TRUTH AND MEANING AS FICTION:

A DECONSTRUCTIONIST READING

OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of works commonly cited in the text refer to the following editions:

CFO — Conversations with Flannery O'Connor, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987)

CW — Collected Works, (New York: Library of America, 1988)

HB — The Habit of Being: Letters, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1979)

MM — Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1969)

PG — The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews, ed. Carter W. Martin (Athens: UP of Georgia, 1983)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: O'CONNOR'S TEXTUAL MOVEMENT AND MYSTICISM

> Reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness and force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce.
>
> Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (158)

In a letter to "A" dated 20 July 55,[1] Flannery O'Connor noted that "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like a bald statement. However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. . . [because ours] is a generation of wingless chickens which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead" (HB 90). In this statement, O'Connor provides probably the best description of herself as a writer--a staunch believer with a modern mind. Most of her critics do not seem to possess such an understanding of this Southern writer. So far, many O'Connor scholars have confined their study to theological concerns, overlooking the other side of her, "the modern consciousness" that she possesses as shown in part by her

familiarity with such modern thinkers as Jung and Nietzsche, among others. Although some critics, such as Frederick Asals and Suzanne Morrow Paulson, explored O'connor's work in terms of modern psychology, they treated her as they would any other modern writer, failing to address her peculiarity--"a Catholic peculiarly possessed of modern consciousness."

Hence, O'Connor scholarship as a whole boasts few studies that have examined the writer's uniqueness, a quality resulting, I believe, from the tension and the play (or conflict) between her Catholic outlook and her modern consciousness, and between her two simultaneous roles as a traditional believer and a modern fiction writer. It is this tension and play that make O'Connor's writing unusually rich and profound but, at the same time, as many critics have pointed out, extremely difficult and sometimes self contradictory.[2] Red R. Spivey, and Robert H. Brinkmeyer are among the few who have either examined or mentioned such tension and play in O'Connor. Based on his personal interactions with O'Connor, Spivey manages to show the paradoxical sides, "the deconstructive and the traditional sides of Flannery O'Connor," and advocates a deconstructive reading of her work: "Because of the paradoxes of O'Connor's fictional vision, a deconstructionist view of her work is inevitable" (275). Brinkmeyer, on the other hand, applies Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to O'Connor's writing and argues that O'Connor's fiction is the product of the

interplay between O'Connor's fundamentalist self and the non-fundamentalist "other" which resides both in and out of herself, or between her traditional beliefs and her modern consciousness.

Spivey's argument for a deconstructive reading of O'Connor is very appropriate and timely, but his essay amounts to no more than a call for such a reading with little exploration of O'Connor's work. More important, like a few other O'Connor scholars, he merely exposes O'Connor's contradictory attitudes and views without examining why and how she possesses this paradoxical vision, a crucial question deconstructionists would and should ask in order to uncover the pattern of thinking and the movement of text we human beings perhaps can never escape. As for Brinkmeyer's study, while I hail his insight in perceiving the multiple vision in O'Connor, I disagree with his assumption that O'Connor intentionally sets up in her fiction the battle between these different perspectives. The vying perspectives, I would argue, are perhaps the inevitable result of the tension inherent in O'Connor herself. Furthermore, while Brinkmeyer examines the tension in O'Connor by focusing on the rivaling voices (those of the narrator, of the characters, and of O'Connor herself) in her fiction, I would like to approach the issue by exploring her work mostly in terms of signification. As a traditional believer, O'Connor sees the world with a sacramental vision and would like others to do so, but as a writer of modern

consciousness, she is keenly aware of the difficulties of getting her messages across to her audience because of, among other things, problems of signification and the collapse of traditional values and beliefs.

Raised in a Catholic family in the South, O'Connor developed a strong sacramental vision which shaped both her life and her writing. In a speech delivered at Notre Dame, she preaches, "The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth" (MM 152). Moreover, O'Connor considers those who challenge the Eucharist responsible for the "dissolution of belief": "when Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical fact is separate from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable" (MM 161-62). Yet O'Connor's sacramental vision is a unique (mystic) one, characterized by the thinking of modern French Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work she read widely and in whom she developed a great interest.[3]

To Teilhard, the sacrament, like the Cross, is neither just a symbol nor merely reality. It is simultaneously both. This dialectical vision is an extension of his dialectical view of matter in general. Teilhard believes

that "matter falls into two distinct zones . . . the zone of matter in the material and carnal sense; and . . . the zone of matter taken in the spiritual sense" (Divine Milieu 108). The main thrust of his thought involves an attempt to break away from traditional bifurcate way of thinking where things are divided into spirit and matter or soul and body, with the former always privileged and the latter forever condemned. He writes: "In their struggle towards the mystical life, men have succumbed to the illusion of crudely contrasting soul and body, spirit and flesh, as good and evil" (Divine Milieu 105). Opposing such an illusion, he argues vigorously in works such as Divine Milieu and The Heart of Matter that matter itself is at once spiritual and material, and good and evil, since it may lead us either way. More important, he contends that it is only through matter that men can approach spirit--their God: "the soul can only rejoin God after having traversed a specific path through matter--which path can be seen as the distance which separates, but it can also be seen as the road that links" (Divine Milieu 108; emphasis original). Teilhard expresses his strongest belief in the inseparability of matter and spirit when he claims, "The truth is that even at the peak of my spiritual trajectory I was never to feel at home unless immersed in an Ocean of Matter . . ." (Heart of Matter 20).

Interestingly, Teilhard's criticism of the dichotomy of soul and body in human thinking anticipates Jacques

Derrida's major attack on the Western metaphysics, though the two French thinkers probably share little else in their beliefs. To Derrida, as Barbara Johnson summarizes in her "Translator's Introduction" to his Dissemination,

> Western thought. . . has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference, mind vs. matter, man vs. woman, soul vs. body, life vs. death, nature vs. culture, speech vs. writing. These polar opposites do not, however, stand as independent and equal entities. The second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it. (viii)

As a deconstructionist, Derrida, however, also sees the impossibility of escaping such a dichotomous pattern of thinking. Teilhard, on the other hand, does not. He tries to do away with it. But while exposing people's illusion of clearly dividing spirit and matter, he falls right back into the very thing from which he tries to flee. In collapsing the gap between matter and spirit, he opens up one within matter itself by splitting matter into, as quoted above, "two distinct zones": "the zone of matter in the material and carnal sense," and "the zone of matter taken in the spiritual sense." Moreover, in rejecting the identification of spirit as good and matter as evil, he merely transfers

such an identification into matter itself, dividing matter into "Living Matter" which is "spiritualizable," and "Dead Matter or Inverse matter" which is "evil . . .at the opposite extreme of God" (Heart of Matter 230-233).

Such a paradoxical or, in a sense, mystical movement of text by Teilhard delineates not only the foundations of his theory but also, on a higher level, the grammar of Western thought in which we are perhaps forever trapped. That is, we all, including the greatest thinkers, follow such a grammar. A look at Phaedrus will illustrate the point. In Phaedrus, Plato, as Derrida demonstrates clearly, denounces writing as a poison corrupting human memory and truth, but later in his discussion he has to bring writing back as the only cure for corrupted memory and the only means for reaching presence and truth. Therefore, Plato's elimination of writing, Derrida argues, "must call upon the very thing it is expelling, the very surplus it is putting out. The pharmaceutical operation must therefore exclude itself from itself" (Dissemination 128; emphasis original). In his critique of a several well-known writers' work, Paul de Man also points out the impossibility of escaping this paradoxical movement in our writing:

> The discourse by which the figural structure of self is asserted fails to escape from the categories it claims to deconstruct, and this remains true, of course, of any discourse which pretends to reinscribe in its turn the figure of

> this aporia. There can be no escape from the dialectical movement of text. (187)

O'Connor, of course, is no exception. Whole-heartedly embracing Teilhard's thought, she echoes the Jesuit in denouncing those who try to dichotomize spirit and matter: "The Manichean separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter" (MM 68). In this statement, O'Connor shows her understanding that, without the mediation of matter--in a narrower sense, without language or the signifier--reaching the infinite spirit, the signified, is out of the question, and her mission as a Catholic writer is impossible. For immediately following this comment, she says that, as a result of people's desire to eliminate the mediation of matter, "fiction is hard if not impossible because fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (MM 68). O'Connor fully endorses Teilhard because the French thinker's dialectic view of matter not only expresses her thought but, more important, also enables her to remain at once a staunch believer and a modern fiction writer. A sacramental believer, as she claims herself to be, O'Connor would like to see matter (the signifier) and spirit (the signified) merge so that abstract religious ideas can be easily incarnated. But as a modern writer, she is not only aware but also in need of the gap between the signifier and the signified, for it is this gap that provides the writer

with a playing space, a space without which the writer could not function. A look at some of O'Connor's critical and personal writing will reveal clearly the paradoxical attitude and vision she possesses.

On the one hand, O'Connor sees the Sacrament as reality, rather than just a symbol of God's grace. An incident she described in a letter to "A" best illustrates her religious vision. At a dinner party she attended, a lady called Broodwater observed that as an adult she no longer saw the Eucharist the way she did as a child, and she now "thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one." Hearing this, O'Connor flared up: "I then said in a very shaky voice, 'well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.'" O'Connor goes on to say in the letter, "That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable" (<u>HB</u> 125). Her urge to defend the sacrament as reality rather than merely a symbol demonstrates her firm religious belief, but on another level, her defense hides a desire to merge the signified with the signifier. O'Connor admires the same desire in Teilhard: in her review of a book on Teilhard, she writes, "The discovery we owe to Teilhard is that vocation of spirit is visible, concrete. . ." (<u>PG</u> 127). When spirit is visible and concrete, it becomes, by implication, visible matter itself, leaving no mediation between the two. Any religious

meanings (messages) would then be self-evident, since the message and the messenger are fused.

As a fiction writer committed to a Catholic mission but equipped with modern consciousness, O'Connor, however, needs a space between matter and spirit to work with. She is again thankful to Teilhard, this time for opening up a gap within matter while closing the one traditionally posited between spirit and matter, a movement of text that makes writing possible. In her review of Teilhard's The Phenomenon of Man, O'Connor expresses, as an artist, her deep appreciation of the French thinker on this point: "the poet, whose sight is essentially prophetic, will at once recognize in Teilhard a kindred intelligence. His is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it" (PG, 130; emphasis added). The last phrase best exemplifies both the French scholar's and O'Connor's dialectical movement of text. On the one hand, spirit is united with matter as the former is said to be in the latter, but, on the other hand, the metaphor "penetrate" entails that the two are not the same, for matter needs to be done away with in order for spirit to surface. "Penetration" thus involves a differentiation between the two. Such penetration is, as O'Connor claims in the quote, "what the poet attempts to do," namely, what the poet's responsibility is.

In a lecture at Sweetbriar College, Virginia, O'Connor more explicitly defines this task of the artist:

> The artist <u>penetrates</u> the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality. . . . the real novelist, the one with an instinct for what he is about, knows that <u>he cannot approach the infinite directly</u>, that he must <u>penetrate</u> the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that. (<u>MM</u> 163; emphasis added)

The repeated use of the word "penetrate" reveals the prominent role of this metaphor in O'Connor's play of words, a play that enables her to be both a believer and a modern fiction writer. The last sentence in the quote above consummates such a play. The sacramental believer and the fiction writer, as we have shown, do not find themselves in harmony on the issue of signification. But in O'Connor's statement, the two are said to be in no conflict at all. Rather, the sacramental vision has become a necessary complement to the artist: the more sacramental his vision, the deeper the artist will penetrate matter to attain spirit--the "infinite" and "ultimate reality"--to use O'Connor's own words.

Such play, found frequently in O'Connor's critical writing, does not eliminate but merely serves to hide the tension between her two roles, a tension that O'Connor seems constantly aware of. For example, in her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," O'Connor complains that "the

Catholic novelist frequently becomes so entranced with his Christian state that he forgets his nature as a fiction writer. This is all right, this is fine, if he stops writing fiction. . ." (MM 170). Although, in the previous paragraph, O'Connor also argues that the novelist's religious belief should make him or her a better novelist, the tension between belief and fiction writing is so real and, sometimes, so intense that she has to confront it; and she admits it overtly later in the essay: ". . . the novelist who is a Catholic may feel some friction between what he is supposed to do as a novelist and what is supposed to do as a Catholic . . ." (MM, 177). Her awareness of the distinction between fiction writing and purely religious discourse is also evident in her narration of the incident at the dinner party where she had a confrontation with Broodwater. Concerning her rebuttal to Broodwater's comment defining the Eucharist as a symbol, O'Connor writes in the letter that "this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story . . ." (HB 125; emphasis added). The phrase "outside of a story" indicates that, in a similar situation in a story, she probably would not say the same thing in the same manner. Instead, as a fiction writer, she would very likely express her ideas in a much more indirect way because, as she says, "the modern novelist sinks, or hides, his theme" rather than overtly expressing it (MM 72). The idea of "hiding" her theme in language again reveals O'Connor's desire for mediation between language and

meaning, for meaning here becomes an entity of its own that you can hide in a text.

What O'Connor seems to ignore or perhaps is unaware of here is that when we open up a space between the signifier and the signified (a space or a differ<u>a</u>nce, to use Derrida's term, that makes our thought possible), there is no guarantee we can trace from the signifier to the signified. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains in her reading of Derrida,

> the sign, phonic as well as graphic, is a structure of difference . . . [and] what makes the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also the never-annulled difference from "the completely other." Such as the strange "being" of the sign: half of it always "not there" and the other half always "not that." The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. This other is of course never to be founded in its full meaning. (xvii)

In slightly more plain terms, Johnson also expounds this paradoxical nature of language and meaning:

> The very fact that a word is divided into a phonic <u>signifier</u> and a mental <u>signified</u>, and that as Saussure pointed out, language is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units, indicated that

> language as such is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome. To mean, in other words, is automatically _not_ to be. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference. Derrida's word for this lag inherent in any signifying act is _differance_, from the French verb _differer_, which means both to "differ" and to "defer." What Derrida attempts to demonstrate is that this _differance_ inhabits the very core of what appears to be immediate and present. (ix)

The theme that O'Connor says modern novelists hide in their fiction may, thus, never be recovered by the reader.

Added to this almost impossible tracing of the meaning of writing is O'Connor's realization of the difficulty of conveying her religious messages due to the absence of sacramental vision in modern consciousness. According to Brinkmeyer, the challenge to sacramental vision that began with the Renaissance totally changed people's view of the world.[4] The crumbling of sacramental vision brought about, as Erich Heller points out, "a radical change in man's idea of reality, in that complex fabric of unconsciously held convictions about what is real and what is not"; and with this change is gone "that unity of word and deed, of picture and thing, of the bread and the glorified body. Body will be merely body, and symbol merely symbol" (267, 212). In other words, the loss of sacramental vision completely

transformed human consciousness. By the time of the Enlightenment, according to Lewis P. Simpson, the rational mind had replaced revelation as the model of truth, and with such valorization of reason, people turned drastically inward and placed all value and meaning within consciousness. As a result, the human mind, writes Simpson, believes "solely in its own existence" and "has no knowledge outside itself and no reference for action outside its own functioning" (27).

This isolation of the self in its own subjectivity has reached its apex in the twentieth century. The result of this radical subjectification of reality, as J. Hillis Miller describes, is the death of God:

> Man has killed God by separating his subjectivity from everything but itself. The ego has put everything in doubt, and has defined all outside itself as the object of its thinking power. Cogito ergo sum: the absolute certainty about the self reached by Descartes' hyperbolic doubt leads to the assumption that things exist, for me at least, only because I think them. When everything exists only as reflected in the ego, then man has drunk up the sea. If man is defined as subject, everything else turns into object. This includes God, who now becomes merely the highest object of man's knowledge. God, once the creative sun, the power establishing the horizon where heaven and

> earth come together, becomes an object of thought like any other. When man drinks up the sea, he also drinks up God, the creator of the sea. In this way man is the murderer of God. (3)

O'Connor knows well the modern world Miller describes and the challenge she is facing in writing in such a world. Soon after the letter to "A" in which she cited Nietzsche in describing our age as one where "God was dead" (see the quote that starts this chapter), O'Connor wrote to "A" again:

> . . . I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs. One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation . . . (HB 92)

The impact of the changes in the modern world on O'Connor is tremendous, for she witnessed in her life the collapse of traditional culture in the South. Her response to the disintegration of Southern culture is again, as is typical of her, ambivalent: one side of her, as Spivey points out, "clung to the stability of a declining social order. . . . but another side of her psyche fully accepted the growing cultural disorganization of the modern South" (276).

O'Connor deplores the modern lack of faith caused by the disappearance of sacramental vision--the collapse of

unity between word and meaning, between body and spirit. She regrets the crumbling of established logocentric beliefs and values; she expresses this regret when she writes, "We are now living in an age which doubts both fact and value . . . . In our fractured culture, we cannot agree on morals; we cannot even agree that moral matters should come before literary ones when there is a conflict between them" (MM 117, 140). In these words, one will not fail to feel O'Connor's yearning for a stable logocentric value system. But, on the other hand, O'Connor also embraces, though perhaps unconsciously, new ideas and outlooks that the cultural changes have brought about, and that call into question the values and beliefs the other side of her attempts to uphold. Spivey pinpoints this unique nature of O'Connor's work when he contends that,

> O'Connor [in her fiction] was seeking quite unconsciously most of the time, to decompose her own view of the world, if not her style, in order to exorcise from her mind a logocentrism that governed many aspects of her life and work. These unconscious efforts sprang in part from her perception of profound changes in American culture. (278)

As a result of this dialectical vision, O'Connor, on the one hand, advocates "incarnational fiction," arguing that fiction "should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality" (MM 148). The

metaphor of "grounding" spirit in concrete, observable matter reveals again her wish for unity between the signified and the signifier--a wish for transcendental meaning to be incarnated in her fiction.

