Wise Blood* at the New York artist community at Yaddo as well as in the literary Connecticut home of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, where she sojourned as a member of the family until the sudden onset of lupus forced her to return home to Milledgeville.

(Bishop's drowning, for example, is first narrated through Rayber at the end of Book Two; in book Three, it comes through Tarwater's point of view in a dream.)

The first reference to Mauriac in her letters appeared in that famous August 1955 letter to Betty Hester we have already quoted: “I read all the Catholic novelists, Mauriac, Bernanos, Bloy, Greene, Waugh” (*HB* 98). The following January, in a letter to Father McCown, she made the astonishing claim that she had “read almost everything that Bloy, Bernanos, and Mauriac have written.” By 1956, of course, Mauriac had already written a vast amount, though not all of it had been translated into English. She added: “The Catholic fiction writer has very little high-powered ‘Catholic’ fiction to influence him except that written by these three, and Greene” (130). She held this opinion firmly to her death. Just four months before she died, she repeated emphatically to Father McCown: “Anybody who wants to be introduced to Catholic fiction must start with the French—Mauriac and Bernanos” (570). In the final month of her life, when she was all but bed-ridden by constant pain, a friend sent her a newly-published book by Mauriac. O’Connor responded with a brief note of appreciation, which must have taken great effort to write: “Thanks for the Mauriac book. I know it’s fine and I hope I’ll get to it sooner or later . . .” (589). But O’Connor, whose body was ravaged by the lupus and weakening by the day, had precious little time left to read; she died later that month.

The range of these occasional comments on Mauriac scattered through her letters indicates something of the breadth, but also the depth, of O’Connor’s appreciation for his art and thought. It is important to reiterate that she digested her Mauriac—as she did all the modern continental European authors she admired—in their English translations.¹⁷⁴ What we notice first is the sharpness of O’Connor’s eye, and memory, for a striking turn of phrase. Astonishingly, she seems to have treasured the final translated line of

¹⁷⁴ Fortunately, as we have noted, these translations (remarkably, nearly all the work of a single translator, Gerard Hopkins) were uniformly of a high literary quality.

Mauriac's *Lines of Life* (translated in 1929 by Eric Sutton) for ten years, quoting it by memory in her letter to Betty Hester: "And (she) was again one of those corpses floating down the stream of life" (*HB* 237). She wanted Hester to verify the accuracy of this old quote at her local public library (wryly observing, however, that "they probably don't specialize in Mauriac at the PL"), compared to the one she had just read in Gerard Hopkins' 1957 translation: "(She) had again become one of those dead who are carried down the stream of life."¹⁷⁵ This exchange testifies to how closely O'Connor read fiction, and here Mauriac in particular—with a poet's attunement of eye and ear.

As one who took more a deeply personal interest in what she called "the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil," O'Connor attended with care to Mauriac's stark depiction of the drama of good and evil in his fiction: "One thing I notice about Mauriac is that he often does it the opposite way—instead of the evil life intruding upon the good as a shock of grace, the good intrudes upon the evil. He did it that way in *The Lamb*" (*HB* 241).¹⁷⁶ She added this pithy comment to summarize Mauriac's trademark presentation of grace working in the lives of those who seem most hopelessly lost: "You accept grace the quickest when you have the least" (241). This is a rough translation of one of Mauriac's favorite Pascalian paradoxes of grace: "Just when you thought I was farthest from you I was closest." She felt Mauriac was especially helpful for those who struggled with their faith. She explained to Father McCown in a letter dated January 1958 that she sent Mauriac's *The Stumbling Block* (1956) to her friend Cecil Dawkins

¹⁷⁵ We should note that the image of a body floating down a river which represents life is strikingly similar to the closing image of Harry/Bevel Ashfield pulled into the current of the river (the Kingdom of Christ) at the end of her story "The River," published in 1953.

¹⁷⁶ Elsewhere she wrote, however, that she thought *The Lamb* to be Mauriac's weakest novel.

who “is one of those you have to go at obliquely, because I think she is much relieved to think that she has, with a good conscience, got rid of her faith” (263).

O’Connor was especially fond of Mauriac’s comment in *God and Mammon* (1929), in response to Maritain’s question of how a Christian should write fiction, that rather than cleaning up the subject matter, “*il faut purifier la source.*”¹⁷⁷ Mauriac had written *God and Mammon* during a time of intense spiritual crisis, after Gide had publically suggested that perhaps he was a successful fiction writer because he was more committed to the “Mammon” of worldly success than to his purported Catholic creed. Furthermore, Mauriac had at this point come under attack from within the Catholic Church by those who criticized his work as unedifying, even unchristian, a circumstance O’Connor herself found all too familiar. She saw in Mauriac’s clarification of his vocation as a writer and a Christian a strong defense of the fundamental goodness of the Christian fiction writer’s calling to write with artistic integrity and leave the results in God’s hands: “I think that we have to give Him the best we’ve got for His use and leave the uses to Him.” For her own sense of calling and commitment to the exigencies of the work of art, the integrity of the writer’s vision—especially when this vision relates what is unpleasant—was a fundamental article she had learned from the final chapter of Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism*, but it must have encouraged her immensely to find it confirmed by Mauriac.

¹⁷⁷ “One must purify the source.” O’Connor seemed to take this advice of Mauriac’s as confirmation of her idea that “if the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God” (*MM* 148-149). In other words, if the writer’s eyes are good (clear physical perception, but also the spiritual eyes of Faith), the writer can honestly relate what he sees, the good along with the bad, and leave the outcome of this work in the hands of God.

Thus O'Connor identified with Mauriac's avoidance of the sentimental to gratify what she called the pious desire for "the instant uplift," which she saw as the disingenuous desire for a redemption without considering its high cost.¹⁷⁸ Thus, it nettled her to hear that a Catholic scholar had complained that Mauriac and Graham Greene did not present a positive picture of Christian marriage in their fiction (*HB* 520).¹⁷⁹ Though not known to be a humorist, Mauriac's flashes of dry French irony were not lost on O'Connor. After returning from her one overseas trip to Lourdes in the spring of 1958—paid for by a family member who hoped O'Connor would find help for her lupus—she remarked to her friend Ashley Brown, concerning the marketing of pious kitsch she found so appalling: "Mauriac wrote somewhere that the religious-good stores [at Lourdes] were the devil's answer there to the Virgin Mary. Anyway, it's apparent that the devil has a good deal to answer to" (285). Both Mauriac and O'Connor had a horror for the rapacious marketing of religious sentimentality.

O'Connor published two reviews of Mauriac books in her diocesan journal *The Bulletin*. The first, her review of Hopkins' fresh translation of *Destins (Lines of Life)*, appeared on October 26, 1957, features no more than a brief paragraph appended to her thoughts on two other books. This concise distillation of her views on the novel opens a

¹⁷⁸ "There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration" (*MM* 48).

¹⁷⁹ She also references this in "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers" in *Mystery and Manners*, in the context of responding to the frequent requests of Catholic readers for *positive* literature: "In a recent book by a Catholic scholar, Mauriac and Greene are taken to task because in their novels they do not give us a true picture of Christian marriage. It is implied that if they exerted themselves a few degrees more, they could do this and, in the process, improve their art. This is a very doubtful proposition. Vocation is a limiting factor, and the conscientious novelist works at the limits of his power and within what his imagination can apprehend. He does not decide what would be good for the Christian body and proceed to deliver it" (*MM* 182-183).

helpful window on what O'Connor saw when she read Mauriac's fiction. Not surprisingly, what she sees in Mauriac is a reflection of her own interests in drawing startling figures: a concern for "the distortions in the lives of . . . 'the moral gentry'" (PG 45). Specifically, for O'Connor, Mauriac excels in depicting "the difficulty of the acceptance, even the recognition, of Grace by those whose lives have been deadened with the kind of morality and pious habit which has no basis in genuine charity" (45). In the middle-aged woman of the novel who develops a hopeless attraction for a young rake, Mauriac shows this attraction breaking up "for a short space of time the patterns of religious complacency in which she has been immured." But by the end of the novel she is again "one of those dead carried down the stream of life" (the closing phrase O'Connor had admired for ten years).

O'Connor second published Mauriac review, on the author's idiosyncratic meditation on the life of Christ, *The Son of Man*, appeared in the September 3, 1960 edition of *The Bulletin*. What impressed O'Connor about the book is Mauriac's what she calls Mauriac's "incarnational sense" of "Christ's presence in the contemporary world" (Getz 154). She writes: "This is a novelist's meditation; Mauriac is always able to impress the reader with a strong sense of the flesh—all men's flesh that Christ takes on—and of the anguish of the human situation." She suggests a marked contrast between Mauriac's anguish, "an anguish transmuted into charity," to the hopeless atheistic anguish of Sartre, for whom "hell is other people" (referring to the famous line from *No Exit*). By contrast, O'Connor writes, "for the Christian with Mauriac's anguish others are Christ." She concludes that "this is a valuable book, one which will provide the reader with unforeseen insights into the Incarnation."

O'Connor read Mauriac's *Mémoires Intérieures* not long after it was published in translation (early 1961), around the same time that she completed what many consider her best piece of nonfiction, the searching introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*. *Mémoires Intérieures* featured the French author's discursive autobiographical account of his lifetime of reading influences. Intriguingly, the parts that O'Connor singled out for attention in her letter to Betty Hester were Mauriac's remarks about Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (HB 431). Mauriac's comments on Brontë's novel reveal his lifelong fascination for the enigma of the dark, brooding quality of her work: "if ever there has been a book which can stand in isolation from its creator, and impose itself upon the reader in its own right, it is surely this, with its catastrophic world in which are imprisoned a small number of damned souls each one of whom is delineated with a fine, hard line" (Mauriac *Memoires* 61).¹⁸⁰

But perhaps of still greater interest to O'Connor, because of her mutual high regard for Hawthorne, were Mauriac's perceptive insights concerning the hidden operations of redeeming grace in *The Scarlet Letter*. Arthur Kinney helpfully reports as part of his inventory that she used marginal lining to emphasize two pages of Mauriac's comments (132). In these pages Mauriac not surprisingly keys in on the destructive hypocrisy of religious pharisaism in the novel—"this American Tartuffe"—contrasting it with the story in John's Gospel of Jesus showing grace to the woman caught in adultery (Mauriac *Memoires* 115-116). But what is of greater interest to Mauriac—and surely this insight was not lost on O'Connor, whose own work resonated so deeply with this

¹⁸⁰ Arthur Kinney reports that O'Connor wrote "E. Brontë 61 ff." on the dust jacket of the book, thus calling special attention to this part of Mauriac's book (132).

theme—was the deep mystery of how a sanctifying grace could pierce through even the darkest evil in the novel, both in the case of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale: “What we are shown is pharisaism transmuted into the creative element of sanctity. Grace turns to its own purposes the worst canalizations invented by Tartuffe and Orgon. Its waters flow through them to reach and fertilize the hearts of men.” This mysterious paradox of grace working to transmute the ugliest deformation of evil for its own redeeming purposes lies at the heart of O’Connor’s fiction, and provides perhaps the greatest explanation for the tie between her work and that of Mauriac. In any case, she would have been especially in tune with Mauriac’s discussion of Hawthorne along these lines, having just put Hawthorne at the center of her argument about sanctifying grace transmuting Mary Ann’s grotesque facial cancer into great spiritual beauty.¹⁸¹