Yet O'Connor simultaneously attacks people's obsessive desire to pin down the meaning of text, that is, their desire to locate an unequivocal transcendental signified often equated with ultimate truth:

> they [people who are reading a story or a novel] approach it as if it were a problem in algebra. Find *x*. And when they do find or think they find this abstraction, *x*, then they go off with an elaborate sense of satisfaction and the notion that they have "understood" the story. Many students confuse the *process* of understanding a thing with understanding it. . . . in a good novel, more always happens than we are able to take in at once, more happens than meets the eye. The mind is led by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest. This is what is meant when critics say that a novel operates on several levels. The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it opens up. (MM 71-72)

To O'Connor, the process of understanding a story is an endless on-going experience, and there is no such a thing as the meaning of a story. She continues,

> People have a habit of saying, "What is the theme of your story?" and they expect you to give them a statement: "The theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class"--or some such absurdity. . . .
>
> Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction. (MM 73)

But even the author, O'Connor argues, has little control of the meaning of his/her work: "Actually, 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" (MM 126). Of course, O'Connor's position on the issue of authors' intentions, like her position on many other things, is by no means consistent. In fact, she was very concerned with whether or not people understood her intentions in fiction.[5]

The result of O'Connor's dialectical view of writing is her unique fiction, which registers simultaneously an effort, conscious or unconscious, to deconstruct the various logocentric beliefs rooted in Southern culture and a drive for an "incarnational art" which she hopes would uphold the traditional religious beliefs she values. On the one hand, we see her fiction attacking and satirizing, among other things, the notion of absolute truth/reality and the

illusion of a transcendental meaning, but, on the other hand, we also observe the same fiction sometimes affirming (often at the end of the stories) the belief in an ultimate truth manifested in God/religion, a belief revealing the author's urge for the transcendental signified. What enables her to have it both ways appears, again, to be the mysticism she developed from reading thinkers like Teilhard, for, very often, her characters (such as Haze in Wise Blood and young Tarwater in Violent Bear It Away), no matter how stubbornly they refuse to believe, are mysteriously converted at the end of the stories, although, most of the time, such conversions seem forced without sufficient textual support. Yet, despite this frequent awkward final assertion of a traditional religious vision, O'Connor's fiction remains a powerful deconstruction of logocentrism.

In the following chapters, I will elaborate and support my argument by approaching O'Connor's fiction mostly in terms of signification, with each chapter except the last devoted to a specific logocentric belief that O'Connor/her work deconstructs. Chapter II, a reading of Wise Blood, focuses on the issue of truth and reality, i.e., on how truth/reality is merely man-made fiction. Chapter III, a study of stories that deal with people's futile urge to fuse the signifier and the signified, exposes the danger of logocentric hermeneutics. Chapter IV, an examination of stories that are concerned with the issue of identity, aims to illustrate the absence of clear-cut identities that

people desire to possess. Chapter V, a scrutiny of stories that deal with people's total dependence on language, exhibits language as a game people play to substitute the word for the world. Chapter VI, a reading of *The Violent Bear It Away*, differs from chapters II to V in that it does not focus on one issue; it rather shows how all the issues treated in the rest of O'Connor's work find an expression in this novel, making it O'Connor's masterpiece. As expected, I will also try in the discussion to demonstrate that O'Connor, while attacking these various logocentric ideas, falls, *sometimes*, into the very trap she denounces others for falling into, i.e., asserting an ultimate truth.

Notes

1. "A" is a young woman who, according to Sally Fitzgerald (editor of HB), had "a nine-year friendship and correspondence" with O'Connor and who gave Fitzgerald copies of all the letters she possessed but "wishes to remain completely anonymous" (HB 89-90).

2. Though quite a few critics have discussed the difficulties and contradictions in O'Connor's work, many of them, without a keen awareness of the tension between the two sides of O'Connor, reduce the contradictions in her writing to the issue of how well she realized her religious intention. Robert E. Golden and Mary C. Sullivan (5-6), John R. May, and Marshall Bruce Gentry (3-4), for example, in their respective studies all argue that, to use Gentry's words, "the foremost issue in O'Connor's criticism [is] 'the relation between O'Connor's stated religious intent and the realization of that intent within the fiction'" (3).

3. O'Connor exhibited her reading of and interest in Teilhard in many of her letters, book reviews, and speeches. See for example HB pp. 361, 387-8, 477, 509, and PG pp. 86-88, 99, 107-8, 126-27, 129-30. O'Connor recommended Teilhard to several of her friends. Even the title of her famous story "Everything that Rises Must Converge" comes from, as she claims, "a physical proposition" that she found in Teilhard (HB 438).

4. The following material and discussion of the impact of the disappearance of sacramental vision are based on

Brinkmeyer (2-5).

5. See for example her complaint about critics' misunderstanding of The Violent Bear It Away in her letters to "A," to Robert Lowell, and to Andrew Lytle, written respectively in January and February, 1960 (HB 372-73); and her appreciation of Spivey for understanding her intention. In her letter to Spivey, O'Connor wrote, "You have certainly got my intention down in this story ["The Lame Shall Enter First"]. I'm not sure of myself that I carried out the intention dramatically so well. . . . I do thank you for writing this [article]. It's a great help to me to know that somebody understands what I am after [sic] doing" (HB 506-7).

CHAPTER II

WISE BLOOD: TRUTH/REALITY AS FICTION

Wise Blood, O'Connor's first published book, has so far been treated almost exclusively as a purely religious tale, "a modern saint legend" in Dorothy Walter's words (43), or a tale "about a modern pilgrim" in Jill P. Baumgaertner's interpretation (121). Reading the book in deconstructionist terms will, I believe, broaden our understanding of it. To approach the book this way, we will need a solid grasp on deconstruction. Noted for its persistent attack on Western metaphysics, deconstruction has been viewed mostly as a force against tradition. Few, hence, seem to have noticed its debt to one of the important sources of Western tradition, the Bible, a debt Herbert Schneidau convincingly demonstrates in his study Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition. Schneidau explains the Bible's heritage as follows:

> The Bible's 'influence' is not to give us genres or archetypes which can be endlessly refilled with extraneous materials; instead it plays a role which demands that we acknowledge how precarious is our grasp of any meaning in the world at all and that we force ourselves to probe the words and

> forms before us in a never-ending labor. (255)

Schneidau further suggests that deconstruction fully inherits this unique role of the Bible; that is, like the Bible, deconstruction challenges our certainty about any "truth" or "meaning" in the world. G. Douglas Atkins provides a clear summary of Schneidau's argument in his discussion of deconstruction:

> Derridean deconstruction, according to Schneidau, is akin to the way in which the Bible insists on the fictionality of things, alienating us from the world, which it empties of 'meaning,' reminding us constantly of the vanity of human wishes. Yet the Bible's attitude is always ambivalent, at once criticizing and nourishing culture. (31)

A similar ambivalence, to recall the discussion in the last chapter, marks O'Connor's world outlook, making her simultaneously a deconstructionist and a safeguard of Southern culture. And it is in Schneidau's sense of deconstruction that O'Connor's fiction, Wise Blood in particular, qualifies best as deconstructionist oeuvre.

Published in 1952, Wise Blood has been considered a difficult and controversial book. To some critics, the book is flawed by O'Connor's overly harsh religious vision; to others, the novel, especially its central tale of Haze Motes, is extremely "queer."[1] But read in Schneidau's deconstructionist terms, the novel makes good sense: Haze's obsessive but failed pursuit of meaning in the world

functions as a powerful deconstruction of the logocentric beliefs people complacently cherish, and Haze's life story provides a thorough exposure of the meaninglessness and fictionality of the world that we human beings create. To suppport my argument, I will examine the novel from a structuralist and post-structuralist perspective, exploring the problem of truth and meaning in terms of signification.

The issue of signification is highlighted from the beginning of the novel. When the story opens, Haze Motes is on a train to Taulkinham. He meets Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, who sits facing him in the same car. The narrator describes in great detail how Mrs. Hitchcock tries to find out who Haze is and where he is going. After asking him whether he is going home and receiving no answer, Mrs. Hitchcock begins to scrutinize Haze. The thing that catches her special attention, we are told, is Haze's newly-bought "glaring blue suit" with its price tag still on. Eager to find out its price, she "squinted at the price tag. The suit had cost him $11.98. She felt that that placed him and looked at his face again as if she were fortified against it now" (<u>CW</u> 3). This incident is of great importance. Mrs. Hitchcock is so interested in Haze's suit and its price because the suit and its price are both meaningful signs in the society in which they live. A suit in the Western world is usually a sign that distinguishes professionals from blue collar workers; the price of a garment is a tag ("price tag" as we always call it) which registers and signifies one's

social and economic status, as is shown in the case of the Haze's suit and its price. In buying the suit, Haze wants people to recognize him as a professional, but its cheap price betrays his low status: the $11.98 price, as quoted above, "placed" Haze, making Mrs. Hitchcock feel "fortified" against him in their interaction.

Because the major concern of structuralists and post-structuralists is what makes meaning possible, in this study, I am, however, less interested in the meanings of the suit and its price as signs than in what enables them to have these meanings. "Treating as signs objects or actions which have meaning within a culture," modern linguists, as Jonathan Culler points out, attempt "to identify the rules and conventions which, consciously or unconsciously assimilated by members of that culture, make possible meanings which the phenomena have" (31). In other words, to cite Culler again, "If we are to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which, by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe" (25). These symbolic structures and systems of relations, as many structuralists have demonstrated, are ipso facto the products of mankind--of people of a given culture in a given historical period. For example, we all know that what makes the suit uniquely meaningful in the Western world is the underlying symbolic structures (rules and customs) which dictate how people should dress for

various social occasions; these underlying structures and systems may change from community to community and from generation to generation.

But what determine these structures (systems) and their changes are ironically the very people who are governed by them. Claude Levis-Strauss pinpoints this paradoxical nature of mankind when he writes, "men have made themselves to no less an extent than they have made the races of their domestic animals, the only difference being that the process has been less conscious or voluntary" (353). We have made ourselves because, while we create our symbolic structures, which in turn allow signs to have meanings, we subject ourselves to these meanings, assuming they are objectively based on truth and reality. We are often unaware that, to use Terence Hawkes's words, "meanings arises from the interplay of signs . . . [and] the world we inhabit is not one of 'facts' but of signs about facts which we [human beings] encode and decode ceaselessly from system to system . . ." (122; emphasis original). The whole human world is hence what Derrida often calls a text. "According to Derrida," as Atkins summarizes,

> nothing escapes textuality: there is simply nothing outside textuality, outside 'the temporalization of a lived experience which is neither in the world nor in 'another world'. . . not more in time than in space, [in which] differences appear among the elements or rather

> produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the <u>texts</u>, the chains, and the systems of traces.' Derrida proposes, in fact, a 'double' science,' a science of textuality. Once we rethink the metaphysical concept of 'reality' in 'textual' terms (there are no philosophical regulations of truth, the thing itself being a sign and all 'facts' being in 'fact' interpretations, as Nietzsche argued), we are left with a world of texts, all of which possess a certain 'fictive' or 'literary' quality. (23; emphasis and parenthesis original)

The world Haze Motes enters at the opening of <u>Wide Blood</u> is thus also a text, a text framed completely by a system of monetary relations and embodied entirely by the symbolic structures of commercialism, as is demonstrated in part by Mrs. Hitchcock's reading/treatment of Haze.

Haze himself does not realize the fictionality of the world at all as he sits in the train to Taulkinham. On the contrary, he seems determined to challenge Christianity for being unreal and to embrace what he mistakes for the natural world represented by Taulkinham, a decision he has made after being released from the army and after finding, upon returning to his hometown Eastrod, his childhood home, a source of his comfort and faith, completely gone. These latter two events had a great impact on Motes, especially on his religious vision. Influenced by his Grandfather, a

preacher, and his pious mother, Haze had developed from childhood a keen interest in religion. When he joined the army, "[t]he only things from Eastrod he took into the army with him were a black Bible and a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles that had belonged to his mother" (CW 12). During his four years in the army, Haze's interest in the Bible began, however, to diminish, and he developed doubt about God and sin, thanks probably to his fellow servicemen's atheist inculcation. When he first entered the army, he still read the Bible, but by the time he leaves the army, he reads it no more: "he did not read any book now but he kept the Bible because it had come from home" (CW 13). Home is then his last hope and faith, since it is the only thing he says he is longing for during his final days in the army (CW 12-13). So when he discovers his childhood home to be "only a shell" (CW 13), all his hope or faith evaporates.

This discovery brings to a culmination Haze's doubt about the existence of God, and, in a larger sense, about all Biblical signification, for, like all those in the South who take a fundamentalist approach to scripture, he has always read the Bible in literal terms, looking for physical signs as necessary proof of its truth. At ten, after he had seen his father writhing in voyeuristic delight before a fat woman who squirmed in a black coffin in a carnival tent that was forbidden to children, Haze was beaten by his mother and made to feel a sinner. As a result, he had walked for a mile in the woods with stones in his shoes and then waited

for physical signs of God's forgiveness; however, he was totally disappointed: "Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign" (CW 30). This obsession with finding the observable signified--an obsession that derives from the presumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified--leads Haze to the conclusion that Biblical stories are not real.

Haze's attack on the believability of the Bible, which is, above all, metaphorical, is made clear early in the story and continued throughout most of the novel. During his meal in the dining car, Haze tells the lady across the table that he does not believe in Jesus: "Well, I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train" (CW 7). What Haze wants to convey here is not just that he does not believe in Jesus, but also, and more important I believe, that God does not exist--an implied message highlighted by the two subjunctive "even if" clauses. Two chapters later, Haze makes his point completely explicit. When the fake-blind "evangelist," Asa Hawkes, accuses him of having committed "fornication and blasphemy," Haze answers, "They ain't nothing but words," and "Nothing matters but that Jesus does not exist" (CW 29). His first-day preaching about the Church without Christ carries the same message. Haze challenges his audience again and again: "Where has the blood you think you been redeemed by touched?" And he continues, "I'm going to preach there was no Fall because

there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar" (CW 58, 59).

Haze's argument against Jesus and the Bible as a whole is that there is no physical evidence--no referents or objective signified--to back them up. According to Haze, any thing without a physical referent is meaningless: "it was not right to believe in anything you couldn't see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth" (CW 116). It is with the same mentality Haze later requests Hawkes provide physical proof of God's grace: "If Jesus cured blind men, howcome [sic] you don't get Him to cure you?" (CW 63). Haze's reasoning is flawed. As Derrida points out in discussing the relation between "meaning," "referent," and "signified,"

> Certain statements can have a meaning, although without objective signification. "The circle is square" is a proposition invested with meaning. It has enough meaning for me to be able to judge it false or contradictory (widersinning and not sinnlos, says Husserl). I am placing this example under the category of the absence of the signified . . . [because] "square circle" marks the absence of a referent, certainly, and also the absence of a certain signified, but not the absence of meaning. (Margins of Philosophy 319)

Haze's obsession with locating the signified for the Word comes from his desire for a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, or between language and reality. This obsession is based, to use Schneidau's words, on "an implicit presumption that we have an easily accessible standard of 'external reality' against which to measure any of our utterances" (248). Such a standard of "external reality" simply does not exist.

Haze's urge to pin down the signifier against "external reality" is shared by other people in Taulkinham. For instance, when Haze is preaching about his new Jesus, Hoover Shoats, a radio evangelist, asks him to show Him to the audience; and as Haze fails to do so, Shoats claims, "That's the trouble with you innerleckchuls . . . . you don't never have nothing to show for what you are saying" (CW 90). Another example occurs towards the end of the story. When Haze finally abandons the realm of the natural world and is determined to embrace the literary kingdom of Christianity, he realizes the blasphemy and sin he has committed. He tells his landlady, Mrs. Flood, "I'm not clean," a statement that sparks the following significant, though also comic, conversation:

> "I know it," she said after a minute, "you got blood on that night shirt and on the bed. You ought to get a washwoman . . ."
>
> "That's not the kind of clean," he said.
>
> "There's only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes," she

muttered. (CW 127).

The dialogue is important because it centers on the issue of signification. For one thing, it makes clear the impossibility of a one-to-one relation between the signifier and the signified. For another, it shows us that, to Mrs. Flood, and probably to all the people of Taulkinham, there is perhaps indeed only one kind of clean, the physical one, because the "external reality" which they assume exists and against which they measure each other's utterances is merely the materialistic reality they have created in monetary terms. Mrs. Flood's interest in Haze is based on nothing but money--she is interested only in his fairly substantial retirement pension from the army. In other words, to her, Haze's meaning lies in the money he signifies. And money, of course, is but another signifier in the commercial system.

What Haze and the people of Taulkinham are perhaps unaware of when they claim that God is unreal and that there exists only one reality is that, in making those claims, they are playing god, trying to impose their own meaning upon "things" and to replace Biblical "reality" with their own "reality"--their fictional world. This act of replacement, often unconscious to the human mind, is, in structuralist/post-structuralist terms, people's process of understanding, "a process of reducing one type of reality to another" (Culler, 30). Haze and the people of Taulkinham follow this process. In place of a religious world, they

have created a commercial universe, or, to be more accurate, they have turned the former into the latter, for, as I will show, they have literally made religion a money-making business. Religion can be easily transformed into business because the two are not only structurally similar but also closely related, if not totally interdependent, in reality: both the religious kingdom and the commercial world are artificial systems or realities we human beings have built to maintain a way of life. Although the two systems are supposed to be different and to create two entirely different ways of life, they are often intermingled in our world. To support my argument, we need only examine how most of the religious organizations, especially those of TV evangelists, operate in this country. Since all societies have always openly privileged the spiritual life and condemned the material one, though most of us perhaps covertly enjoy the latter, we frequently embrace the latter in the name of the former, as is shown by the people in Taulkinham where commercialism subsumes everything.

When Haze first arrives in Taulkinham, what he sees upon stepping out of the train are business signs: "as soon as he stepped off the train, he began to see signs and lights. Peanuts, Western Union, Ajax, Taxi Hotel, Candy. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically" (CW 15). The next thing he runs into is a hand-written advertisement in the men's toilet for Mrs. Leora Watts, a prostitute. Motes is immediately drawn into

this commercial symbolic structure, for he rushes at once to Mrs. Watt's, and more important, he speaks, consciously or unconsciously, its language. He tells Mrs. Watts, "I come for the usual business" (CW 18; emphasis added). Everything in this town is truly "business," including religion. What Haze encounters in Taulkinham the following night fully illustrates this point. He is loitering along the street downtown, and, before long, he finds himself in a crowd of people watching a salesman demonstrate his products, potato peelers. But the salesman is soon interrupted by the fake-blind preacher Hawkes, who wants to cash in on the crowd. He speaks to them: "Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel" (CW 21). What Hawkes does here is his routine. In fact, as we learn later, Hawkes has faked his blindness purposely for this religion/business.

Hawkes is not the only one in the story who engages in this kind of religious/business practice. Shoats is another one. When Shoats first meets Haze, the latter is preaching about the Church Without Christ on his recently acquired Essex. Shoats immediately decides to impose himself upon Haze as a partner in order to turn it into a money-making enterprise. Despite Haze's denial, Shoats claims that he has been saved by Haze and is now a disciple of the new Church, but he mistakenly calls it the Holy Church of Christ without Christ. And, in spite of Haze's protest, Shoats goes on to ask the members of the audience to join the church by each paying him a dollar. To stop Shoats's

trickery, Haze finally has to use force. Shoats, however, will not give up. He resumes his money-making scheme by hiring Solace Layfield to follow and emulate Haze in preaching, a scheme which is ended only by Haze's killing of Layfield.

Yet Haze does not stop Shoats and Layfield, really because he disagrees with their practice. He does it because he fears that they may be a threat to his authority as a god, a role he is creating for himself by inventing the Church Without Christ. Haze, as we already know, plunges into the life of Taulkinham as soon as he arrives in the city. He plays into its systems of monetary relations. Besides purchasing sex from Mrs. Watts, he approaches and then seduces Sabbath Hawkes, Asa Hawkes's daughter, by, among other things, buying her a potato peeler. Moreover, when he finds himself still the only member of his church after two nights of preaching, Haze tries, though in vain, to bribe a boy into joining his church by taking him to a whorehouse: "But it was all a mistake because after they had gone and got out [of the whorehouse] again and Haze had asked him to be a member of the Church without Christ, or more than that, a disciple, an apostle, the boy said he was sorry but he couldn't be a member . . ." (CW 83).

Another example of Haze's absorption into the worldly structures and systems of Taulkinham is his purchase of the Essex. A car is a very important sign of one's value and importance in an industrial and commercialized world.

Possessing a car would certainly add to one's worth in such a society. Haze understands this perfectly. He spends all of his fifty dollars on the Essex, and, more significant, when discussing with Hawkes and his daughter about justification for redemption, he claims: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (CW 64). This statement, which seems out of place in a religious discussion, is not inappropriate for people to whom religion is commercial. The statement also reflects our worldly reality where a person with a good car is indeed often "justified" for better treatment than one with a poor car when other conditions hold constant.

While participating in the creation of this worldly reality in Taulkinham, Haze, like the rest of the characters in the story, also invents his own private fictional world sustained only by his subjective belief. For example, his Essex is an old car that is falling apart. But Haze will not admit it; rather he repeatedly declares the car to be in excellent condition. After he takes his car to a mechanic who says that he cannot put the car in good order, Haze says, "This is a good car," and he takes it to another mechanic (CW 65). The second mechanic lies that he can fix the car overnight, and Haze believes him, leaving the car in his charge. However, to Haze's great dismay, not long after he picks up the car the next day, it breaks down on a dirt road off a highway. But even then, Haze still will not accept his car's real condition. He twice tells the gas

station owner who has come to his aid at his request that it is a good car, and he claims, "That car'll get me anywhere I want to go" (CW 71). Similarly, later when a mechanic at a gas station, after checking Haze's car, tells Haze all the problems the car has and warns him of the danger of driving it on highway, Haze flares up: "'Listen,' Haze said, 'this car is just beginning its life. A lightening bolt couldn't stop it'" (CW 116).

What is most interesting here is Haze's complete trust in the mechanic who cheats him. As soon as Haze brings his car into his garage, this mechanic tells him that he can "put the car in best shape overnight, because it was such a good car to begin with, so well put together and with such good materials in it, and because, he added, he was the best mechanic in town." Haze, without asking any question, leaves the car with him, "certain that it was in honest hands" (CW 65). Haze believes him but not the other mechanics because this mechanic says what he wants to believe whereas the others do not. This incident shows two things. First, it exposes Haze's desire or need to believe, or, more precisely, to suspend disbelief, even though the desire or need is obviously displaced. Instead of searching for God, Haze seeks truth from these mechanics, so, on a metaphorical level, these mechanics are Haze's gods. Second, the incident reveals how Haze, and probably all of us, determine truth and reality--using what we like to hear to affirm our own sense of what is true and real. It also

reveals that "external reality" is often our own creation--a projection of what we believe to be real. This is the logocentric self-confirming process by which we attempt to reach, first, "truth" and, then, power, as exemplarily manifested in Haze's story.

All Haze's actions in the story may be characterized as striving for power in the name of searching for truth. He attacks Christ for having no physical proof as truth, but his own discourse, as shown above, is supported by nothing but his self-projected "reality." Similarly, Haze will not believe in Christ and His stories because, as he repeatedly claims, they are just words. But when he advocates his new Jesus and is asked to show Him, he admits, "There is no such a thing as any new Jesus. That ain't anything but a way to say something" (CW 90). This statement reveals that Haze, while claiming truth, does the very thing he attacks others for doing. Haze thus epitomizes what we all often do in achieving "truth." When we claim that we are correct (or we know the "truth"), we always have to show that we are different from those whom we consider wrong, but while doing so, we almost always fall into the very thing we try to exclude or to define as the other.[2] We engage in this type of paradoxical practice in our drive for truth because if we can claim possession of truth, we then possess power and authority. The drive for truth thus always hides an urge for power and authority. This is because, as Danny J. Anderson, a scholar on deconstruction, points out, power and

authority "always already are at work in discourse, attempting to smother difference" (151). Haze's discourse is no exception.

Haze's speech is noted by the reader for its claim on truth/power. In fact, Haze seldom speaks without mentioning the word "truth." Early in the story, trying to compete with Hawkes, he boasts to the audience: "Listenhere, I am a preacher myself and I preach the truth" (CW 30). Later he warns the people who show no interest in listening to his preaching that they would miss the truth if they left him: "Listen, you people, I'm going to take the truth with me wherever I go . . . . I'm going to preach it to whoever'll listen at whatever place" (CW 59). Haze even labels himself as a person who does not "want nothing but the truth" (CW 107). The speech that best exposes his urge for truth/power is the following: "I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is there's no truth . . . . No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach!" (CW 93). Haze's drive for truth/power is too strong here to evade our notice. Hidden in his denial of any truth is a claim that only he knows the truth, the "only one truth" he preaches. But what makes possible as well as impossible such a claim of truth is the paradox inherent in the statement, in which two unreconcilable assertions cohabit but cancel each other out: the claim that "there's only one truth" negates the assertion that "there's no

truth," and vice versa. Claiming truth in such a manner exhibits clearly once again that what Haze desires is the ability to claim truth/power rather than truth itself.

Haze's desire for truth/power is so intense that he would do anything to stop or eliminate anyone who might challenge his sole claim on it. Haze does not really dispute with Shoats and Layfield because the two are fake preachers. We know that, while Haze accuses Shoats of selling religion, he himself has attempted to enroll a boy as a member of his church by taking the boy to a whorehouse. Haze truly hates Shoats and Layfield because they challenge his truth/authority. We know that it is Shoats who corners Haze, making him admit that the new Jesus he advocates does not exist (CW 90-91). And it is Layfield who makes Haze see the side of himself that he failed to see before. The first time Haze becomes aware of the similarity between him and Layfield in what they are doing is when they are both preaching and a woman asks him, "Him [Layfield] and you twins?" (CW 94). The idea of equating Layfield with himself hurts Haze so much that, instead of answering the woman's question, he expresses his wish to have Layfield killed, making the woman totally confused:

> "If you don't hunt it [Layfield] down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you," Haze answered.
>
> "Huh? Who?" she said. (CW 95)

But despite his unwillingness to acknowledge their

similarity, Haze is forced to see Layfield as a double of himself when he confronts Layfield face to face: looking closely at Layfield, Haze "seemed to perceive the resemblance in their clothes and possibly their faces" (CW 114). Haze is horrified by the notion that he is no different from Layfield, and will not accept it because the notion threatens his self-conceived identity as a truth possessor; consequently, he ruthlessly murders Layfield in order to preserve his god-like image. In murdering Layfield, Haze is trying to affirm his role of god: he is judging Layfield and determining his fate. Yet the murder cannot erase Haze's emerging consciousness that, despite his denial, he is indeed not much different from the two counterfeit preachers. "In seeing himself in Layfield, Haze," Brinkmeyer suggests,

> undergoes a profound experience of otherness: He views himself from outside himself, seeing himself as others see him. "He had never pictured himself that way before," the narrative consciousness reports Haze's thinking, and this perspective disturbs Haze not only because he sees his own physical deterioration in Layfield's . . . but also because he instinctively senses his own falseness in his double's. (107)

Haze now understands that his quest for meaning in this world is doomed since whatever he declares to be true is but his self-projection.

Another incident which helps Haze reach this understanding is Enoch Emery's response to his call for a new Jesus. Enoch is a character who both parallels and contrasts with Haze. Like Haze, he is an adventurer/quester in the city. Unlike Haze, who rejects the material world at the end of the story, Enoch goes in the opposite direction: before he disappears from the story, he descends into the animal world by shedding his human clothes and donning a gorilla-outfit. Being such a worldly person, Enoch, like the rest of the people in Taulkinham, naively believes in a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified. When he hears Haze's call for finding a new Jesus for the Church Without Christ, Enoch becomes at once determined that he has located it--a mummy in the museum. As a result, he first takes Haze to see it, and the sight greatly horrifies Haze (CW 54-56). Then he steals it from the museum and delivers it to Haze. As Haze is still asleep when Enoch arrives at his residence, Enoch leaves it with Sabbath Hawkes, who cohabits with Haze. Sabbath later presents it to Haze and calls it their child, an act full of significance, for it implies that the mummy is the product of Haze's struggle in Taulkinham. Stunned again at the sight of the mummy, Haze snatches it and throws it against the wall, breaking it into pieces (CW 106). Haze is furious because he cannot believe that the god he calls for is a hollow body--an empty signifier. But such is indeed the god Haze and the people of Taulkinham have created for

themselves.

O'Connor makes the point clear, though indirectly, in her narration of Sabbath's thoughts about the mummy. When Sabbath opens the parcel Enoch has left with her and sights the mummy, she is shocked, but, at the same time, she also perceives something familiar about it: "She had never known anyone who looked like him before, but there was something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried" (CW 104). The mummy, as Stephens correctly points out, is an embodiment of our created gods: "Our false gods are, more than anything else, merely ourselves, our own shrunken, dried up, and above all, mortal--no matter how we try to escape it--selves" (61). Haze is one of these gods who have created the commercial world. But Haze is not aware of this now. He does not realize the world is a man-made universe, a text, on which we human beings as gods impose our own meaning, until he is stopped on the highway by a policeman, who destroys his Essex by pushing it over the road embankment on a hill. The policeman functions as the god of the establishment, enforcing its arbitrary law and regulations: when Haze asks the policeman why he stopped him, the policeman replies, "I don't like your face" (CW 117). This answer is no mere tease. It reflects both the authoritative mentality he enjoys as a policeman and what is often a lack of any real objective basis for law enforcement actions.

What is more revealing is that the policeman destroys Haze's car simply because he does not like Haze as a person and because Haze does not have a licence (CW 117-18). Earlier in the story, O'Connor has highlighted this arbitrariness of our societal regulatory systems. After meeting Hawkes at the potato peeler salesman's show, Haze follows him in order to find out who he is. In his pursuit, Haze runs a red traffic light and is stopped by a policeman.

> "You know what that little thing hanging up there is for?" he [the policeman] asked, pointing to the traffic light over the intersection.
>
> "I didn't see it," Haze said.
>
> The policeman looked at him without saying anything. A few people stopped. He rolled his eyes at them. "Maybe you thought the red ones was for white folks and the green ones for niggers," he said.
>
> "Yeah I thought that," Haze said. "Take your hand off me."
>
> The policeman took his hand off and put it on his hip. He backed one step away and said, "You tell all your friends about these lights. Red is to stop, green is to go. . . . (CW 24)

This seemingly comic scene about what the traffic lights mean exposes the total subjectiveness of our signification structure, and, in a larger sense, of all our arbitrarily man-made social systems.

Realizing finally the total fictionality of the world of which everyone is a creator/god, Haze blinds his eyes, throws money into the trash can, wears barbed wire around his chest, and walks with stones and glasses in his shoes. In this way, he willfully ends his own life, an act that, many critics believe, suggests his total rejection of the fictional realm of the natural world and his full embracing of the kingdom of Christianity. Yet the meaning of the denouement is probably not that simple and clear-cut. For example, both Hendin and Ben Satterfield in their separate studies consider the ending ambiguous and interpret it differently. Satterfield does not believe that there is any textual evidence to suggest that Haze is converted or redeemed, and he accuses those who read the ending as Haze's redemption of "hav[ing] some mystic ability to perceive things that are not in the book" (39). Hendin, on the other hand, regards Haze's final action as his self-affirmation:

> Haze maintains until the end the no-existence of Jesus. Since pain is the only attribute of life for him, perhaps he tortures himself to assert his own existence. His suffering is both proof that he has survived, and the price he pays for being alive. By clinging to silence, broken glass and barbed wire, Motes affirms himself and embraces his pain as the sign of his own life. (55)

Though this reading suppresses the apparent religious overtone of the story's ending and though it is perhaps a

far cry from O'Connor's intention--O'Connor defines Haze as "a kind of a saint" (HB 89) and "a Christian malgre lui" (MM 114)--it is not totally off base if we put Haze's whole story in perspective.[3]

Based upon Haze's persistent frantic denial of Jesus throughout most of the story, we shall perhaps not find it entirely improbable or illogical that Haze engages in self-negation at the end as a form of self-affirmation. In fact, read as a whole, the story does not really encourage us to treat Haze's final actions as embracing Christ, because Haze's conversion, as some readers contend, seems too abrupt, or, "insufficiently motivated" (qtd. in Walters 61). Just before driving onto the highway and then being stopped by the policeman, Haze tells the gas station worker that "it was not right to believe anything you couldn't see or hold in your own hands or test with your teeth" (CW 116). But in no more than two or three hours, he is suddenly transformed from a sheer materialist to a pure spiritual believer, deciding to blind and starve himself. Of course, we may explain this rapid conversion in terms of Catholic mysticism--seeing it as testimony of God's mystic power, an explanation that O'Connor would certainly love. This is because O'Connor was a well known believer in religious mysticism (a fact shown especially in her enthusiastic advocacy of Teilhard), and, moreover, she calls Haze "a Christian malgre lui"--a person turned into a Christian by God's mystic power. In fact, O'Connor literally declares

Wise Blood to be "a mystery," a mystery about Haze's inability to escape God (MM 114-15).

Hence, I believe that O'Connor--for whom "fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (MM 68) and for whom the ultimate reality is the Incarnation" (HB 92)--is trying at the end of the story to use mysticism to affirm her religious belief. That is, by having Haze blind and starve himself, she intends to suggest that Haze, driven by the undisputable power of God, finally repents his sins and accepts God, although, as I have argued, the denouement is not without ambiguity the way it is, and may assume obvious awkwardness when read the way she would like. O'Connor's purpose becomes clearer if we recall her condemnation of Enoch, who chose the material world--she has him degenerate into a gorilla. By juxtaposing Haze's life with that of Enoch, she aims obviously to glorify Haze's final choice--a purely spiritual life--and, in turn, to privilege the religious system over the commercial one, unaware that the two, as explained earlier, are not that much different and are often intermingled. We thus can hardly miss O'Connor's urge at the end to impose her religious vision on the reader, to force the reader to replace his/her vision with this privileged one. This is perhaps where O'Connor differs from Derrida and his followers.

Derridean deconstructionists, we understand, do not attempt in their writing to replace one vision, or one term, with another, because they believe that to privilege one

term over another is to fall into the same practice one attacks and tries to avoid. Deconstruction, as Atkins writes, "refuses to rest with the replacement of one term of an opposition by the other, which serves merely to perpetuate hierarchization . . . . [Rather] deconstruction consists of an undoing/preserving that produces ceaseless reversal, reinscription, and oscillation of hierarchical terms" (5-6). This certainly is not what O'Connor is doing. A staunch believer, O'Connor, in deconstructing beliefs she opposes, always tries to impose her privileged ones, allowing little "reversal" and "oscillation." In a sense, Stephens is correct about O'Connor when she contends,

> what the reader constantly strives to achieve in O'Connor's books--a feeling for the humanity of the characters that transcends questions of conscious belief, a reaffirmation of his sense that there is a wide range of belief within which we can still respond to a character as a man or woman--is exactly the kind of liberal feeling towards belief that O'Connor means to attack. (105-6)

Yet notwithstanding O'Connor's urge to assert her religious vision, her work itself, as the ambiguity of the ending illustrates, often thwarts her own efforts. Hence, Wise Blood works mostly as a powerful critique of our complacent belief in objective truth and meaning, and a thorough exposure of the fictionality of our world. Haze's

final realization of the nothingness of the universe and the meaninglessness of man's worldly endeavor is of extreme significance, for, as Schneidau points out, such consciousness may be our hope for a better understanding of human life:

> From the time we are disabused about Santa Claus, we are open to sudden revelations of meaninglessness or arbitrariness. The range of these experiences runs from blighting despairness to strenuous conversions . . . Sooner or later we are afflicted by the feeling that nothing matters, or "makes any difference," i.e., that we are unable to supply the differentiations which in primitive cultures are articulated by myth, so that our lives and purposes are reduced to entropy. We may flee to various cults, but doubt will have its turn at those. Thus latent Yahwism works within us, leavening all the lump. We are condemned to freedom, not because God is dead but because he is very much alive, as an agent of disillusionment in a basic sense. In this condition, it is not remarkable that we are nihilistic: what is remarkable is that we can become aware of it and can acknowledge intermittently the "nothingness of consciousness when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything." So with all self-deceptions: their

> extent is not as remarkable as our awareness of them. We have reached out for the apple of selfknowledge, and in doing so have alienated God, nature, and each other; but by pressing our self-awareness to its extreme, where we become alienated from ourselves, we find that this is not the end of the story. The Fall is only the beginning of the Bible. To be thus "decentered" (and, as I shall try to show, to be acutely conscious of the fictionality of things) is the precondition of insight: thus it is a felix culpa, good news from modern man of a somewhat unlikely kind. (48-49)

Haze's story has, in a way, brought us such good news because it wakens us to the knowledge of our complacent self-deceptions, and urges us to quest forever for the apple of knowledge "we have reached out for."