Altogether, these references to Mauriac scattered through O’Connor’s body of prose point to a very personal connection she sensed with the work of this French Catholic author of fiction from her days just out of college to the month before her death, the crucial seventeen-year period that comprised the entirety of her short but fertile writing career. She may have called herself a “hillbilly Thomist” and talked about reading a page of the *Summa* every night before going to sleep, but at the same time, and without great fanfare, she avidly read and squirreled away her Mauriac, amassing the stockpile of fifteen Mauriac volumes in her two Milledgeville bookcases, where shelf-space was at a premium. In Mauriac, the established Nobel laureate forty years her elder, she sensed the long-distance kinship and encouragement of a modern Catholic novelist

¹⁸¹ O’Connor’s idea in that essay that the goodness of grace uses evil and suffering for its “raw material” could well have been prompted—or, at least, O’Connor would have found it reflected—by Mauriac’s comments concerning *The Scarlet Letter* (see “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*” in *MM* 226-227).

who in many ways modeled for her the values that resonated deeply with her own: a strong sense of pursuing creative writing as an honorable, God-given vocation, devoting herself to producing an art of integrity and letting the chips fall where they may; a desire to “purify the source”—or see the mystery of life through the eyes of her Christian faith, while never compromising the integrity of physical vision; a distaste for the religious hypocrisy of sentimentalism and mercenary marketing schemes; and an earthy, honest portrayal of man’s wretched degradation in a fallen world beset by evil, but also a world charged with the presence of the incarnate Christ and never beyond the surprising transformations of the relentless pursuit of God’s grace.

IV

Any comparative study should work on the assumption that the differences between phenomena to be compared are always more numerous than their similarities. Thus, it is important to mention in brief the many discrepancies between the two authors’ fictional methods and worlds. Mauriac’s sensibility tends to examine complex emotional states and at times can verge on the maudlin; O’Connor’s is flinty. Some scholars have attributed this sensitivity in Mauriac as a psychological response to the absence of his father early in his life. Mauriac engages more with the psychological and internal state in general, and more specifically with the wounds of mother-son relationships. He focuses more on the frustrations of the sexual drive and its roots in the turmoil of adolescent passions—in what Augustine would define as “concupiscence.” O’Connor is more reticent to write about sex.

Mauriac's sensibility is more "romantic" than O'Connor's in his persistent thematic emphasis on the child as "the father of the man," as Wordsworth put it. He is also more of an expressionist. Especially in his early novels, such as *Young Man in Chains*, there is a strong biographical identification with his protagonist that O'Connor was more careful to avoid. Also in his early novels, he evinces strong influences from French Symbolist poetry that are absent from O'Connor's heritage. Whereas O'Connor firmly believed (from Henry James and her writing tutelage under the New Critics and Caroline Gordon) in the dramatic importance of showing rather than telling, Mauriac often tells and summarizes more than he shows. Thus O'Connor is easily the more subtly dramatic of the two authors. She is also more humorous, more explicitly and consistently ironic and extroverted. Anthony Esolen has expressed the view that O'Connor may be "the finest ironist in English literature of the last fifty years, especially in her scorn of those rags we call righteousness" (Esolen 367). Mauriac, though he employs irony, is certainly a more lugubrious author. And though he emphasizes the person of the devil less than O'Connor does, and does not generally use violence as his main vehicle for "the action of grace," his fiction feels noticeably more ponderous than O'Connor's.

Mauriac explicitly develops in several of his novels a mystical Catholic doctrine of vicarious suffering, whereby one character accepts suffering—in some strange sense, redemptively—on behalf of another.¹⁸² If the transfer of suffering between characters is in O'Connor, it is certainly muted. O'Connor is also more explicitly Christocentric (as is Rouault); Mauriac is a more Marian Catholic. Many of these differences can be seen to reflect the significant cultural differences between American and Gallic expressions of

¹⁸² It might be noted that Charles Williams, the Anglican novelist and friend of C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, developed a similar doctrine in his mystical-sacramental novels in Mauriac's generation.

Catholicism, but they also show that although Mauriac was one of O'Connor's lifelong admirations and a major stimulus to her fiction, as a sharp-eyed literary *bricoleur* she took from him what she found helpful and left behind what she did not.

CHAPTER 6

O'CONNOR AND BLAISE PASCAL:

“PASCAL WROTE IN HIS NOTEBOOK, ‘IF I HAD NOT KNOWN YOU,
I WOULD NOT HAVE FOUND YOU’”

Précis

Pascal may not at first blush seem to fit into this study of O'Connor's contemporaries, but it can be argued that in the decades in which O'Connor wrote, Pascal attained a height of popularity among modern existentialist thinkers that was unmatched in the previous three centuries. Pascal's fingerprints are all over *renouveau* thought. Pascal was instrumental in the Maritains' conversion, and he was the favorite author of Rouault and Mauriac, whose work breathes the Pascalian spirit.

Virtually nothing has been written about O'Connor and Pascal. I want to begin that conversation here with the argument that O'Connor's work seems to me decidedly more Pascalian than Thomistic in form and flavor. What Frederick Asals has called her “imagination of extremity” suits the aesthetics of antinomy Pascal deploys in the *Pensées*, a form that does not agree with the methodical plodding of “the Dumb Ox.” In my view, O'Connor's stories, in their angularity, flashes of wit, and violent attack of paradox, are patently *Pascalian* stories of sin and grace. Pascal and O'Connor critiqued the modern project in fascinatingly similar ways—he at the beginning of it; she at its end.