Notes

1. For such critical responses to the novel, see, for example, Josephine Hendin's The World of Flannery O'Connor, pp. 43-55; Isaac Rosenfeld' review article "To Win by Default"; and Martha Stephens' The Question of Flannery O'Connor, pp. 43-97. Stephens considers Wise Blood the "queerest of her [O'Connor's] books" (78).

2. This is a phenomenon that has been clearly shown by Derrida in his close reading of Plato's argument against writing in Phaedrus and by De Man in his reading of Rousseau's figural writing. Refer to the introductory chapter for details on this point.

3. I must make it clear that I am not here supporting Satterfield or Hendin; I am only using their arguments as examples to indicate that the novel's denouement may be read other than as showing Haze's complete conversion or redemption. In fact, I disagree with Satterfield's main argument that the ambiguity of the ending of the novel (as well as the ambiguity of O'Connor's many other stories) is the result of bad fiction writing and that O'Connor is a "religious propagandist" rather than a fiction writer (48). To deconstructionists, ambiguity in literary writing does not mean bad art at all; rather, it indicates the richness of literature. More important, it is the very ambiguity of her fiction, I will argue, that makes O'Connor such a great writer. O'Connor's fiction itself is not religious propaganda; only certain readings (O'Connor's own included)

of the fiction are, i.e., some critics' interpretations make her fiction appear propagandistic.

CHAPTER III

THE FUSION OF THE INFUSIBLE: DECONSTRUCTION OF LOGOCENTRIC HERMENEUTICS

O'Connor's position on hermeneutics and on signification as a whole is very complex. Being a sacramentalist, she "believe[s] the Host is actually the body and the blood of Christ, not a symbol" (HB 124); that is, she reads Biblical literature as reality rather than as a symbolic text. But as a writer of modern consciousness, O'Connor seems aware not only of the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between a text (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified) but also of the danger of interpreting the Bible literally. She censures people's effort to treat a text "as if it were a problem in algebra" and criticizes their drive to pin down its meaning (MM 71, 73). In spite of her ambivalence on the issue, however, O'Connor's fiction, as we have seen in Wise Blood, features a prominent attack on fundamentalist hermeneutics which is characterized by an urge to treat Biblical words literally, an urge, as shown by Haze and the other people in Taulkinham, to locate physical referents for Biblical words so as to fuse the signifier with the signified.

Although the whole O'Connor canon deals one way or

another with hermeneutics, "The River," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and "Parker's Back" stand out as stories devoted primarily to this issue. In this chapter, I will, through a close reading, try to demonstrate how these stories contribute to O'Connor's unconscious deconstruction of fundamentalist/logocentric hermeneutics. I call this deconstruction her "unconscious" effort because she does not interpret these stories the way I do. This difference between our interpretations, however, does not devalue my reading because (intentional fallacy apart) O'Connor in her fiction, to quote Spivey's convincing argument again, "was seeking, <u>quite unconsciously most of the time</u>, to decompose her own view of the world, if not her style, in order to exorcise from her mind a logocentrism that governed many aspects of her life and work" (278; emphasis added). Moreover, as Andre Bleikasten points out, reading O'Connor's work in terms different from those set by the author is what we now really need:

> So far, O'Connor's novels and stories have been read predominantly in analogical and anagogical terms along the orthodox guidelines she [O'Connor] so diligently supplied in her public statements. As a result, a great deal of O'Connor's criticism strikes one as heavily redundant and, in the last resort, fussily futile. To refresh our perception and appreciation of her work, what is probably needed now is a freer, less timorous and less

> pious approach, focusing on the multiple meanings produced by the interplay of signifiers rather than on a unique, unequivocal transcendental signified equated with ultimate truth. (10)

To begin my discussion of the stories, let me first turn to "The River." The story is about Harry/Bevel Ashfield, a four-year-old boy who, neglected by his parents, literally follows a preacher's call to plunge into the "river of Christ' and drowns himself. O'Connor considers the boy's action a baptism and sign of God's grace: "young Bevel's 'peculiar desire to find the kingdom of Christ' represents the 'working of grace for him'" (qtd. in Walters, 76). Following O'Connor's interpretation, most critics read the boy's dying as a commendable religious act--"dying into life," as some call it--and they privilege Bevel's death over the corrupted materialistic life of his parents. But a close examination of the story will show that Bevel's death is more an indictment of fundamentalist hermeneutics than an affirmation of God's grace, and that the story condemns not only materialism but also fundamentalism.

When the story opens, Mrs. Connin, Bevel's babysitter, is picking up the boy from his home, and she also learns that the boy's mother is sick. As a person who reads symbolic religious language in literal terms, Mrs Connin takes the boy, later that day, to the Reverend Bevel Summers, who is presiding over a river-side preaching service, and asks the preacher not only to baptize Bevel

but also to cure Bevel's mother by praying for her. Mrs. Connin is not the only one in the story who believes that faith can cure physical illness. During the preacher's service, two people, one lame, the other blind, testify to the truth of his healing the physically handicapped (CW 162-64). Even Paradise, the only person in the audience who counters the preacher, rejects him simply because the latter could not heal the cancer in his ear. The fact that both the believers and the non-believers base their decision concerning religious truth on physical evidence is very revealing: the two groups do not differ very much in the final analysis. Both share the same desire to find some observable signified for religious words, i.e., both attempt to collapse the gap between the signifier and the signified.

Bevel's parents and their friends also take a physical approach to religion, though in a different way. Like Hawkes and Shoats in Wise Blood, they interpret religion in explicitly material terms. After Mrs. Connin tells them that she has asked the preacher to pray for Bevel's mother, the boy's father answers, somewhat ironically though, "Healing by prayer is mighty inexpensive" (CW 167). In his answer, the two apparently different groups meet: on the one hand, we have those who try to heal by prayer; on the other, there are those who respond to such practices in monetary terms. Later, when they discover the classic Bible story book Bevel stole from Mrs. Connin, they see, again, only its monetary value and scramble for it:

> She [Bevel's mother] threw the handkerchief down and held the book too high for him [Bevel] to reach and began to read it, her face after a second assuming an exaggerated comical expression. The others moved around and looked at it over her shoulder. "My God," somebody said.
>
> One of the men peered at it sharply from behind a thick pair of glasses. "That's valuable," he said. "That is a collector's item," and he took it away from the rest of them and retired to another chair.
>
> "Don't let George go off with that," his girl said . . . . (CW 167).

To these people, the meaning of religion lies in its physical value. In this sense, these people resemble those who read the Bible literally and assess its truth on the basis of physical proof such as physical healing.

The characters' desire for a complete fusion of the signifier with the signified is best shown in Summers's inability to distinguish between the river in which he stands and the river of Jesus's blood about which he is preaching:

> There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' blood . . . . All the rivers come from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea and if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it

> because that's the River that was made to carry sin . . . . (CW 162)

As Marshall Bruce Gentry points out, "While insisting that the river of Blood is the only river that matters, the preacher implies that the river before him--the one in which Harry/Bevel later drowns--is the same as the River of Life" (93). It is this kind of fusion/confusion that leads Bevel to take literally what the preacher asks the "people with trouble" to do: "lay in that River of Pain, and watch it move away toward the kingdom of Christ" (CW 162). Bevel obviously belongs to the "people with trouble" whom Summers calls upon. He is deeply troubled by the tremendous difference between the world the preacher's words have envisioned and the bleak world he has experienced at home, a loveless one characterized only by drunkenness and disorder. Following Summers's call, Bevel thus decides to escape the home-hell and to find "the Kingdom of Christ."

But the boy's subsequent drowning-death does not truly symbolize, as some believe, a birth into life; it only indicates a jump from one hell to another--fleeing the hell-home of his materialist parents, Bevel only plunges into the tomb-kingdom of those fundamentalist believers. The boy is a victim of both worlds. A scrutiny of Summers's baptizing of Bevel and the boy's final drowning will support my argument, for both events are described as horrifying experiences for the boy. Observe first how the preacher baptizes the boy:

> Suddenly the preacher said, "All right, I am going to Baptize you now," and without more warning, he tightened his hold and swung him upside down and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of Baptism and then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated. (CW 165).

The word "suddenly" and, especially, the phrase "without more warning" are usually employed to forebode something unpleasant. Thus, they certainly discourage us from reading what to come as something positive. Moreover, the verbs, "swing," "plunge," and "jerk," portray the baptizing more as an act of abuse than as a sign of God's grace, for these actions are too violent to be used for baptism, considering, especially, that the baptized is only a pre-school child. Such a terrifying act will not leave Bevel appreciative at all of the sacred message it is supposed to carry. The boy, according to the narrator, is a pathetic sufferer of the baptizing: "The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face" (CW 165).

Bevel's drowning at the end of the story is an equally painful experience:

> Bevel bounded into it [the river] with his shoes and his coat on and took a gulp. He swallowed some and spit the rest out . . . . He intended not to

> fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time. He put his head under the water at once and pushed forward. He put his head underwater at once and pushed forward.
>
> In a second he began to gasp and sputter and his head reappeared on the surface; he started under again and the same thing happened. The river wouldn't have him. He tried again and came up, choking. This was the way it had been when the preacher held him under--he had had to fight with something that pushed him back in the face. He stopped and thought suddenly: it's another joke, it's just another joke! He thought how far he had come for nothing and he began to hit and splash and kick the filthy river. His feet were already treading on nothing. He gave one low cry of pain and indignation. (CW 170-71).

In fact, in these two passages we discover that it is not only the child's terrible suffering that prevents us from reading the drowning as a worthy "death into life."[2] The narration, especially its somewhat ironic tone, also calls such a reading into question. For example, echoing the pre-school child's consciousness, the statement that the boy "intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize

himself" sounds not only ironic--ironic because he is following exactly what the preacher has told him to do--but also, in certain sense, comic, for few can help laughing when a four-year-old uses the phrase "fool with." The tone certainly undercuts the seriousness of the boy's intention. The same thing may also be said of the two sentences "The river wouldn't have him. He tried again and came up, choking," though the slightly comic tone here is tainted by bitterness. This is a tone often associated with black humor or dark comedies, and the tone is appropriate for the situation because what is happening to Bevel may be best defined as black humor. The boy has been told by the preacher that plunging into this river would lead him to the kingdom of Christ, but what he faces in doing so is nothing but pain and frustration.

It is no wonder that Bevel thinks that "it's another joke, it's just another joke." His thought serves as an attack, a very appropriate one, on fundamentalist hermeneutics, for what is happening, as we outsiders see it, is, in many ways, truly a joke, a very cruel one though. Bevel's cry of "indignation" is the only logical response one can conceive of in such a situation. The word that is most revealing in this passage is "filthy" in the sentence "he [Bevel] began to hit and splash and kick the filthy river." The sacred river, "the River of Life" the preacher proclaims it to be, turns out to be no more than a "filthy river." But what comes next (following the above quoted

passage) puzzles the reader, however. At the end of this penultimate paragraph, Bevel undergoes a sudden turnaround in his feeling about what is happening to him: "For an instance he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and his fear left him" (CW 171). This abrupt change in Bevel's feeling, I would like to argue, is the result of the narrator's/O'Connor's heavy-handed effort to affirm her religious belief, since O'Connor, as cited earlier, sees the boy's death as a journey into "the kingdom of Christ." Yet this forced note of affirmation is too weak to assert itself, for it is smothered by the preceding narration that portrays Bevel's drowning as a senseless suffering and a cruel joke.

What makes O'Connor's interpretation more problematic is the last paragraph of the story where Mr. Paradise re-emerges. The surprise reappearance of Paradise is very confusing if we are to read the story as celebration of Bevel's redemption. As A. R. Coulthard points out, "Not only does the final image of empty-handed Paradise invite what O'Connor might well consider a misreading, but Mr. Paradise virtually wrests the story from its protagonist at the conclusion" ("Deadly Conversions" 89). In fact, the problem is greater than that. As Coulthard further argues, O'Connor or the narrator seems to use Paradise, very awkwardly, to reinforce the notion of Bevel's redemption:

> O'Connor reintroduces Paradise at the end of the

> story by linking him with the redemptive sun symbol and, through heavy-handed color imagery, with the blood of Christ. . . . Then O'Connor rather clumsily points out the spot where Mr. Paradise sat "almost every day, holding an unbaited fishline in the water," a religious symbol which has no realistic basis. ("Deadly Conversions" 89)

It is very ironic to have Paradise, a person who treats religion exclusively in literal/material terms, "celebrate" Bevel's "embracing of God's grace," for such an arrangement not only undermines the significance of Bevel's action but also implies a possible connection between the old man and the boy, between, I believe, what Paradise practices and what Bevel is doing--interpreting religious preaching literally. Keeping in mind all the problems I have pointed out concerning O'Connor's interpretation of the story, I find her reading extremely questionable. Coulthard is right when he concludes,

> In "The River," O'Connor seems to want us to take what [Bevel's drowning] must reasonably be viewed as a naive, grotesque mistake to be either redemptive for Harry or spiritually enlightening for Mr. Paradise, or both. This is asking too much, and "The River" is O'Connor's most theologically puzzling story. ("Deadly Conversions" 90)

But if we read the story as a satire not only on materialism but also, and above all, on fundamentalism, the story is then not puzzling at all; rather, it is very illuminating.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" also deals with the issue of hermeneutics. It satirizes people's attempt in interpreting the Bible to fuse the signifier with the signified, i.e., the attempt to hypostatize Biblical words. Although O'Connor (HB, 123-24) and many critics consider the story to be exclusively an explication of the Christian doctrine that "Humans are the Temples of the Holy Ghost," its narrative, I believe, shows it to be something else. Read closely, the story seems to be, above all, a castigation of those who try to read the doctrine in literal terms. And, determined by the context, the circus freak--the story's central symbol, which many believe to embody the doctrine in question--serves as an indictment against the attempt to fuse spirit with the human body because it exhibits the ugliness of such a forced fusion.

The story, told mostly from a twelve-year-old girl's point of view, evolves around two convent school sisters (her cousins) spending a weekend at their aunt's home. From the beginning, the doctrine is not treated as solemnly as we would expect it in a doctrine explication tale. The story begins as follows: "All week end [sic] the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot . . ." (CW 197). Here the two fourteen-year-old sisters have turned the sacred

phrase into merely a word game. Yet they are not the only ones who play with the doctrine. Sister Perpetua, the oldest nun at the convent from whom the two sisters learned the doctrine for first time, told them that if a man "should 'behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile' . . . they were to say, 'Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!' and that would put an end to it" (CW 199). On the surface, Perpetua's use of the doctrine differs from the two sisters' in that it is not just a joke, though the two sisters seem to have perceived it that way. But, whether for fun or for some practical reason, employing the doctrine in such a mundane manner, especially in such a sexual setting, makes the doctrine sound trivial and comic. This trivial and comic use of the doctrine, in turn, pokes fun at fundamentalist hermeneutics because such use follows a fundamentalist approach to Biblical doctrines: using the statement "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost" to protect one's body presupposes not only that my body is literally a Temple of the Holy Ghost but also that I am the Holy Ghost itself, for the implication of the statement is that "if you violate me, you violate the holy Spirit."

Such a literal wedding of the spirit with the body is ugly and grotesque. This is clearly suggested by the circus freak that the two convent sisters saw at the fair and which the twelve-year-old girl imagines to be "a temple of the Holy Ghost."[1] Though hermaphroditic gods are common in myth, the setting in which O'Connor puts the freak does not

encourage us to regard it as a union of God and man. Suzanne Morrow Paulson, who considers the freak's role ambiguous (both profane and sacred), correctly points out the problems of such a reading: "the profane setting overwhelms the sacred: the materialistic ends of freak shows appeal to the sexual curiosity of the masses. The physical reality of the hermaphrodite is an ugly reality that appears to deny the sacred nature of the world . . ." (102). As evidence to support Paulson's argument, the two sisters see the freak solely as a queer sexual phenomenon, a fact that is best shown in the way they decide to describe the freak to the twelve-year-old girl. When the two sisters return from the fair, they first do not want to tell the girl (who did not go with them) what they saw because they do not think her old enough to know about it; but the girl tricks them into depicting it to her anyway:

> "I'm not as old as you all," she said, "but I'm about a million times smarter."
>
> "There are some things," Susan said, "that a child of your age doesn't know," and they both began to giggle.
>
> "Go back to your own bed," Joanne said.
>
> The child didn't move. "One time," she said, her voice hollow-sounding in the dark, "I saw this rabbit have rabbits."
>
> There was a silence. Then Susan said "how?" in an indifferent tone and she [the girl] knew that

> she had them. She said she wouldn't tell until they told about the you-know-what. Actually she had never seen a rabbit have rabbits but she forgot this as they began to tell what they had seen in the tent. (CW 206).

In exchanging the depiction of the freak for a story about rabbit-bearing, the two sisters obviously treat the freak as nothing more than something that serves to satisfy their sexual curiosity. Another problem involved in viewing the freak as a union of man and God is that the freak presents his existence to be more the result of Gods' punishment than His grace: "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit . . . .and if you laugh, He may strike you thisway" (CW 207). Such a presentation will no doubt lead people to question the benevolence of God. Even Walters, who considers the freak an incarnation of the union of man and God, admits this as a potential problem for her reading:

> Inevitably, additional questions are raised as to the responsibility of a cosmic agent which would permit the agony endured by the natural freak. What place does the grotesque human sufferer occupy in the scheme of a benevolent creator? . . . . This nihilistic impulse manifestly resides outside the conscious intent of the story itself, but the "demonic" thrust is undeniably there. (81)

Hendin raises similar questions in her reading of the story:

> O'Connor's treatment of the Holy spirit seems to be ironic, undercutting, as it does, its power as a traditional symbol of transcendence. All the outward signs of invisible grace shown by her characters are signs of mutilation, marks of deformity they cannot transcend. It may be that God can only be found in O'Connor's world in connection with finite, unredeemable human ugliness. (95)

All these questions or charges will be valid--in fact, they can hardly be rebutted--if we are to read the freak as an embodiment of religious doctrine. But they will all be irrelevant if we consider the freak as an indictment of people's urge to fuse the spiritual and the material.

A look at the twelve-year-old girl, especially her attitude towards both the freak image and religion, will also support the latter reading, for the girl's obsession and her own identification with the freak serve to further the story's satire on the attempt to fuse the spirit and the body. As the point of view character, the girl exposes herself, often through a double irony (for she does it mostly unconsciously), to be a prideful and mischievous, sometimes even mean, brat. She constantly thinks others stupid or ugly and laughs at them for it. "After observing them [the two sisters] for a few hours," she decided "that they were practically morons and she was glad to think that they were only second cousins and she couldn't have

inherited any of their stupidity" (CW 197). Herself a fat girl--for she is said to have "fat cheeks" (CW 198)--she notices in others only their physical imperfections: Susan's skinny body, Cheatam's bald head and dark face "with ruts and gulleys" . . . (CW 197-98). Though mean and prideful, the girl is ironically not unconcerned with her "spiritual soundness," for she wishes to be a saint and to go to heaven. She treats theological concepts both literally and practically. When she hears the phrase "Temple of the Holy Ghost," she immediately sees herself as such a temple, and, more important, she regards the phrase as "a present" to her that she can play with (CW 199).

Later, realizing that she cannot go to heaven as a saint because of her pride, she decides that she can be a religious martyr, and she envisions herself literally killed as such:

> she began to prepare her martyrdom, seeing herself in a pair of tights in a great arena, lit by the early Christians hanging in cages of fire, making a gold dusty light that fell on her and the lions. The first lion charged forward but fell at her feet converted. A whole series of lions did the same . . . . finally the Romans were obliged to burn her but to their astonishment she would not burn down and finding she was so hard to kill, they finally cut off her head very quickly with a sword and she went immediately to heaven. She

> rehearsed this several times, returning each time at the entrance of Paradise to the lions. (CW 204)

Literal interpretations of theological ideas bring, however, no positive changes in the girl; rather, they serve only to sustain her prideful and repulsive character. Towards the end of the story, she and her mother accompany the two sisters back to the convent. When they arrive at the school, a nun asks them to attend a benediction in the chapel. Even there, the girl is still mean, laughing secretly at the people around her. She did not stop her "ugly thought" until "she began to realize that she was in the presence of God. Hep [sic] me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her [her mother] so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do" (CW 208). She seems to repent here, "but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, 'I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be" (CW 208-9).

The Host reminds her of the freak because both are corporealizations of the Word. To the girl, as O'Connor says, "the Host is actually the body and blood of Christ, not a symbol" (HB 124), and the freak is really a Temple of the Holy Ghost. The girl thinks of the freak and what he said here because she wants to identify with him as a "Temple of the Holy Ghost" so as to justify the way she is: "This is the way He wanted me to be." Hence, the girl will

not change. On the way home, she again observes only others' physical ugliness, this time, that of Alonzo, the driver: "The child observed three folds of fat in the back of his neck and noted that his ears were pointed almost like a pig's" (CW 209). Even critics who follow O'Connor's interpretation of the story see the child's observation here as problematic. Milles Orvell, for example, writes that the girl's contemptuous observation of Alonzo "tends (unintentionally, I think) to undercut the point of the story and hence to evoke uncertain response from the reader . . . . If we can laugh at Alonzo, why can't we laugh at the sideshow freak?" (47). Orvell is right in pointing out the problem the scene causes for O'Connor and her followers' interpretation of the story, but his last question is besides the point. What we shall laugh at is not Alonzo's or the freak's deformity but the girl's naive attempt to hypostatize theological concepts. Like Walters, Orvell considers the problem he perceives to be O'Connor's unintentional by-product, but whether intentional or unintentional, the problems are there, discouraging us from reading the story the way O'Connor desires.

Like "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "Parker's Back," one of O'Connor's last stories, also stages an attack on the fundamentalist urge to fuse the Word with its signified, an urge well exemplified in the story by its protagonist, O. E. Parker, who puts on his body, by tattooing, pictures of whatever he desires to be, including that of Christ. Again,

as with the two stories we have just examined, O'Connor and many scholars read this story differently. They see it as a defence of the belief in Incarnation--they consider Parker's tattooing of Christ on his back a true act of incarnation--against, as O'Connor suggests, "the notion that you can worship in pure spirit," a notion advocated in the story by Parker's wife, Sarah Ruth whom O'Connor calls a "heretic" (HB 594). Although I do not have much trouble in agreeing with O'Connor that the story exposes Sarah as a "heretic" who presumes that one can arrive at the signified without the signifier, I do not think Parker's tattooing, presented as it is, is an act of Incarnation because even a rather casual reading of the story will reveal that the portrayal of Parker's obsession with tattooing is ironic and comic.[3] The story castigates, I think, not only Sarah but also Parker: while Sarah is chastised for her urge to reach the signified without the mediation of signifiers, Parker is satirized for his apparent drive to collapse the signified into the signifier. The two do not really differ much because both are fundamentalists, though in different ways, and both presuppose the attainability of the transcendental signified. Since the problems with Sarah have been well considered, I will focus my discussion here mostly on the satire directed at Parker, an issue that seems to have escaped most critics' attention.

One thing that is ironic about Parker is that he remains a staunch atheist until he has Christ tattooed on

his back (of course, here we have to suppose the act of tattooing to be the sign of his conversion). When he was merely a teenager, Parker was depraved. He drank and engaged in fights and blasphemy, and, more important, he was determined not to be "saved":

> His mother wept over what was becoming of him. One night, she dragged him off to a revival with her, not telling him where they were going. When he saw the big lighted church, he jerked out her grasp and ran. The next day, he lied about his age and joined the navy. (CW 658)

But he stayed the same person in the navy, so the navy "put him in the brig for nine months and then gave him a dishonorable discharge;" after his dismissal from the navy, he went to the country where he "took various jobs which he kept as long as it suited him" (CW 659). Thus, we can see that Parker is a drifter or, as many critics suggest, a quester, but a quester, I will argue, only in the ironic sense because he never seems to know exactly what he is searching for and, more important, he carries out his quest in an extremely unusual way: tattooing on his body the images of what he happens to like in his search. This strange mode of questing, a major object of ridicule in the story, is the product of the desire to fuse the signified with the signifier, for, by putting the images of the things a person desires on his body, he attempts to make the image and his body merge so that the two may become an inseparable

entity--he may thus become the thing itself. When the signified is collapsed into the signifier in such a manner, the signifier becomes the only thing that counts.

So, to Parker, the tattoos are the only reality: they are the sources of both his unhappiness and satisfaction. As we are told, he is being forever troubled by and dissatisfied with the tattoos he has. He even feels "as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging war" (CW 659). But tattooing is simultaneously Parker's only solution to his problems and his only means to quench the thirst for the things he wants. Whenever he feels troubled or dissatisfied, "he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up" (CW 659). Tattoos have become the only things he cares for: "The only reason he worked at all was to pay for more tattoos" (CW 658). Even after his marriage to Sarah Ruth, who opposes his tattooing, Parker continues to add tattoos. Sarah protests against tattooing because, as a fundamentalist, she follows word for word the Bible, which prohibits any creation of images: "Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth" ("Deuteronomy," 5:8; the same message is given almost verbatim in "Exodus," 20:4). Yet, ironically, Sarah is the one who motivates Parker to have Christ's image tattooed on his back.

Before his marriage, the images Parker had on his body were mostly those of the animals he admired. After their marriage, Sarah constantly chastises Parker for his atheist heresy and blasphemy. Bombarded by and tired of Sarah's preaching, Parker finally decides to have a picture of God tattooed on his back so as to please her. We are told that he wants this religious tattoo to be "a surprise for her" (CW 670), and he believes that "she would at least be pleased [by it]. It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her" (CW 672). Another reason, a more immediate one, for Parker to have the tattoo seems to be the accident he had while working for an old woman on her farm--he crashed the tractor he was driving into a tree and burned it. Many scholars believe that the accident shocks Parker into realizing his sin and the power of God, making him convert. But such a conversion, if it is one, is comic and ironic on two accounts. First, the scene of the accident is portrayed in comic terms:

> He landed on his back while the tractor crashed upside down into the tree and burst into flames The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractor, the other was some distance away. (CW 665)

The fact that one's attention is directed to his shoes after so severe an accident makes the event look anything but solemn (this is an example of the tone problem O'Connor

acknowledged having: "It is too funny to be as serious as it ought"). Second, to show one's conversion by tattooing a picture of Christ on the back would undercut, in most cases, the seriousness of his/her intention and, as a result, it is not likely to convince people about the conversion. That is why Parker fails to convince Sarah (of course, he also fails to please her). Telling him that the tattoo on his back is just "another picture," Sarah drives Parker away from their house by beating him with a broom (CW 675). The ending of the story makes Parker's "conversion effort" appear extremely ironical as it renders Parker a totally pathetic and comic person--he is reduced to a crying baby: "There he was--who called himself Obadiah Elihue--leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (CW 675).

The desire to fuse the spiritual with the material is not an urge peculiar to Parker (otherwise, the story's satire would be an effort wasted). It is a human tendency to merge the signifier and the signified so as to attain meaning--to make the meaning transparent or self-evident. In fact, as Theodore Gaster points out, there have always been people in history acquiring religious tattoos to show their spiritual faith:

> The custom of tattooing passed even into Christianity. In early centuries, baptism was known as "sealing," and this was also the ancient name for the rite of Confirmation, which originally followed immediately. Nor did the

> custom survive only in a figurative sense. To this day the Catholics of Central Bosnia tattoo themselves with religious symbols. . . . and it is recorded of the German mystic, Heinrich Seuse, that he impressed the name of Jesus over his heart. (51-2)

But, as we have seen in Parker's case, having the name of Jesus over one's heart does not ensure one's faith at all.

Our wish to merge the signifier and the signified is not limited to the sphere of Biblical understanding. Since we human beings rely so much on the observable to determine the existence of things, we always desire such a merger or merging when we try to know and understand anything signified. What Parker's mother does in the story exemplifies this point. "She would not pay for any tattoo [for Parker] except her name on a heart, which he had put on . . ." (CW 658). By allowing only her name to be tattooed on Parker, she obviously wishes that her son would forever have her on his heart. (Please note: she permits only "her name on a heart.") That is, for her to know that Parker keeps her in his heart, she needs to see her name physically on it. Yet, just as having the name of Jesus carved on one's heart or the image of God on one's body does not ensure one's possession of faith, her having her name engraved on Parker's body does not guarantee that he will forever keep her in mind. With the satirizing of Parker extended to his mother, the story's attack on people's

desire for the unity of the signifier and the signified reaches a scope we have not seen in "The River" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost."

With Bevel's death, and Parker's reduction to a crying baby, we see clearly how dangerous and absurd fundamentalist/logocentric hermeneutics may be. In fact, O'Connor's work elsewhere also exhibits repeatedly the danger of taking the signifier for the signified. I would like to conclude this chapter by citing the ending of her story "The Comforts of Home" as one more example, a very illuminating one, to support my argument. Although the story is not concerned with Biblical hermeneutics, its denouement highlights, in a unique and very effective way, the danger and absurdity we are talking about. Thomas, its protagonist, hates and tries to drive out Sarah Ham, a delinquent girl his mother has brought home. After his mother's repeated refusal to make the girl leave, he goes to see the sheriff to have her arrested for taking his gun. Having arranged for the sheriff to come and search for the gun, he returns home, and finds, to his surprise, that gun is back where it belongs. He is so frantic that he decides to plant it in the girl's handbag. Caught by the girl while he is doing it and blasted by the girl in the presence of his mother, he counter-charges her of stealing the gun. Infuriated, the girl lunges at him, and he fires at her in return. But, as his mother has thrown herself between them, he kills his mother instead.

At this moment, the sheriff comes in and examines the scene. The story ends with his interpretation of what he sees:

> the fellow [Thomas] had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl . . . .As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. He was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he hoped to find them, but this one met his expectations. (CW 594)

This denouement foregrounds the fact that it is too easy for us to misunderstand the signifier (what we see), especially when we look for what we expected--when we try to collapse the gap between the signifier and what it signifies)--just as the sheriff did.

Notes

1. As mentioned above, many critics read the freak in entirely different terms. They believe that O'Connor uses the freak to symbolize the ideal of Christ being the union of both man and God--an ideal, though grotesque, we must accept. For such a reading, see Baumgaertner (77-81), Feeley (135-39), and Walters (77-81), each of whom offers a strict sacramentalistic interpretation of the story.

2. The presentation of Bevel's final "baptism" is so horrifying that Mark Sexton also finds it problematic. But, instead of considering this presentation, as I am, an attack on fundamental hermeneutics, Sexton sees it as an indication of O'Connor's ambivalence towards vernacular religion:

> While the promise of this [Bevel's] final baptism would seem a triumph, its manifestation astounds and haunts the readers. Only as a result of the boy's pure desperation will the river accept him. In its simultaneous threat and deliverance, this final "baptism" is the culmination of the ambivalence of O'Connor's presentation of vernacular religion in "The River." (9)

3. Even O'Connor, while writing the story, acknowledged the tone of the story as a problem: she wrote to a friend: "'Parker's back' is not coming along too well. It is too funny to be as serious as it ought . I have a lot of trouble with getting the right tone . . ." (_HB_ 427). Although she might have thought she had the problem taken

care of when she published the story, I believe the story is still too funny to be read as she would like it to be.

CHAPTER IV

THE IDENTITY OF NON-IDENTITY AND THE COLLAPSE OF SIGNIFICATION

In addition to questioning fundamentalist/logocentric hermeneutics, O'Connor's work also challenges, very successfully, people's logocentric belief in or desire for a pure, inherent self-identity. Since most of O'Connor's stories are concerned somehow with the issue of identity, I will treat, in this chapter, only the most representative ones and approach them, again, mostly in terms of signification. The stories I will discuss fall into two groups, with "Good Country People" and "A View of the Woods" forming one group; "Everything that Rises Must Converge," "Judgment Day," "Greenleaf," "Revelation," and "The Artificial Nigger" making up the other. In the first two stories, the protagonists stubbornly insist that their names signify their identities (their "true selves"), and they fight ferociously, though in vain, to maintain that impossible one-to-one relationship. The stories of the second group, on the other hand, satirize the people in the South who, amidst the collapse of Southern culture and its signification system, try to hold on to their disappearing "superior" identity. To understand better my argument, a

brief review of the modern sense of identity is helpful and necessary.

"Since the era of speculative Idealism," asserts Martin Heidegger, "it is no longer possible for thinking to represent unity of identity as mere sameness, and disregard the mediation that prevails in unity" (15). Instead of sameness, identity, as Georg Gadamer suggests, is "the identity of identity and difference. Everything alive is bound by the 'other,' the world around it in the constant change of assimilation and secretion" (58). That is, in the modern world, we--as individuals, a community, or even a nation--can no longer live in isolation from others. Rather, in this unprecedented interdependent world, we are constantly being shaped and reshaped by the other--the non-self. All cultures assimilate elements from others. Every nation's economy is interwoven with another's. That is why no one today can define clearly what being American really means. That is also why we no longer have a pure American economy (we have almost no pure American products; what we often have are products made abroad in the name of an American company or, sometimes, vice versa). On a philosophical level, without this difference within identity ("the ontic ontological difference" in Heidegger's terms and "the differ<u>a</u>nce in Derrida's theory), human thinking would, as Atkins points out, be impossible: "in the movement of thought, elements are never fully present because they must always refer to something other than 'themselves'" (17).

But in general, despite the inherent difference within the self, we still tend to repress consciousness of the other so as to maintain the traditional concept of a pure, inherent self-identity, because the idea of identity gives us a sense of security and control.

Hulga of the story "Good Country People" serves as a good illustration of the point. Her original name (given by her mother) was "Joy," but she changes it to "Hulga" because she does not think that "Joy" signifies her "identity"--a handicapped person with an artificial leg. To her, the ugly sound of "Hulga" better fits her deformed body, and more important, the name "Hulga" reminds her of the power she desires: she associates the name with the "ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called" (CW 266-67). In short, she deems the new name an accurate signifier of her self--an ugly outside with a powerful inside. This desire for identity between names and the named is not new; it can be traced to the ancient Greeks. Cratylus in Plato's The Dialogues, for example, firmly believes that names "are natural and not conventional," and that the names and the named are identical, for "he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them" (I:323, 383). Although Socrates does not totally agree with Cratylus, his desire for this identical relationship is no less: he tells Cratylus, "I quite agree with you that words should as far as possible resemble things" (I: 382). To rid us of a

desire so deeply rooted in Western tradition is thus no easy task.[1]

In renaming herself, Hulga also attempts to separate herself from her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, whose speech is full of platitudes, and who, she believes, knows only the surfaces of life. She thinks that she is so above her mother that she needs to teach her about the truth of life:

> To her own mother she had said--without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full--"Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!" (CW 268)

In accusing her mother of not seeing what she is not, Hulga exposes the very problem she herself has--seeing herself superior to others. Here and elsewhere, she fills her speech with scholars' names to show her different identity as a Ph.D, and as such, she considers herself a person of profound understanding: she "had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition [the artificial leg], she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (CW 268). But the emergence of Manley Pointer, a Bible salesman, soon crushes the "Hulga" which she has created for herself.

With words like "Lady, I have come to speak serious things" (CW 270), Pointer appears simple and sincere to Hulga. Eager to identify the signifier with the signified, she fails to realize that all his words and his seeming innocence are empty signifiers that do not constitute a self. Consequently, she "decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence" (CW 281). She is so happy that she wants to shape this innocent mind with her "deeper understanding of life" (CW 276). After some casual contact, she also believes that the boy really loves her, and she is so sure of his love that she fancies Pointer has bought the new hat he wears on their date particularly "for the occasion" (CW 277). Yet this date, both their first and last, brings all her fantasies to an end. On that day, when they are walking in the field, the boy tricks her into climbing into the loft of a barn they see:

> It was a large two-story barn, cool and dark inside. The boy pointed up the ladder that led into the loft and said, "It's too bad we can't go up there."
>
> "Why can't we?" she asked.
>
> "Your leg," he said reverently.
>
> The girl gave him a contemptuous look and putting both hands on the ladder, she climbed it while he stood below, apparently awestruck. (CW 279)

As soon as they are in the loft, Pointer begins to fulfil his scheme of taking her wooden leg away. He kisses her and declares that he loves her. At first, Hulga does not respond to his show of "love," but she soon gives in. At his request, she not only says that she loves him but also shows him her artificial leg, something she has showed no one else before. Moreover, she demonstrates to him how to take the leg off and lets him do it.