It is a curiosity of history that two of the most brilliant Catholic Christian thinkers, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), died almost exactly three hundred years apart, at the untimely age of 39, their unusual intellectual and creative gifts at last succumbing to excruciating battles with illness. The two authors' lives stand as bookends to the modern period. What lies between them, a gulf in western culture more vast than the ocean that separates their continents, is what has been called the project of the Enlightenment, the attempt to enthrone a secular human rationalism over Christian revelation known as modernity. Though Pascal stood near the front end of this cultural sea change, and O'Connor at what she considered its spiritually desiccated end, both saw with keen intelligence what they were confronting as Christians, and neither could be said to back down from a good fight. The work of both authors can be seen as pressed from a struggle with surprisingly similar opponents, and both bequeathed as their greatest legacy, in their various original genres, a devastating critique of modernity and a compelling apologia for the Christian faith.

The fact that these two influential geniuses have not been studied in apposition may not be surprising, though considering the volumes of criticism that have been published in the 45 years after O'Connor's death it is odd that no one has suggested it.¹⁸³ O'Connor's repeated references to herself as "so thirteenth century" (Gooch 156) and "a hillbilly Thomist" (*HB* 81) have herded the majority of her readers down the well-traveled paths of Thomism. It is true that O'Connor ruminated on pages of the *Summa* as a kind of devotional breviary before sleep, and we have already established that the

¹⁸³ I have not found a study that compares the two authors. In his *Return to Good and Evil*, Hank Edmondson includes eight references to Pascal that suggest important common emphases, but Pascal is not central to the focus of his study. Several other critics have, like Brad Gooch, sensed a "Jansenist" sensibility in O'Connor's fiction, but have not defined or explored Jansenism at length (Gooch 319).

influence Aquinas exercised over her thought and art is beyond dispute (*HB* 93-94), but in the end she was aware that her self-designation as “thirteenth century” could be little more than rhetorical.¹⁸⁴ She lived on the other side of the great fault line that ruptured the medieval synthesis, and she was sufficiently realistic to know there was no going back to an idealized pre-modern world. Unlike Chesterton, who hankered for “merry old England,” O’Connor was not a jovial crusader for a return to medievalism. Simply by virtue of her place in history, then, O’Connor shares more cultural and intellectual common ground with the seventeenth century than she does with the thirteenth, and this alone places her closer to Pascal than to the medieval Schoolmen.

The question immediately before us is the extent to which a direct line of influence may be drawn. How much of Pascal did O’Connor read? What did she think of his thoughts? At first glance, the absence of a critical mass of evidence may explain why critics have largely passed over Pascal in reference to O’Connor’s work. Kinney’s catalogue of her private collection shows that she owned the 1941 Modern Library edition of the *Pensées and The Provincial Letters*, but the book is unsigned and the pages are unmarked (Kinney 25). O’Connor mentions Pascal by name only on two occasions in the six hundred pages of *The Habit of Being*.¹⁸⁵ From these passing references we gather that O’Connor saw Pascal’s importance to Jansenism, that she deemed some aspects of Jansenism problematic, and that she associated his thinking with the “leap of faith.”

There does not appear to be much grist to grind from her letters: to understand this much

¹⁸⁴ She described herself in her first letter to Betty Hester as “a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness” (*HB* 90).

¹⁸⁵ To Ted Spivey, on Nov. 16, 1958, she wrote: “I like Pascal but I don’t think the Jansenist influence is healthy in the Church” (*HB* 304). To Alfred Corn, who was seeking spiritual direction, she wrote on July 25, 1962: “I hope you’ll find the experience you need to make a leap toward Christianity seem the only one to you. Pascal had a good deal to say about this” (*HB* 485).

of Pascal, O'Connor need not have opened her copy of the *Pensées*. Any educated modern Catholic would be similarly aware of Pascal's contributions.

However, there is a moment in her lecture at Sweetbriar College a year before her death that for a brief moment lifts a veil on what could be a deep personal kinship she felt with Pascal. Reflecting on the vague spiritual search of modern man as it has been portrayed in literature, O'Connor reaches for the most intimate part of Pascal's *Pensées*, from the section "*Mystère de Jesus*": "Pascal wrote in his notebook, O'Connor says, 'If I had not known you, I would not have found you'" (MM 160).¹⁸⁶ She shows that Pascal's experience at his conversion, the famous record of which he kept sewn into his overcoat closest to his heart, was an immediate, life-transforming encounter with "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars" (161). O'Connor then identifies with the heart of Pascal's theology: she says that "all my own experience has been that of the writer who believes" (here she specifically identifies the writer as Pascal) in the eternal God who has revealed Himself in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the God who confounds the senses; the God who presents a scandalous stumbling block to modern thinking; and the God who is the ultimate concern of man. All of these points of orthodox Christian dogma could just as well be section headings in Pascal's *Pensées*.

There is also reason to suspect that O'Connor felt the pervasive sway of Pascal's thought in her broad reading, beginning with her discovery of the French in her student days at Iowa, even more than she herself realized. She would have absorbed large doses

¹⁸⁶ It is interesting that O'Connor slightly misquotes Pascal here. The *Mystère de Jesus* section of the *Pensées* is an intimate dialogue of the soul with Christ. Pascal's speaker in the line O'Connor misquotes is not he, as O'Connor has it, but Christ: "Take comfort; you would not seek me if you had not found me."

of Pascal by osmosis, filtered through the French Catholic revival so defining to her mind and art. A careful study of this revival reveals that one of its underrated features included a widespread resurgence of interest in Pascal's thought.¹⁸⁷ Two of O'Connor's favorite contemporary writers, Guardini and Mauriac, published appreciative books on Pascal.¹⁸⁸ Mauriac continually acknowledged the influence Pascal had on his formation and his preoccupation with misery and grace.¹⁸⁹ In his *Mémoires Intérieurs*, which O'Connor read with interest, Mauriac writes that the *Pensées* "have, perhaps, done more for Christ in this land of France than the forty volumes of Bossuet's collected works" (HB 431, Mauriac 154).

Raïssa Maritain's memoir shows how Léon Brunschvicg's edition of Pascal, "which for thirty or perhaps forty years has been in the hands of every generation of French students," was instrumental in her and Jacques' journey from the anguish of agnosticism to the church. The passage is worth quoting at some length, since Raïssa's book was well loved in O'Connor's circle. She writes that she came to Pascal after reading Plotinus and Plato:

But constantly, ever since the seventeenth century, Pascal has exercised
His influence on our country, and influence more profound, more alive
than that of any other of our classic writers. Pascal is a surprise to the

¹⁸⁷ The great study of Pascal's modern revival is Dorothy Eastwood's remarkable dissertation at Oxford, which she completed in 1932, entitled *The Revival of Pascal: A Study of His Relation to French Thought*.

¹⁸⁸ These are: Romano Guardini, *Christliches Bewusstsein: Versuche Über Pascal* (Leipzig: Jacob Hegner, 1935) and Francois Mauriac ed., *The Living Thoughts of Pascal* (NY: Longmans, Green, 1940). O'Connor said "Mauriac is one of my admirations" and claims to have read all he ever wrote (HB 356, 130). Her admiration for Guardini was no less evident: "I am reading everything I can of Guardini" (HB 74).

¹⁸⁹ "There was a Jansenist streak in him," writes McInerney of Mauriac (*Some Catholic Writers* 94). Kurt Reinhardt writes at length about the Jansenism of Mauriac's novels in *The Theological Novel of Modern Europe* (130-154). See also Margaret Mein's essay, "François Mauriac and Jansenism" (147-164).

reader who expects only to find an exemplary style and instead finds himself in the presence of a moving and overwhelming master. Through their sincerity and humanity, their loftiness and spiritual efficacy, the *Thoughts* of Pascal can be put on the same level as the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine.

What most drew me to Pascal was his sense of the abyss, of the abyss he had so narrowly avoided . . . I loved Pascal because he justified my own anxiety, my own aspirations, my own questing. Among all the French classic writers, even more than Corneille, he amazed me by his high and sad seriousness, his undisguised humanity, his tragic anguish. (R. Maritain 83-84)

With telltale words like *abyss*, *anxiety*, *aspirations*, *questing*, and *anguish*, it is easy to see from Raissa's account why Pascal would come to appeal so viscerally to the young existentialists of the twentieth century.

Pascal was perhaps the favorite author, along with Dostoevsky, of the expressionist painter Georges Rouault, the lifelong intimate friend of the Maritains, whose sensibility Maritain described as "almost Jansenist" (*Rouault*). Rouault, as we have seen, picked up his lifelong love for Pascal in the studios of Gustave Moreau, who read Pascal to his pupil as they painted, and that passion for Pascal was encouraged in Rouault's lifelong correspondence with the poet André Suarès, a Pascal enthusiast. Rouault's daughter Isabelle testified in a 1990 interview that the *Pensées* was to be found on her father's nightstand (Davies 378). He apparently read Pascal as regularly as O'Connor read Thomas.

The scholarly labors of Léon Brunschvicg, Jacques Chevalier, and Louis Lafuma in revising the previously incomplete editions of the *Pensées* opened a fresh view of Pascal and laid the foundation for the revelatory redactions by Jean Mesnard and Philippe Sellier, who like meticulous art restorers presented the *Pensées* in the twentieth century as it had never been seen before. Even T. S. Eliot, whose critique of the modern spirit in “The Wasteland” O’Connor admired, wrote an essay on the perennial importance of the *Pensées*.¹⁹⁰ Pascal was read with renewed interest in relation to the burgeoning philosophy of existentialism, and his following grew as a result. It might be said that Pascal never enjoyed exposure to a wider or more receptive readership than in the French cultural movement that stamped so great an impression on O’Connor’s theology and art.

Perhaps the strongest warrant for setting Pascal and O’Connor side-by-side lies in the consensus among many of O’Connor’s readers that her stories are in some respect “Jansenist.” The meaning of this adjective is notoriously unstable. Even in the century of Jansenius and his followers at Port-Royal, “Jansenism” conjured up vastly diverging significations to the movement’s friends and foes. The official censure of the movement in the years after Pascal’s death certainly had the effect of darkening the label. So it is not surprising to find that when critics point to O’Connor’s Jansenism, they are not generally using the term as a compliment. A representative example can be found in Brad Gooch’s just-published biography. Gooch reads O’Connor’s “The Comforts of Home” as revealing “a Jansenist aspect” of her character, using the term pejoratively for

¹⁹⁰ T. S. Eliot, “The *Pensées* of Pascal” (1931) in *Selected Essays* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), 355-368. Eliot writes: “Pascal is one of those writers who will be and who must be studied afresh by men of every generation. It is not he who changes, but we who change. . . The history of human opinions of Pascal and of men of his stature is a part of the history of humanity. That indicates his permanent importance” (355). The essay concludes: “because of his unique combination and balance of qualities, I know of no religious writer more pertinent to our time” (368).

what he tries to establish throughout his study as O'Connor's puritanical repression of her own sexuality (319).¹⁹¹ Jansenism, in this sense, comes to mean something virtually synonymous with Manicheanism, an excessively austere denial of the body. And this is certainly the way some of the morally permissive Molinists and Prynnonists of Pascal's day stereotyped a minority revival movement that came to be renowned, and frequently despised, for its austere moral scruples and fervent piety.

But even if self-denial is admitted as an aspect of the culture of Jansenism, it would be a great mistake to reduce the theologically complex whole of the movement to this one synecdoche. Not only does it overly flatten the rich contributions of Jansenist adherents like Pascal, it misses what may in a positive sense be seen as the most revelatory "Jansenist" aspects of O'Connor's Christian poetics. Here we would do well to remember that Jansenius, bishop of Ypres and associated with the school at Louvain, gave his name to the movement because of his treatise on Augustine. For its reliance on the single most influential church father of Catholics and Protestant Reformers alike, the movement might just as well have been called Augustinianism. Its great stresses were an Augustinian anthropology, emphasizing the ruinous depravity, misery, and bondage of man in his fallen state—and an Augustinian soteriology, emphasizing the primacy of God's sovereign, prevenient grace in converting man to Himself and enabling him by grace to do good works.