After he has the leg in his possession, he puts it in his valise. As he is doing so, Hulga is surprised to discover that the valise contains "only two Bibles in it," and, more important, that the Bibles are fakes: "He took one of these [the two Bibles] out and opened it. It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whisky . . ." (CW 282). With "I hope you don't think . . .that I believe in that crap [meaning Christianity]!" Pointer walks away with Hulga's wooden leg, revealing his real intention and, in turn, proving Hulga to be a truly naive, superficial person like her mother. Frederick Asals offers an excellent elaboration of this point:

> . . . the girl has not, as she thinks, escaped her mother and her mother's values: the entire identity of "Hulga" is built on them. Her academic nihilism is riddled with such cliches as, "we are all damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's kind of salvation." If the language

> is more sophisticated than any at Mrs. Hopewell's command, it is no less trite, and the smug self-deception underlying it ("I don't have illusions") is, if anything, greater. ("The Double" 61).

In making all those nihilistic remarks, Hulga, like Haze in Wise Blood, is really driving for super truth, a truth she claims only she knows. But as it turns out, such truth is no more than self-deception. A victim of such deception, Hulga pays a very dear price: at the end of the story, she is left alone in the loft of the barn without her artificial leg.

Like Hulga, Mark Fortune in "A View of the Woods" also insists on a one-to-one correspondence between his name and his self-identity, and he clearly distinguishes himself from others, even from his daughter and daughter-in-law, the Pitts. Though he has permitted the Pitts family to live on his estate, he will not allow them to name their children after him: he tells them that if they "couple his name with Pitts he would put them off the place" (CW 527). But he changes his mind when Mary Fortune comes: he "suggested himself that they name her Mary Fortune," simply because "she bore his unmistakable resemblance" (CW 527). To him, a Fortune's face means a Fortune's reality, and, as such, it requires a Fortune's name.[2]

Unable to see any difference between appearance and reality, old Fortune always flatters himself that Mary is a pure Fortune. So he fancies that Mary resembles him not

only in looks but also on the inside: "but she was like him on the inside too. She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive" (CW 526). He is so eager to see Mary as a pure Fortune that he will not look at her in any other way. As the narrator comments, "The fact that Mary Fortune was Pitts too was something he ignored . . . . He liked to think of her as being thoroughly of his clay" (CW 528). Later, however, the old man and his grand-daughter get into an argument over a strip of land between their house and the road: while the old man wants to sell it, Mary wants to keep it as the children's playground. As old Fortune begins to sense differences between him and Mary, he feels as if there are certain Pitts characteristics in the girl, a fact he cannot tolerate:

> "Are you a Fortune," he said [to Mary], "or are you a Pitts? Make up your mind."
>
> Her voice was loud and positive and belligerent. "I'm Mary-Fortune-Pitts," she said.
>
> "Well I," he shouted, "am PURE Fortune!" (CW 541)

It is no accident that O'Connor capitalizes the whole word "PURE." She does so, I believe, to highlight the old man's obsession with the idea of pure identity.

To Mark Fortune, Mary can only be either a Fortune or a Pitts, with no mediation in between, i.e., no "Mary-Fortune-Pitts" as Mary presents it. So, when Mary fights with him

at the end of the story, he is totally puzzled and extremely infuriated. He simply cannot stand "the face that was his own but had dared to call itself Pitts," and he is determined to annihilate it (CW 545). But in destroying Mary, he also kills himself--he dies of a heart attack caused obviously by the exhausting fight he has with her. Most ironically, not until his death does the old man seem to learn that there is no identical relationship between a Fortune face and a Fortune person: "The old man looked up into his own image [Mary's face]. It was triumphant and hostile. 'You been whipped,' it said, 'by me,' and then it added, bearing down on each word, 'and I'm PURE Pitts'" (CW 541). In this final imagined scene, the old man, for the first time, allows his own image to call itself a Pitts. But the price of this lesson is too high for him to pay.

The protagonists of the five stories to be discussed are also obsessed with their identities, the identities they and their ancestors have invented for themselves in the process of the creation of their culture--American Southern culture. With traditional culture disintegrating, or becoming "fractured" in O'Connor's word (MM 140), people's established identities are also rapidly vanishing. As explained in the earlier chapters, each culture has its own signification systems, which, in turn, sustain its values and beliefs, including people's identities. So the collapse of traditional Southern culture has also caused a lack of referential meaning in the South. For example, a white face

no longer necessarily signifies a traditional white identity, and a higher birth no longer guarantees a higher class status. But many people, such as the protagonists of our stories, will not accept what is happening and are still attempting, often desperately, to maintain their crumbled signification structure so as to hold on to their cherished identities.

In "Everything that Rises Must Converge," both Julian and his mother battle very hard, though in different ways, to keep their fading status as the descendants of a once renowned and wealthy family--Julian's mother tells him his "great-grand father was a former governor of the state" and his "grandfather was a prosperous landowner" (CW 487). To keep her status, the mother participates in the "Y reducing class," and more important, she "was one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves and who had a son who had been to college" (CW 486). She wears the hat and gloves because, to her, they are the symbol of her class: "She was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity" (CW 489). Once, however, when she is in a bus, a black woman with a little boy gets on wearing a hat identical to her own, a sign reminding her that the black woman and she now share equal status. Yet the mother will not acknowledge the fact. She denies the implied relationship between them as a comic impossibility by imaging the woman as a juggling monkey: she feels "as if the

woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat" (CW 496). She supposes that the black woman stole her hat because she simply cannot imagine the symbol of her "wealthy" and "dignified" white identity on a black woman. To defend her "superiority," she then tries to patronize the black woman by offering her little boy a "shining new penny" when they get off the bus. Outraged at her condescension, the woman batters her with a huge handbag. Shocked by the woman's act, Julian's mother then suffers a stroke.

Her death symbolizes the impossibility of retaining the traditional white identity and teaches a dear lesson to Julian, who, as John F. Desmond puts it, "is just as elitist as his mother, just as proudly isolationist in his stance toward the real historical process, though he protests that it is only she who needs to face reality" (70). Julian's relationship to his mother is very much like Hulga's to hers. As Hulga is a "sophisticated" copy of her mother, so is Julian of his, despite the efforts of each to think otherwise. On the surface, Julian despises his mother's nostalgia for the family's past. Whenever she talks about the mansion the family used to possess, he reproves her and calls the mansion "that decayed mansion," but, as the narrator tells us,

> it [the mansion] remained in his mind as his mother had known it. It appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then

> wandering through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him--whereas she had hardly know the difference. (CW 488)

The fact that the mansion appears regularly only in Julian's dreams is very interesting; it illustrates Freud's theory that the thing that a person considers as the other (non-self) and suppresses in himself will eventually resurface, often in dreams, as his very self. It is what Freud would call the "deferred" self. Consciously, Julian may despise his mother for longing for the past--the elite status--but deep in his mind, he emulates her in what she yearns for, as is shown clearly in the above passage. In fact, whenever Julian does something as a revolt against his mother, he exposes himself to be merely a duplicate of her in a slightly different form. To protest his mother's racist attitude, Julian decides to make some black friends, but only a special type: "some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer;" yet, as we are told, "he had never been successful" in his design because, to his disappointment, the two "distinguished-looking" blacks he tried to become acquainted with turned out to be an undertaker and a street

gambler (<u>CW</u> 494). His revolt is thus only a modified drive for the high status his mother wishes to maintain.

Like Julian and his mother, Tanner of "Judgment Day" also insists in vain on maintaining his vanishing wealthy white identity. Once a land owner, he wants people not only to recognize his white face but also to treat him as a white master. When he first met Coleman, whom he was to turn into his servant, Tanner made him a pair of eye glasses from a piece of bark and some hay wire, and he then asked him to look through the glasses:

> ". . . .What you see through those glasses?"
>
> "See a man."
>
> "What kind of a man?"
>
> "See the man make theseyer glasses."
>
> "Is he white of black?"
>
> "He white!" the negro said as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it. "Yessuh, he white!" he said.
>
> "Well, you treat him like he was white," Tanner said. (<u>CW</u> 684)

In the following forty years Tanner made sure Coleman followed his words and established a firm master-servant relationship with him. In his words, Tanner has made "a monkey" out of Coleman, and he will not let the reverse happen: "You make a monkey of one of them [blacks] and he jumps on your back and stays there for life, but let one make a monkey out of you and all you can do is kill him or

disappear" (CW 684). Later, he does disappear, though very unwillingly and feeling very shocked, after he has lost his land.

Tanner is so preoccupied with his supposed status as a white man that, even after he has lost his land, he refuses to work for the black doctor who has "usurped" his position. He will not work for the black because, he tells the doctor, "The government ain't got around yet to forcing the white folks to work for the colored," and because he does not want to be "a nigger's white nigger" (CW 684-85). In order not to work for black people, Tanner goes to stay with his daughter in an apartment in New York City, but he soon finds himself in a much worse situation: he is totally deprived of the identity he is used to. Yet, like Julian's mother, he still will not give up his white "superiority." When a black has moved into the apartment next to his daughter's, he tries to approach him as he would Coleman but he is disappointed. The black neighbor will not even answer him. He is totally puzzled, telling the black: "I was getting along with niggers before you were born" (CW 688). The irony is that he does not seem to realize that the relationship he had with Coleman is no longer what most whites and blacks have now.

Tanner becomes so outraged at the black's attitude that he flares up, telling the latter sarcastically: "'And you ain't black,' he said 'And I ain't white'" (CW 690). By this sarcasm, Tanner wishes to place the black in his

"proper" place and keep the difference between them. But, despite his resistance to being merged with blacks, Tanner is physically (and symbolically) fused with them when the black neighbor kills him by thrusting his head and arms through the spokes of the banister. "This violent convergence with a hostile Negro on the physical level," as McFarland suggests, "brings out, on the spiritual level, a convergence with 'otherness'--what is not oneself, and especially what is feared and despised as alien and inferior" (70). The biggest irony is that Tanner, even right before his death, still lives on his imagined identity. After being in the city for a while and realizing that he is worse-off there, he decides to go back to the country, to Coleman, specifically, with whom he hopes he can preserve his master position. His wish to go back to Coleman is so strong that he is determined that, if he dies on his way home, his dead body should only be turned over to Coleman: "he had written a note and pinned it in his pocket. IF FOUND DEAD SHIP EXPRESS COLLECT TO COLEMAN PARRUM, CORINETH, GEORGIA" (CW 676).

Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" suffers the same fate for insisting on her superior identity. Also a land owner, she fears the invasion of her space by the Greenleafs (her tenant's family), especially their two prosperous sons who have their own growing farms and who form a sharp contrast to her two "degenerate" good-for-nothing sons. While the two Greenleaf sons not only have their own farms but also

are married, each with three children, neither of her sons has a successful career (they do not even care about her farm at all), and neither is married. And, what is worse, while Wesley, her younger son, is physically weak, Scofield, the older one and an insurance salesman, seems, to her, deficient in intelligence and poor at business: "She would not have minded his selling insurance if he had sold a nicer kind but he sold the kind that only Negroes buy" (CW 504). Hence, she is constantly fretted by the prospect of the Greenleafs taking over her place. She fears: "When she was dead and gone from overwork and worry, the Greenleafs, healthy and thriving, would be just ready to begin draining Scofield and Wesley" (CW 509).

The invasion of her place by the Greenleafs is symbolized by a bull which belongs to the two Greenleaf brothers and which has run onto her estate. The story opens with the bull chewing, one night, by the window of Mrs. May's bedroom. She tries to drive it away as an unwelcome guest--as a non-self--but she fails. So the whole night, she is bothered, even in dreams, by this invading other which, she fears, is coming to take over the place:

> She had been conscious in her sleep of a steady rhythmic chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and

> now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs. (CW 501)

The bull in her dream eats only her and her family, but not the Greenleafs, because, to Mrs. May, the bull is the very symbol of the Greenleafs. It is the Greenleafs who are taking away her place step by step (rhythmically like the bull's chewing). She is determined to stop the invasion by stopping the bull. What follows in the story is her desperate struggle to drive this bull, this terrible other, from her farm.

Again she fails, and what is more ironic, at the end of the story, the bull, a symbol of the other (the Greenleafs), finds its referent, instead, in her--the bull buries its horns into her bosom, completely destroying her dream of maintaining her distinction from the other. She seems to have learned the lesson, for "she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (CW 525). As she is whispering her new intimation to the animal, she seems to have fused with Mr. Greenleaf, her truly feared other. This is suggested by the inserted clause "when Mr. Greenleaf reached her." As it is put in the sentence, the clause is very vague, making it seem that Mrs. May is not just fusing with the bull but also with Mr.

Greenleaf who also "reached her" when the bull buried its horns into her.[3]

Just as Mrs. May's dream for her identity is crushed, so is disrupted Mrs. Turpin's (in "Revelation") illusion of an identity between, on the one hand, respectable behavior, industry, and cleanness, and, on the other hand, a state of spiritual superiority. Mrs. Turpin always feels proud of being a hardworking person and differentiates herself from not only blacks but also those whites whom she considers "trash." She flatters herself that God "had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! [though we know otherwise, for she is unusually over-weight.] He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said" (CW 642). And she thinks that she and her family are so clean that their pigs are cleaner than other people's children: "Our hogs are not dirty and they don't stink. . . . They are cleaner than some children I've seen" (CW 638). She is so concerned with the differences between people that she often "occupied herself at night naming the classes of people" (CW 636).

Her sense of a superior identity is not challenged until she encounters an "ugly" girl who strikes her with a book and tries to strangle her. They are in a doctor's office, waiting to see the doctor. During the whole time, Mrs. Turpin keeps bragging about herself, her family, and her knowledge and understanding of the world, though her talk often betrays that she is not much different from the

woman whom she deems "white trash." For example, when the "trash" woman suggests that all blacks should be sent back to Africa, Mrs. Turpin "refutes" her, "There's a heap of things worse than a nigger," but, when she further explains the reason why black people should stay in this country, she reveals herself to be no less a racist: "'Nooo,' they're going to stay here where they can go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color. That's what they all want to do, every one of them, improve their color" (CW 640, 641). The girl becomes so tired of Mrs. Turpin's complacent platitudes that she charges at her and calls her "wart hog from hell." Astounded, "Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh" (CW 645, 646).

She is shocked because she cannot believe that the hog, an image that she once thought stood only for the dirty or ugly, would be applied to her: "'I am not,' she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From hell.' But the denial had no force. The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation" (CW 647). The next day, for the first time, Mrs. Turpin will not take her black neighbors' compliment about her being "sweet," and "pretty," but even then, she tries to maintain her difference: "You could never say anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but no with them" (CW 650). More significant, at the end of the story when she seems to have acquired, in reverie, a

vision of her marching to heaven in the same procession with blacks and "white trash," she still will not give up her separate identity from them:

> There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bring up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud [her husband], had always had a little of everything and the God-given with to use it right. (CW 654)

Even being left at the end of the procession does not seem to bother her, since she is pleased that she and her like are together, not mixed with the other kinds. But the fact that she and her people are the last to go to heaven denies or puts into question the existence of a correspondence she supposes between her hardworking, clean people and their superior spirituality.

"The Artificial Nigger" exposes the impossibility of a pure, inherent self-identity in a most intriguing way. The issue is treated on a double level. On one level, we have Mr. Head try, in vain, to distinguish himself from his grandson Nelson, and, on another level, we have both Mr. Head and Nelson discover that they are not, as they used to think, above black people. Based upon his age, Mr. Head

firmly believes in his superior wisdom and knowledge, worldly and spiritual, in relation to Nelson. Because the boy seems too prideful and never listens to him, he decides to teach the boy a lesson by taking him on a trip to the city in which the boy was born but from which he was taken after his birth and to which he has never returned. Imagining himself as "Vergil summoned" to teach "Dante," the old man considers the trip a "moral mission":

> "The day is going to come," Mr. Head prophesied, "when you'll find you ain't as smart as you think you are." He had been thinking about this trip for several months but it was for the most part in moral terms that he conceived it. It was to be a lesson that the boy would never forget. (<u>CW</u> 211)

But from the start, the boy will not see it that way. When the old man tries to establish his position as a "guide" by telling the boy that he has been to the city twice, the boy counters, "If you ain't been there in fifteen years, how you know you'll be able to find you way about?" (<u>CW</u> 211). The boy turns out to be right, for the old man loses his way not long after they enter the city.

But even in this alarming situation, Mr. Head still will not forget his guiding role and is eager to teach the boy a lesson. When, tired of walking aimlessly around, they stop to rest and Nelson dozes briefly, the old man hides himself round a corner, hoping to frighten the boy when he wakes up. Startled upon wakening, Nelson dashes off into

the street with such speed that the old man loses him. When he finally finds the boy, Mr. Head is stunned to see the boy, terror-driven, sitting on the ground with an elderly woman, who is yelling at him, "you've broken my ankle and your daddy'll pay for it" (CW 226). Seeing his grandfather, Nelson rushes to him, but to his great surprise and dismay, the old man denies knowing him. This denial, so unbelievable to everyone on the scene, also makes Mr. Head feel disgraced, and this disgrace, in turn, destroys the intellectually superior and morally dignified identity he had held for himself. So, ironically, in denying Nelson without, the old man in fact acknowledges Nelson the other within, since the latter is, as Preston M. Browning well puts it, "the living embodiment of Mr. Head's intellectual pride and moral boasting" (63-64).

What is destroyed on this trip to the city is not just Mr. Head's imagined superiority relative to Nelson but also the two's shared condescension toward black people. On the train to the city, they ran into a black family passing through their aisle. While Nelson, having not seen a black before, did not recognize that they were black people and paid little attention to them, Mr. Head looked at them as if he were seeing a circus show. Then Mr. Head laughed at the boy for not recognizing blacks, which humiliated Nelson and made him hate black people, and more important, "he understood now why his grandfather disliked them" (CW 216). It is here we learn explicitly of the old man's racist

attitude toward blacks. The superior position he and the boy feel they hold relative to black people disappears, however, when they are in the city where, as we know, they lose their way. They turn to blacks for help, for direction, an experience that greatly changes Nelson. After a black lady tells him the way, Nelson "suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face." (CW 223). This apparently strange feeling of his is, however, very significant because it suggests that Nelson now acknowledges his connection with the formerly considered non-self, the "other."

Both Mr. Head's and Nelson's understanding of their undeniable connections with the other is reinforced when they encounter a battered plaster statue of a black on a fence. The experience they have just had enables them to look at the "nigger" in a new light. The miserable looking "nigger" seems to them an indictment of their inflated pride and unfounded superiority because, as the "nigger" is artificial, the image of blacks as inferior and white as superior is also man-made, made especially by conceited people like themselves. Staring at the statue, a signifier supposed to stand only for the "inferior" blacks, they seem to find themselves in it--the frail and fallible men of all time and all races. Being frail and fallible creatures, all human beings are connected, including--besides Mr. Head and Nelson--Hulga, Fortune, Julian and his mother, Tanner, Mrs.

Turpin, and, of course, all of us who share an identity in non-identity. In addition, with the hat, a symbol of Julian's mother's status, put on a black woman, Tanner's land repossessed by the black doctor, the horns of the Greenleafs' bull buried in Mrs. May's body, the image of hog imposed on Mrs. Turpin, and finally the "artificial nigger" symbolically connected with Mr. Head and his grandson, we have certainly seen a vivid parade of the total collapse of signification in the South and, in a larger sense, in the modern world as a whole.

Notes

1. For example, even O'Connor, who is here satirizing Hulga for harboring such a desire, is not immune to it. O'Connor's position on naming is, of course, not easy to define. Once, in answering "a Professor of English" who inquired about what some of her characters' names meant, she wrote, "As for Mrs. May [protagonist of "Greenleaf"], I must have named her that because I knew some English teacher would write and ask me why. I think you folks sometimes strain the soup too thin" (HB 582). But, on an earlier occasion, she reproved Ben Griffin, another professor, for misnaming Motes by correcting him: "Motes, not Moates" (HB 89). This correction is significant, for, as A. R. Coulthard suggests, "O'Connor was never finicky about spelling, so she must have had the name's symbolic connection with the biblical mote in mind when she insisted on its correct spelling" ("Names" 97). A look at some of her characters' names may also reveal O'Connor's ambivalence on the issue. While she seems to play with some of her characters' names, making them sound ironic (such as Farebrother in "The Comfort of Home" and Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First), she painstakingly names many of her characters, as Coulthard demonstrates, to symbolize what she intends these names to (such as Misfit in "A Goodman Is Hard to Find " and Hawkes in Wise Blood).

2. Fortune's change of mind here reminds us of Parker's on the use of his own name, a case that further

exemplifies people's belief in the identity between names and the named. Parker's given name is Obadiah (an Old Testament Prophet's name meaning "the Lord servant") and Elihu (who appears in the Book of Job as a God follower). But as an atheist, Parker never used the name (he only uses the initial O.E.): "He had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only to the files of the navy and the government. . . . When the name leaked out of the navy files, Parker narrowly missed killing the man who used it" (CW 662). He would not even tell Sarah his name when he first met her. After her insistence on knowing it, he merely whispered it into her ear, and he did not forget to warn her not to use it: "If you call me that aloud, I'll bust your head open" (CW 662). Parker would not use this name because he did not think that it signified his true identity, an atheist. But at the end of the story, as Coulthard points out, "when Parker identifies himself by his spiritual name for the first time [though this identity is questionable as I explained in last chapter], 'he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque'" ("Names" 98); and he uses the name, for the first time, when he is requesting his wife to let him into the house. Yet we remember that his new identity is but his illusion--he is driven away from the house like a baby.

3. What has been said about Mrs. May can also be said of Mrs. McIntyre of "The Displaced Person," and Mrs. Cope of

"A Circle in the Fire." Like Mrs. May, both are land owners who try in vain to maintain their crumbling identities. To avoid repetition, I am not discussing them here; they will be treated in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

LANGUAGE AS A GAME AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WORD AND THE WORLD

Towards the end of the story "A Later Encounter with the Enemy," General Sash, a one-hundred-year-old veteran of the Civil War, finds himself attacked by the commencement speaker's words "that meant nothing to him": "He felt that . . . the words were coming at him like musket fire" that he could not escape (CW 260, 261). Finally, he is, in a way, killed by these empty words. Interestingly, Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" also imagines the conflict between her and Mr. Guizac, an immigrant, as "a war of words," and she sees "the Polish words and the English words coming at each other . . . grappling with each other" (CW 300). In her fiction, O'Connor touches repeatedly on the issue of "words," or, more accurately, "the war of words." She is, I deem, trying to demonstrate that people's excessive reliance on words has confined them within a verbal universe where words do, in fact, replace things and thoughts replace actions. In revealing how human beings are trapped in language, she, in turn, exhibits to us the difference between the word and the world that we tend to ignore. In this chapter, I will elaborate my argument by examining the

following stories: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "A Later Encounter with the Enemy," "The Displaced Person," "A Circle in the Fire," " A Stroke of Good Fortune," and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

Language, again, is a system of difference that deals with relationship rather than absolute reality. In other words, language functions merely to help us constitute our own sense of reality. As Hawkes illustrates with regard to bourgeois discourse, "it [bourgeois discourse] <u>shapes</u> reality in its own image, acting as the institutionalized carrier, transmitter or encoder of the bourgeois way of life" (107). Any signifying structure, Hawkes further explains, is thus a system "which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate its sense of its own being: i.e, the very fabric of its system of 'meaning'" (131). Hence, there is no truly objective or one-to-one relationship between the word and the world. Instead, there is always a disparity between the two, forever urging us to narrow it and, simultaneously, forever thwarting our efforts to do so. As a result, people tend to work only with language while believing they are dealing with reality.

To illustrate the point, let us first turn to "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." What the protagonist, the grandmother, says in the story has little to do with reality. Language is merely a word game she plays. At the beginning of the story, the grandmother, who wants to visit "her connections in east Tennessee" rather than go to

Florida (her son's intended destiny), never says a single word about her true intention but talks, among other things, about the dangers of meeting the Misfit en route to Florida so as to frighten the family into changing their minds (CW 137). Later, to get the family to visit an old house on a remote farm, she even tells them of "a secret panel in the house," which, she knows, has never existed (CW 143). In addition, in order to prevent the Misfit from killing her family, she repeatedly calls him "a good man" when she knows him otherwise. Throughout the story, the grandmother develops, in Richard Pearce's words, "a language of cliches to disguise and control reality . . . " (79). To the grandmother, what count are words or other signifiers like dress and looks. Her notion of goodness or good men is based completely on conventional terms--the decorum that the South boasts of.

When the family sets out on the road, the grandmother is dressed in sharp contrast to her daughter-in-law who "still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief":

> the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. (CW 138)

She puts on this fancy dress because she wants people to recognize that she is "a lady," not some unworthy woman. With this mentality, she collapses the gap between the signifier and the signified, equating appearance with reality. After only a casual talk, she calls Red Sam, a roadside cafe owner, "a good man." Like the grandmother, he also lives on words, and as soon as the family enters the cafe, Red Sam and the grandmother start a chat made up of platitudes:

> "These days you don't know who to trust," he said. "Ain't that the truth?"
>
> "People are certainly not nice like they used to be," said the grandmother.
>
> "Two fellers come in here last week," Red Sammy said, "driving a Chrysler. It was a [sic] old beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?"
>
> "Because you're a good man!" the grandmother said at once.
>
> "Yes'm, I suppose so," Red Sam said as if he were struck with this answer. (CW 141-42)

The dialogue well exemplifies man's total reliance on words. On the one hand, the grandmother bases her judgment of Sam merely on the story he told her. Red Sam, on the other hand, makes his living, in part, by playing with language:

he talks to the grandmother obviously to win her, a customer's, trust so as to keep his business--his life-line. The logic of his talk appears to further suggest that language is the same as the world, for it is the only thing by which we know people. Sam starts by saying that we do not know "who to trust," and that, according to him, is truth. But by telling the grandmother the wonderful things he said he did, he is implying, perhaps unconsciously, that the one way to know "who to trust" is listening to what people tell you. In the grandmother and Red Sam, we see clearly humanity as slaves/manipulators of words.

The grandmother further exhibits her dependence on looks and words when she boast to the Misfit, "I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell " (CW 147; emphasis added). The grandmother's dependence on looks is too obvious to miss here, for the Misfit exhibits all the conventional decorum. With "silver-rimmed spectacles," he has "a scholarly look" (CW 146). He is extremely polite even when he asks the grandmother's son and his family to allow themselves to be shot: "Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?" And he even apologies for not wearing a shirt in front of the ladies (CW 148). Thus, "his actions," as Dorothy Tuck McFarland points out, "demonstrate a complete lack of essential connection between conventional behavior and some fundamental standard of good and evil that is assumed to lie behind it" (19). In this sense, the Misfit, I would argue, serves to satirize and

shock people who, like the grandmother, attempt to identify words with objective reality.

O'Connor even has the Misfit indict our total dependence on words. The Misfit twice tells the grandmother that his conviction was not based on any specific evidence of his committing a crime but on "the papers" the authority had on him: "they could prove I had committed one [crime] because they had the papers on me" (CW 151). To survive in such a system, the Misfit goes on to say, you have to "get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you'll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right" (CW 151). The Misfit's statement exposes our faith in signature/writing and our presumption that signature/ writing, as signifiers, can preserve the presence of the signified--events that took place in the past. But, as Derrida and other deconstructionists have convincingly demonstrated, the temporal and spatial gap inherent in the signifying system may never be bridged; the signifying structure always involves a trace from the signifier to the signified, a trace that seldom succeeds in locating the signified.[1]

What the Misfit says about our obsession with "papers" depicts our society, whose function depends totally on words--the word of religion or the word of the law--which are man-made systems that govern what we do. People

everywhere fill the world with cliches and platitudes. For example, when the Misfit is killing her family, the grandmother does nothing but urge the Misfit again and again to pray, claiming that if he prays, he will be saved. In this sense, argues Preston M. Browning, the Misfit "would seem to be a kind of saint _manque_, cutting through the cliche-ridden, heedless lives of the people he murders to radical questions of depth, of spirit, of the reality of good and evil as ontological entities" (58). But the irony is that, while the Misfit accuses others of using empty language, he does, too. As mentioned earlier, when he prepares to kill the grandmother's family, he politely "requests" them to follow him, and more important, he advocates signing whatever we do. He proves no exception to the human dependence on words.

"A Late Encounter with the Enemy" provides, in a different way, another example of the human tendency to focus only on language--on the signifier--and to take it for whatever we would like it to be. In the story, Sally Poker Sash, a sixty-two-year old who is graduating from college after going to summer school for twenty six years, wants her one-hundred-year old grandfather to attend her graduation ceremony as a symbol of "what all was behind her" (_CW_ 252). She makes him sit on the stage to stand "for the old tradition! Dignity! Honor! Courage!" (_CW_ 253). But the old man is in fact a floating signifier that stands for nothing. Though known as General Tennessee Flintrock Sash,

he is in reality, as the narrator reveals, George Poker Sash, who had been only a major. He has no memory of what his granddaughter wants his to signify: "The past and the future were the same thing to him, one forgotten and the other not remembered" (CW 257). What the old man knows and enjoys are ironically "parades with Miss America and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products," products of commercialism (CW 252).

Moreover, the old man is employed to represent something that perhaps has never existed. The South's so-called "glory," "dignity," and "honor" are primarily a myth Southerners have invented. What Sally Poker Sash and the commencement speakers attempt by using the old man is to perpetuate the myth so as to maintain their own sense of being--their dreamed glory. The speaker associates the old man with "Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee," but these words mean "nothing to him [the old man]" (CW 260). What is going on is thus a word game to the old man, symbolized as a game of warfare: "the words," we are told, "were coming at him like musket fire" (CW 261). Being part of the game, General Sash himself becomes a "word" his granddaughter plays with, a word signifying, however, nothing. O'Connor makes the message extremely clear at the end of the story by having Sally Poker's Boy Scout nephew wheel about the general, who is now dead, bump him "at high speed down a flagstone path," and wait "with the corpse, in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine" (CW 261-62). With his corpse set

against the Cola machine, which enjoys great popularity, the old man's position as a floating signifier becomes extremely apparent: a body supposed to signify past "glory" rests side by side with a symbol of a totally commercialized world. This denouement is of great significance because it suggests that the old man and the glorious history of the South he is meant to symbolize are not much different from coca-cola--they are just two of the many products men have made. The story thus makes it clear that the enemy of the old man, and of mankind as a whole, is language--its often meaningless words.

Like the grandmother, Sally Sash and the commencement speakers, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley (McIntyre's hired help) in "The Displaced Person" also play with language to uphold their vision of reality. When Mr. Guizac, a Polish immigrant, comes to work for McIntyre, he brings with him the qualities and values of advancing capitalism--industry, technical skills, and efficiency:

> Three weeks later Mr. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley drove to the cane bottom to see Mr. Guizac start to operate the silage cutter, a new machine that Mrs. McIntyre had just bought because she said, for the first time, she had somebody who could operate it. Mr. Guizac could drive a tractor, use the rotary hay-baler, the silage cutter, the combine, the lets mill, or any other machine she had on the place. He was an expert mechanic, a

> carpenter, and a mason. He was thrifty and energetic. Mrs. McIntyre said she figured he would save her twenty dollars a month on repair bills alone. She said getting him was the best day's work she had ever done in her life. (CW 292)

Also, Mr. Guizac can get the barn cleaned by "only nine-thirty," in contrast to Mr. Shortley who "had never got anything washed until eleven" (CW 310). Hence, before long, Guizac becomes a threat to the Shortleys. Facing this challenge, Mrs. Shortley, who used to think religious service merely "a social occasion providing the opportunity to sing" (CW 294), begins "to read her Bible with a new attention" (CW 300). She starts to despise the Poles for having a religion that "had not been reformed" (CW 296), and she talks about her sympathy "for niggers and poor folks," and even claims she has always had such concern for them (CW 298). Moreover, she reads the Priest as the devil who brought Mr. Guizac, "the Whore of Babylon" (CW 301). But all her references to religion are merely a game of words she plays to defend her and her husband's shaky position against Guizac's invasion.

That is why she images the battle between her (her family) and Guizac as a war of words:

> She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just

> words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. (CW 300)

In fact, words are her only means to fight back and defend herself. She knows that with the advancement of the Pole, her husband will soon lose his job. Yet she will not accept the fact. She defines displaced persons in literal terms: "It means they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go . . ." (CW 290). With this definition, she tries to deny the possibility of historical displacement, something her family is confronted with. But Guizac's industry and efficiency soon defeat her empty rhetoric: after overhearing that they are to be fired, she and her family immediately leave the farm (CW 302-3).

Mrs. McIntyre has her own linguistic reality or, in Spivey's words, her "artificial stasis," which O'Connor aims to deconstruct (208). At the top of Mrs. McIntyre's world stand herself and the other "good whites;" below them are the "white trash" like the Shortleys'; at the bottom lie the "niggers." The arrival of the Guizacs does not seem, at the beginning, to threaten her world order; rather, it strengthens it by bringing to her farm efficiency and economy. During this period, she taps on capitalist discourse, talking to her farmhand mostly about money, the

need to work, and the law of survival. She tells her people, "Times are changing . . . . It's getting so full of people that only the smart thrifty energetic ones are going to survive" (CW 307). She explains to her black help why they have to work hard:

> "What you colored people don't realize," she said, "is I'm the one around her who holds all the strings together. If you don't work, I don't make any money and I can't pay you. You're all dependent on me but you each and every one act like the shoe is on the other foot." (CW 308)

But when she later learns of Guizac's plan to bring over his cousin by marrying her to Sulk (a black farmhand), she is shocked, less, however, by the prospect of an interracial marriage than by the Pole's growing economic independence and potential to take over her place: "One night she dreamed that Mr. Guizac and his family were moving into her house and she was moving in with Mr. Shortley" [who has come back to her after his wife's death] (CW 322).

After this, Mrs. McIntyre switches her discourse, and starts to speak about Christian morality and patriotism. She accuses Guizac of being a bad Christian: "'I cannot understand how a man calls himself a Christian,' she said, 'could bring a poor innocent girl over here and marry her to something like that" (CW 314). And when the priest asks her not to fire Guizac, she says: "'I don't have any obligation to him [Guizac]. My obligation is to the people who've done

something for this country, not to ones who've come over to take advantages of what they can get . . ." (CW 320). Yet all these words, like those of Mrs. Shortley, are empty signifiers she plays with in order to dismiss the Pole. Though her word-game helps her ignore the facts, it fails to save her from displacement. She finally loses not only her farm but also her speech organ: "her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice altogether" (CW 326).

Mrs. Cope of "A Circle in the Fire" poses as another Mrs. McIntyre. Also a land owner, she treats her farm as if it were an Eden and herself its holy defender. She is seen again and again pulling weeds and grass around her house: "she worked at the weed and nut grass as if they were evil set directly to destroy the place" (CW 232). Acting as if she were God's envoy, Mrs. Cope constantly preaches to Mrs. Pritchard, wife of her hired farmhand, instructing her to be thankful for whatever she is given, fortune or adversity. "'We have a lot to be thankful,' she said. 'Every day you should say a prayer of thanksgiving'" (CW 234). But, as Browning suggests, Mrs. Cope is merely "paying lip service to some vague notion of divine providence, [and she] actually worships at the altar of her own resourcefulness" (51). The following example of Mrs. Cope's bragging best supports Browning's argument: "I have the best kept place in the country and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it" (CW 235). When three poor boys come to her farm, Mrs. Cope decides to

play the same word-game to safeguard her kingdom. Although she does not want the boys to stay, she feigns a welcome: ". . . it's nice of you to stop and see me. I think that was real sweet of you" (CW 236). Even when she forbids the boys to ride the horses, she claims that she does it for their good: "I am afraid you boys can't ride the horses because you might get hurt" (CW 237). But, despite her effort, Mrs. Cope fails in her true intention of making the boys leave. In return for her lip service to them, the boys set her woods on fire, destroying it.