¹⁹¹ Gooch refers to O'Connor uncharitably as "The Church Lady," inviting comparison to Martin Short's repressed prude on Saturday Night Live. Elsewhere he casts her as the lady "who wished to remain on the prebuscent side of twelve" (165). Gooch insists on reading much of O'Connor's fiction in a Freudian way as the often exotic sublimation of what he considers her "Jansenist" sexual prurience. O'Connor was aware people interpreted her stories this way, and generally disparaged it as woefully reductive, missing in its emphasis on the carnal the "lines of spiritual motion."

When O'Connor is read alongside Pascal, particularly the Pascal of the *Pensées* but also the master ironist of the *Provinciales*, a compelling case can be made that the corpus of her fiction is even more "Pascalian" than "Thomistic" in its overall form and flavor: that she might be studied, fruitfully, as something of a "hillbilly Pascalian," perhaps *malgré lui*. Here we might sketch very briefly four areas where more detailed comparisons between the two authors may be worked out: namely, their common points of emphasis (I), common opponents (II), stylistic parallels (III), and finally, biographical connections (IV).

I

A strong apologetic thrust energizes the work of Pascal and O'Connor: both authors were keenly aware that they were writing for an audience that did not agree with their positions and would have to be startled by forceful argument. The sturdiest link between Pascal and O'Connor, as we have said, is their mutual grounding in an Augustinian view of the pervasive, ruinous effects of original sin. For Augustine, man is so utterly fallen from his first created state that even though vestiges of his former greatness remain, he is unable in himself to do or even to seek after the good. Thus, for Pascal, unredeemed man is in a state of misery, in bondage to his self-love, in his concupiscence endlessly pursuing diversions that fail to satisfy, a misshapen freak of his original greatness. He is miserable because, as "a dispossessed king," he bears in himself a confused sense of the height from which he has fallen. The first action of grace, for Pascal, is that by which man comes to see his own sinful misery and need for redemption.

The work of conversion begins with a great humbling of man's pride. It is paradoxically a mark of man's greatness to know that he is wretched.

It is also a mark of man's greatness that he is the object of redeeming grace through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Because of man's turpitude, God must initiate the work of redemption, and this is the very definition of *grace*, because it is an unmerited gift that flows in only one direction. Divine grace actively pursues the sinner. Man's concupiscence and self-love are so entrenched that a violent grace is needed to convert him. Conversion is violent—a great recreating agony in the soul, the slaying of the old nature and the creation of a new man—but it is grace because in this violence alone lies the medicine of salvation:

As for us, we only suffer in so far as our natural vice resists supernatural grace: our heart feels torn between these contrary forces, but it would be very wrong to impute this violence to God, who draws us to him, instead of attributing it to the world which holds us back. It is like a child snatched by its mother from the arms of robbers, who, even while it is suffering pain, *should love the loving and lawful violence of its rescuer . . .*

The cruelest war that God can wage on men in this life is to leave them without the war he came to bring. (Pascal *pensée* 924, my italics)

For Pascal, the knotty paradox of man's condition, the *misère/grandeur*, can only be explicated through what was accomplished for man in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the mediator between God and man, is the center around which Pascal arranges his *Pensées*: “Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre [sic] towards which all things tend. Whoever knows him knows the

reason for everything” (*pensée* 449). And at the center of Christ’s work, for Pascal, is the suffering of the Cross. It is by Christ’s redemptive suffering alone that we are healed of our self-love and are freed to live in charity. For Pascal, while reason is important, it is also fallen and finite, and there are mysteries of revelation that lie beyond its scope.

These are some of Pascal’s points of emphasis in the *Pensées*.

This Jansenist stress on the degradation of man in his fallen state—especially in his proud refusal to acknowledge his need for grace—is one of the great emphases of O’Connor’s fiction. Her characters, like Pascal’s in the *Pensées*, are diverted from facing their desperate condition. To overcome their inability, the action of grace in many of O’Connor’s stories appears strikingly monergistic and irresistible. The great Hound of Heaven is continually dogging the heels of O’Connor’s most stubborn characters, as when the bull gores Mrs. May, the water stain descends inexorably on Asbury Fox, or the shadowy figure at the back Hazel Motes’ mind ultimately brings the prodigal to bay. The evangelical urgency readers have felt in O’Connor’s fiction—the sense of grace as costly and demanding a radical response—is as existentially gripping in O’Connor’s work as it is in the *Pensées*. As with Pascal, the violent dialectical antinomy in O’Connor’s fiction between the misery and greatness of man is never softened; the *tertium quid* that alone makes sense of it is the redemptive work of the incarnation, and it is accessible only to the penetrating vision of faith, the “eyes of the heart.” This persistent theme—along with the attendant emphasis on repentance—may be shown to find more of a nourishing root in the soil of Augustine and Pascal than it does in Aquinas.

II

If much can be known about a person not simply by studying his friends, but his adversaries, it is interesting to note that the groups of thinkers Pascal and O'Connor opposed, though separated by three centuries and changing labels, form surprisingly similar blocs of antagonists.

Pascal in the *Pensées* fights philosophical battles with the early modern Enlightenment on two sides: on the one hand are the Pyrrhonists, the fashionable freethinkers of Montaigne's ilk. Instead of affirming, they question: *Que sais-je?* Can truth be known? This is a revival of ancient skepticism, but at the beginning of the modern period it is also an early forerunner of the postmodern cloud of casual antifoundationalism. The most radical freethinkers, those Pascal calls the *esprits forts*, move beyond skepticism to the mocking denials of atheism. To the other side of the freethinkers, Pascal spars with the rationalists, the early modern Deists who begin with doubt and fashion God and the world out of the mind. The representative of this group is Descartes whose geometric method deduces a "god of the philosophers" but not Jesus Christ. There is no room in rationalist systems, worked out with the *esprit géométrique* and depending on the power of reason alone, for mystery, revelation, the incarnation, or grace. Rationalism is too limiting. There is a third group Pascal meets theologically. These are the Jesuits and Molinists, with their semi-pelagian moral casuistry, their overly optimistic view of man's ability and overly low view of God's standard of righteousness.

O'Connor lives at the opposite end of the three-century experiment of what has been called "the modern project": at the far side of the mockeries of Voltaire and

Nietzsche, Darwin's "descent of man," and the scorched-earth devastation of two World Wars. In a famous introduction letter to Betty Hester, she writes of the Spirit of the Age:

If you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe. If I hadn't the Church to fight it with or to tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw right now. (*HB* 97)

What is fascinating is that in her own way, but with no less fierce a critique than Pascal's, O'Connor addresses essentially the same groups of antagonists in her fiction that he does in the *Pensées*. The "fog" of the freethinking libertine is embodied in the pretentious, sickly aesthete Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill," whom Father Finn bluntly chides for not knowing his catechism: "you are a very ignorant boy" (*CS* 376-377). The philosophy of negation, *le néant*, which O'Connor and the *renouveau* thinkers saw as the bad fruit growing on the tree of Cartesian rationalism, appears ugly in Joy/Hulga, who is hobbled more by a hardened soul than her wooden leg. It is shown to legitimate the self-serving sadism displayed by her seducer Manley Pointer. The *esprits géométriques*, those enlightened men of science represented by the utopian social engineer Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and the psychologist "schoolteacher" Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away*, operate by a narrow rationalist calculus that reduces humans to algebraic variables but entirely misses the crucial human ramifications of the mysteries of evil, grace, and beauty. In short, the Enlightenment does not fare well in O'Connor's fiction.

And neither does the optimism of the Semi-Pelagian moralists, the type of opportunistic casuists Pascal blasts in the *Provincial Letters*. People who consider themselves good enough to be saved by virtue of their own efforts—basically all the

driven matriarchal landowners like Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. MacIntyre, and finally, Mrs. Turpin—have the folly of their self-righteousness mercifully exposed. Grace must come to these tough nuts in a violent humbling. The grace is prevenient and sovereign—they neither ask for it nor deserve it. Whatever sophisticated moral casuistry they may have prided themselves in is burned clean out of them by the action of grace. The grandmother must learn that apart from the perfect God-man Jesus Christ, who as the Misfit sees threw everything off balance, a truly good man is *impossible* to find.

Whether they are skeptics, atheists, deists, or moralists, they are all the spiritually stunted progeny of the modern Enlightenment, and for Pascal and O'Connor these are the mortally sick souls Jesus came to heal. Yet to find the two thinkers sparring with such similar groups three centuries apart may come as something of a surprise. Perhaps this is because the common timeless antagonist they saw to the Christian gospel of redemption is the *amour-propre* that violently insists on setting itself against the love of God.

III

Pascal's style of thinking is the handmaiden to his thought, one of the striking features of which is the potent charge of antinomies—radical antitheses that must always be held together in a balance of tension. *Misère/grandeur* is a doctrine of Christian anthropology, but it is also (a slant rhyme pulling together and an opposing idea pushing apart) an electrifying rhetoric that does not attempt to soften or deny the extremes of paradox, but rather takes a Chestertonian relish in the shock produced by their contact. O'Connor shares the *esprit de finesse* of Pascal's quick, lucid wit—a rapier intelligence capable of slicing through gordian knots quickly and forcefully to come to the heart of a

matter, though that heart prove mysteriously “to have reasons of which reason knows nothing.” Their style of thought is hard-edged, avoids sentimentalism, and is especially attuned to the discrepancies productive of irony.

O’Connor shared one trait with Pascal: lucidity of thought and economy of expression, the *esprit de finesse*. Both have been celebrated as master prose stylists, and what is most curious, for similar traits: clarity, economy, and shocking force.

The aesthetic result of this line of thinking may be likened to the dramatic and unsettling effects of the radical *chiaroscuro* in the work of the seventeenth century tenebrists, where the light flashes all the more brightly against the darkness it illumines. It should be no noted that Pascal’s *Pensées* make their unique rhetorical contribution at the time of the international Caravaggionist school in visual art which included such luminaries as Philip de Champagne in France and Rembrandt in Holland. This rhetorical comparison with the painterly style of tenebrism might be unpacked: Pascal’s *Pensées* abounds in contrasts of the most dramatic and violent order, as does O’Connor’s fiction, which Frederick Asals has called “the imagination of extremity.” For Pascal and O’Connor, this rhetorical violence is the perfect vehicle for the content of their thought, the prophetic intention of which is to shock and unsettle, not to soothe what O’Connor called “the weary reader.” We note here that stylistically, Pascal is more next-of-kin to O’Connor than is Aquinas. Her aesthetics of extremes has more in common with Pascal’s explosive flashes of antinomy than with the plodding thesis/antithesis method of the *Summa*.

The distances opened up by these antinomies creates an aesthetic that appears exaggerated and grotesque, but from an altered perspective is simply faithful to reality,

what O'Connor called the lines of spiritual motion. For Pascal and O'Connor, it was the audience of their fellow moderns that was grotesquely distorted, through the fall, from original created rectitude. Both can be considered as prophets crying in the wilderness—drawing big startling pictures for the almost-blind, shouting to the hard of hearing—and O'Connor's definition of a prophet, tellingly, is that he is “a realist of distances.” If Pascal can be viewed as an artist—and his style has been described as an art—the power of his “art” resembles O'Connor's in this way: they both relentlessly combine realism and distortion, reason and mystery confounding reason, beauty and ugliness in a deliberately unsettling, destabilizing, anti-classical way. This aesthetic, so difficult to describe, stands in opposition to the “noble simplicity and calm grandeur” canons of beauty of the idealist line stretching from Winckelmann through Kant. In fact, and this may be worth pursuing, there is a sense in which Kant's *Critique of Judgment* reveals a critical limitation in accounting for the bewildering sense of beauty conveyed through the violence and ugliness of an O'Connor short story. For all of Kant's attempt to make a universal account of reason, morality, and judgment, this “poetics of extremes” that Pascal and O'Connor exemplify appears, to the tidy systems of the classicist, to be unclassifiable.

The urgency of this struggle, and the hard-headedness and –heartedness of the audience to whom it is presented, necessitates drastic stylistic measures. O'Connor works in a kind of cartoonish grotesque, deliberately drawing large figures, using distortion, applying fantastic and clashing colors. She explains her style as a “reasonable use of the unreasonable.” Her goal is not to comfort, but to afflict the comfortable. She uses exaggeration in the service of truth—a kind of baroque artistic excess. And yet, her

dramatic hyperbole is set in a carefully pruned, witty prose style that is not at all emotive or expressionist. The prose is often restrained but the characters and situations are violently, grossly jarring. This style is not at all classical, because it disrupts rather than eases the mind. It is rather a version of the anti-classical baroque, or perhaps mannerism, where distortion is used deliberately and effectively to pack a dramatic punch.

Both Pascal and O'Connor had a sharp eye for the paradoxical and the ironic. O'Connor may have been the more temperamentally playful, but Pascal's sense of irony comes out in full force in his *Provincial Letters*. There are certain *Pensées*, like the inimitable quip about Cleopatra's nose, that show his sense of humor.¹⁹²

IV

It is a fascinating coincidence that Pascal and O'Connor both died at age 39. Pascal was a brilliant mathematician and scientist; he apparently had little use for fiction, and in his *Pensées* warns about the misleading power of the imagination. O'Connor, for her part, famously detested mathematics. Pascal lost his mother early in life; O'Connor lost her father.

But setting aside these and other obvious differences of culture and temperament, their biographies reveal a number of surprising connections. Both as children demonstrated a precocious intelligence. They were original, creative thinkers, alive to irony, and omnivorous in their intellectual pursuits. Both possessed the ability to apprehend the kernel of a complex thought with astonishing quickness, the *esprit de finesse*. Neither of them was trained in theology, and theology always remained their

¹⁹² "Cleopatra's nose: if it has been shorter the whole face of the earth would have been different" (*pensée* 413).

hobby rather than their primary avocation, yet both became known for their incisive theological acumen. They both died unmarried, though it appears that both of them felt the disappointment of unrequited love. Perhaps both knew that they were marked for short lives. Both died after excruciating illnesses.

Two of the most interesting points of contact must be the balance they maintained between public connections and solitary retreat and the way they came to embrace their suffering as the disciplining action of grace in their lives. Pascal repeatedly felt drawn to the retreat of Port Royal, but he never took vows as a Jansenist monk. To the end he maintained an active engagement with the world, as his scientific pursuits and his respect for the Chevalier de Méré and the “*honnête homme*” demonstrate.¹⁹³ O’Connor could be fierce about guarding her private space at Andalusia—she referred to herself as a “hermit novelist”—yet through her correspondence, her frequent hosting of guests, and her active public lecture circuit, she maintained contact with the larger world outside the farm. For Pascal as well as for O’Connor, the solitude they cultivated can be seen as enriching their public effectiveness, and vice versa.

Both thinkers died an agonizing death after enduring excruciating and prolonged suffering in body and mind which for periods near the end made it impossible for them to work. But the body of their work—limited as it was in volume under these constraints—was paradoxically enriched by the *habitus* of suffering they endured, and it can be argued that they produced their best efforts when the suffering became most intense.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps

¹⁹³ “Pascal is a man of the world among ascetics, and an ascetic among men of the world; he had the knowledge of worldliness and the passion of asceticism, and in him the two are fused into an individual whole” (Eliot 363).

¹⁹⁴ Eliot comments on Pascal’s illness: “it is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favorable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition” (358).

because of the severe constraints they came to accept as part of life, neither was inclined to view life in sentimental terms. There was a blunt edge to their thinking, an existentially urgent directness of attack. The agony they went through may have given both writers a deeper understanding of the affliction of the Cross and of the misery of the fall. It certainly kept them from ever entertaining what the Reformer Martin Luther called a “theology of glory.” And, importantly, both came to see suffering in terms of refinement in their lives, an unsought gift to be embraced rather than a malediction to be fought. Both saw their illness as coming to them from the sovereign and good hand of God. O’Connor adopted the attitude of “passive diminishment,” a humble acceptance of affliction, and Pascal’s works include a moving prayer “asking God to use sickness in his life appropriately.”¹⁹⁵ Paradoxically, their illness gave to them even as a long and comfortable life was taken away: the vise of their suffering had a concentrating effect, pressing from them, in their sharply curtailed years of production, work of undeniable richness and power.

¹⁹⁵ In her “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*” O’Connor wrote: “The creative action of the Christian’s life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world’s goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Père Teilhard de Chardin calls ‘passive diminishments.’ Mary Ann’s diminishment was extreme . . . she was an extraordinarily rich girl!” (*MM* 223). Compare this paradox of a “rich diminishment” to John Donne’s memorable depiction of affliction as treasure in “Meditation 17”: “For affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction” (Donne 1305).

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