Just as word-play fails to help Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Cope protect their respective farms, it fails to prevent Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good fortune" from losing her young womanhood. Having observed childbearing turn her mother into an old woman at the age of thirty-four, Ruby is determined to avoid pregnancy. When she becomes pregnant, she simply cannot accept the fact and tries to deny it by imaging otherwise. She flatters herself for being "extremely young looking for her age," and congratulates herself for doing "so much better [in keeping young] than her sisters" (CW 186-87). She vows to Laverne, her friend, that she will never see a doctor in her life, and she shows her stubborn determination by telling the latter, "They carried me once [to a doctor] when I was ten . . . but I got away. Three of them holding me didn't do no good" (CW 193). Using language, Ruby creates her own world and rationalizes her actions. In a sense, she lives on words.

To her, words are not merely signifiers; they are entities, as is shown in her response to the pain in her stomach:

> She had thought the word cancer once and dropped it instantly because no horror like that was coming to her because it couldn't. The word came back to her immediately with the pain but she slashed it in two with Madam Zoleeda [a palmist she once saw]. It will end in good fortune. She slashed it twice through and then again until there were only pieces of it that couldn't be recognized. (CW 190)

Her imagined slashing of the word "cancer" clearly exemplifies her attempt to hypostatize language--to collapse the signifier into the signified, as Parker does in tattooing the picture of Christ. She simply wants to replace the world with the word. Yet, despite all her effort, the illusion she creates for herself with language finally evaporates towards the end of the story when she collapses on the stairs in great pain:

> She put her fingers on her stomach and pushed down and them took them off quickly. She began walking toward the stairs, slowly, as if the floor were going to move under her. She began the steps. The pain came back at once. It came back with the first step. "No," she whispered, "no." It was just a little feeling, just a little

> feeling like a piece of her inside rolling over but it made her breath tighten in her throat. . . . On the sixth one [step], she sat down suddenly, her hand slipping weakly down the banister spoke onto the floor. . . . (CW 194-95)

That language is a game Ruby and the other characters play can also be seen in the various dialogues she has with her neighbors. Take for example the conversation between her and Mr. Jerger:

> . . . "Yeah, it's a nice day," she said languidly.
>
> "Do you know what great birthday this is?" he asked.
>
> . . . .
>
> "Abraham Lincoln," she muttered.
>
> "Hah! You are not trying," he said. "Try."
>
> "George Washington," she said, starting up the stairs.
>
> "Shame on you!" he cried. . . .
>
> "Now examine this," he said. He was bending over a book, running his finger underlines: "'On Easter Sunday, April 3, 1516, he arrived on the tip of this continent.' Do you know who this he was?" he demanded.
>
> "Yeah, Christopher Columbus," Ruby said.
>
> "Ponce de Leon!" he screamed. "Ponce de Leon! You should know something about Florida," he said. "Your husband is from Florida."

. . . .

"Do you know who Ponce De Leon was?"

"He was the founder of Florida," Ruby said brightly.

"He was a Spaniard," Mr. Jerger said. "Do you know what he was looking for?"

"Florida," Ruby said.

"Ponce de Leon was looking for the fountain of youth," Mr Jerger said, closing his eyes. (CW 188-89)

The two are not engaged in meaningful communication. What they are engaged in is a game or war of words. On the one hand, Jerger tries to belittle Ruby and to show off his knowledge of history (ironically, he does it only with the assistance of a history book); on the other hand, Ruby attempts to fend off Jerger's "attack" and display her wisdom, but she ends up only revealing at once her ignorance and pretentiousness, which is best shown in her saying that Ponce de Leon was the founder of Florida in answering the question intended to elicit Leon's nationality.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" presents a more intriguing and dirtier war of words, one between Tom T. Shiftlet, a one-armed vagabond, and Mrs. Crater, an old widow. The story begins with Shiftlet arriving at Crater's house. Capable of all kinds of tricks, Shiftlet decides to do whatever he can to possess the old lady's car sitting in the shed at a corner of the courtyard; badly in need of

someone to "take care of" her severely retarded daughter, Mrs. Crater, on the other hand, schemes to make the tramp this desired caretaker. What follows is a heated war of words--a war of signifiers with no referents. On the one hand, the old lady deceives Shiftlet about the true nature and the age of her daughter: she claims that her daughter is "the sweetest girl in the wold. I wouldn't give her up for nothing on earth. She is smart too. . ." (CW 176), and she also tells Shiftlet that the girl is "fifteen, sixteen" when in fact she "was nearly thirty" (CW 178). On the other hand, Shiftlet disguises his materialism by talking about a disinterest in material gains and a dedication to spiritual pursuit. Like Red Sam, the cafe owner in "A Good man is Hard to Find," Shiftlet starts his conversation by condemning the corruption of the world: "'Nothing is like it used to be, lady,' he said. 'The world is almost rotten'" (CW 173). When Mrs. Crater tells him that, if he works for her, she can provide him with food and board but she is not able to pay him, he answers, "Lady . . . there's some men that some things mean more to them than money," and he claims to be such a man, one who has "a moral intelligence" (CW 175, 176), though we know otherwise.

Allowed to stay, he fixes the car and agrees to "marry" the girl, but not until he obtains the car, and seventeen dollars from the old woman (again, after a hard-fought war of words). He says that he needs the money for their "honeymoon," something he decides to do solely for the

girl's sake. Infuriated at Shiftlet for his greediness, Mrs. Crater accuses him of milking her; and mad at his ungratefulness, she blasts him: "Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man." Against this barrage of words, Shiftlet, after some deliberation, fights back: "Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit. . . . The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, is like a automobile: always on the move, always . . . . I'm only saying a man's spirit means more than anything else" (CW 179). Shiftlet's answer marks the climax of his war of words with Mrs Crater, but, despite its high-sounding spiritual and philosophical tone, it, I will argue, betrays him.

In this speech, Shiftlet again follows his old game of pretending to be interested only in the spirit. Yet his "spirit" is no different from his "body": both are material, for, to him, as the body equals a house, the spirit equals an automobile (this reminds us of Haze whose "spirit" is also a car, his Essex). That the spirit is compared to an automobile is of great significance, because an automobile is a typical symbol of the material world, and, as we know, it is something Shiftlet secretly yearns for. It is no wonder that his "spirit" (an automobile) "means more than any thing else" to him. Even the old woman seems to see his true "spiritual" needs. In answering Shiftlet's above comment about duality, she says, "Listen . . . my well never

goes dry and my house is always warm . . . . And yonder under that shed is a fine automobile . . . . You can have it painted by Saturday. I'll pay for the paint" (CW 179). By providing Shiftlet with a house and an automobile, Mrs. Crater meets literally the needs of both his body (house) and spirit (automobile). The word-play here reveals Shiftlet to be merely another "Hawkes" or "Shoats"--like them, he is a business man who exchanges "spirit" (religion) as a man-made product for other man-made products, such as money and automobiles.

By handing her daughter, Lucynell, to Shiftlet and giving him her car, the expediently dishonest Mrs. Crater falls victim to Shiftlet's word-play. He weds her daughter and then deserts her on their way to honeymoon. Yet, after he has deserted Lucynell (leaving her in a road cafe), Shiftlet, driving alone by himself, becomes depressed. A linguistic creature who lives on words, he needs someone to talk to so as to maintain his created reality--to maintain his sense of himself as a successful man, able to attain whatever he desires. As a result, Shiftlet offers a ride to a young boy and boasts to him about his superiority and his "best old mother in the world" (CW 182). Unable to tolerate Shiftlet's braggadocio, the boy soon abandons him. Having gone from a deserter to a desertee, Shiftlet seems astounded, astounded because he is deprecated by the boy's words: "My old mother is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" (CW 183). But he is not really shocked, as many

critics argue, by his own sin, and he is not about to change either, for, even after the incident, he is still talking only about the rottenness of the world, not his own rottenness. The rottenness, in his words, has not touched him: it is only "about to engulf him"; more important, he, again, uses words to raise himself above the rest of the world: "'Oh Lord," he prayed. 'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!'" (CW 183). By this prayer, he tries to set himself apart from the slime: he becomes one who calls God to clean the world, a prophet. And he seems determined to continue the course he set earlier--to drive to Mobile after deserting Lucynell: "Very quickly he stepped on the gas and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile" (CW 183). With the story ending this way, we cannot help worrying about the future victims of Shiftlet's never ending word-game. And in Shiftlet's and Mrs. Crater's use of words as deception and self-deception, we see again the gulf between the word and the world, a gap we have observed in all the stories discussed above.

Notes

1. A story that the grandmother tells her grandchildren on the trip may testify to this theory. When she was a young girl, the grandmother had a boy friend called Edgar Atkins Teagarden, who brought her a watermelon every Saturday with his initials "E.A.T" carved on it. One Saturday, when Teagarden brought the melon to her, there was no one at home, so he left it on the front porch. But she never got the melon "because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials, E.A.T.!" (CW 140). Some critics might dismiss the incident as a comic element in the story, but based on the fact that the issue of signification is so prominent in O'Connor's fiction, we can safely consider it another case showing the difficulty of closing the gulf between the signifier and the signified.

CHAPTER VI

THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY: AN IMPOSSIBLE DISTINCTION AND A NEVER ENDING QUEST

Published in 1960, The Violent Bear It Away, O'Connor's second novel and the only other one besides Wise Blood, marks, as many critics have pointed out, the apex of O'Connor's achievement in fiction writing. But the success of the novel lies not only in its poetic prose or well-knit plot--that is, the stylistic and technical merits that scholars have identified--but also in its thematic depth. All the issues treated in the rest of her work (issues that I have discussed in the previous chapters) are given expression here, and these issues are so well interwoven in the story that they give the book not only a complexity but also a continuity that we do not see in Wise Blood. Evolving around young Tarwater's search for meaning, the story is a stringent satire on, simultaneously, fundamentalism (embodied by old Tarwater), and scientism (advocated by Rayber), and on each man's obsessive yet futile attempt to distinguish himself from the other.[1] Moreover, the satire here attains an unprecedented intensity because it results not just from the narration but also from the characters' comments upon each other. That is, in this

story, the major characters function as forces attacking each other's complacent beliefs.

To support my argument, I will first explore the satire on old Tarwater's religious fanaticism (a theme primarily found in the first part of the story starting with the old man's death and ending with young Tarwater's departure for the city), then discuss the attack on Rayber's obsession with scientism--a metamorphosed fundamentalist fanaticism--(a major theme of the second part of the story covering young Tarwater's stay in the city with Rayber), and finally examine young Tarwater as a unique character who challenges both the old man and Rayber and who seems to embrace neither (an issue treated mostly in the last part of the story). While doing all this, I shall further demonstrate that truth/reality is fictional and our identity is but non-identity, and expose again (mostly in the last part of the discussion) O'Connor's futile urge to assert her own truth/meaning, i.e., show how the story itself sometimes thwarts or deconstructs O'Connor's efforts to affirm her religious vision.

The novel begins with the death of Old Tarwater, and the opening paragraph sets the satirical tone for the entire first part of the story:

> Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to

> finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Savior at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up. (CW 331)

Without any background information, we readers will find the situation not only pathetic but also ironic and comic: one of the old man's own kin becomes drunk only a few hours after his death, and a liquor client of his has to "drag" his body and bury it "with enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up." The irony becomes more apparent as we learn more, in the following few paragraphs, about the old man and his life. The old man had kidnapped young Tarwater from Rayber (his nephew and the boy's uncle) in order to raise him as a prophet like himself, and he had hoped that the boy would give him a Christian burial (with the sign of Christ on the head of his grave) after his death. All his efforts have obviously been in vain. Most ironical of all, it was the liquor the old man brewed that made the boy drunk.

As we read on, the irony turns into a satire on old Tarwater. The old man, we are told, was a self-appointed prophet: "The old man, who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it" (CW 332; emphasis added). And he taught young Tarwater that in this world it was "[either] Jesus or the devil" (CW 354). Moreover, old Tarwater was

such a fundamentalist that he desired literal fulfillment of his prophecies. After he prophesied a "destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour"--a destruction he said would be realized when "the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire"--he waited for the sun to burst and was very disappointed when it failed to: "it [the sun] rose every morning, calm and contained in itself, as if not only the world but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet's message . . . . he despaired of the Lord's listening" (CW 322). As a fanatic, the old man would not give up his desire, however. He envisioned the realization of his "prophecy": "Then one morning he saw to his joy a finger of fire coming out of it [the sun] and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him," yet, ironically, as the narrator continues to tell us, "the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body. His own blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world" (CW 332).

Fulfilling prophecies in such a manner--in one's own imagination--only exposes the old man's way of arriving at truth and his way of proving that the Lord has called him: self-confirming and self-calling. In this sense, Rayber is right when he asserts in his study of the old man that "He [the old man] needed the assurance of a call [from God] and so he called himself" (CW 341). Though Rayber himself, as I will show later, fails to escape this self-affirming practice in his "scientific study," his claim here certainly

pinpoints the old man's problem: substituting self-calling for God's call. That is why the old man was extremely angry at Rayber's claim:

> "Called myself!" the old man would hiss, "called myself!" This so enraged him that half the time he could do nothing but repeat it. "Called myself. I called myself. I, Mason Tarwater, called myself. . ." (CW 341)

In calling himself, the old man intended to become God Himself; at least, he acted as if he were the Saviour. He repeatedly claimed that it was his mission to "save," in succession, Rayber, young Tarwater, and Bishop (Rayber's mentally retarded son), and more important, he tried by every means to accomplish his design. He kidnapped both Rayber and Tarwater (when they were young boys) to have them baptized. Though unable to baptize Bishop--because "the schoolteacher was on his guard and the old man was too fat and stiff now to make an agile kidnapper" (CW 335)--he ordered young Tarwater to carry it out, claiming that it was God's call on the boy: "'if by the time I die,' he had said to Tarwater, 'I haven't got him baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission the Lord sends you" (CW 335). Yet, ironically again, all his fanatic efforts to "save" the boys turned out to be failures. Rayber left the old man after being kidnapped for four days and has become a school teacher, a non-believer interested only in statistics and psychology; Tarwater, despite the old man's inculcation,

remains a doubter who has never stopped questioning the old man's preaching. The baptisms that the old man performed on the two were thus empty signifiers, a fact that ridicules, in turn, the old man's obsession with religious rites.

The biggest irony, however, is not his failed attempt to be the Saviour. Rather, it lies in the fact that, while the old man believes he is apart from the "real world," he lives in the very system he denounces as the world of the other, the world of urban people like Rayber. To separate himself from the "real world," he chose to live in Powderhead, a very reclusive place which he fashioned as Eden: "Powderhead was not simply off the dirt road but off the wagon track and footpath, and the nearest neighbors, colored not white, still had to walk through the woods, pushing plum branches out of their way to get to it" (CW 336). To preserve the purity of the place, he would not even permit young Tarwater to go to school. He wanted to "guarantee the purity of his [the boy's] up-bringing, to preserve him from contamination, to preserve him as His elect [sic] servant, trained by a prophet for prophecy;" as a result, he lied about the boy's mental and physical conditions to the truant officer and persuaded the officer to let young Tarwater stay away from school (CW 340). The old man was so sure about his place being superior to the city that he would not allow the boy to go to Rayber's place even after his death: he told the boy, "And when I'm gone, you'll be better off in these woods by yourself with just as

much light as the sun wants to let in than you'll be in the city with him" (CW 344).

Yet, despite his apparent distinction from the "real world," the old man was deeply involved in the system from which he tried to distinguish himself. For example, he made his living by making and selling liquor, something often considered as a corrupting product of the commercial world. The fact that O'Connor has the old man live by selling liquor--out of so many ways she could have him make his living--is very significant, because, to many people, religion and alcohol should never mix. Even the stranger (an invisible character) perceives the irony:[2] he questions young Tarwater about the inconsistency of the old man's practice: "A prophet with a still! He's the only prophet I ever heard of making liquor for a living" (CW 358). Furthermore, like the priests in Wise Blood and many other stories, the old man treats religious faith in material terms, using his property as a leverage to make people "believe."

After Rayber became a teacher rather than a prophet, the old man went to the city "to call on the layers to try to get the property [Powderhead] unentailed so that it would skip the schoolteacher and to go to Tarwater" (CW 346). In preventing Rayber from inheriting the property and by passing it to young Tarwater, the old man hoped to punish Rayber, the nonbeliever, and to reward the boy who stayed with him. This action also reveals the old man's desire to

control the property even after his death, because, by passing the land to the boy, whom he considered a successor of himself, rather than to Rayber, a total "other," he felt sure that the property was still in "his" rather than the "other's" hand. Even young Tarwater seemed to question the old man's action. While seeing lawyers in the city, the place of "evil" (the old man had taught him again and again about the city being the devil's place), the boy was surprised to find himself "enjoying what should have repelled him" and to find the old man buried in his own business, showing no concern for his "spiritual soundness" as he used to. Hence, the boy yelled at the old man, "What kind of prophet are you? . . . . Call yourself a prophet!" (CW 346). The old man's answer "I'm here on bidnis" is, ironically, a very appropriate one, for the old man was on business in a double sense: he was doing business with the lawyers in order to penalize Rayber for being a non-believer, so the trip to the city also involves "religious business." The old man's religious practices are thus not unlike those of Hawkes and Shoats, who make faith a product for sale, and his kingdom is not unrelated to the "real world." The two are in fact closely interwoven.

Moreover, the old man's purpose in kidnapping and raising young Tarwater was not simply to "save" him as he openly claimed. Listen to the following speech he makes to the boy:

> "Listen," he said. "I never asked much of you. I

> taken you and raised you and saved you from that ass in town and now all I'm asking in return is when I die to get me in the ground where the dead belong and set up a cross over me to show I'm there." (CW 338)

Here, he betrays his true intention to make the boy his caretaker after his death. He further revealed his intention when he complimented himself for his life's success despite his failure to "convert" Rayber: he "lived on fourteen years [after leaving Rayber] and raised up a boy to bury him, suitable to his own taste" (CW 345). The old man's "spiritual endeavor" is thus always mingled with worldly pursuit. The narrator renders the point clear in a symbolic but also comic way when describing the old man's making and trying on of his own coffin. After finishing the coffin, he "had scratched on the lid, MASON TARWATER, WITH GOD, and had climbed into it where it stood on the back porch, and had lain there for some time, nothing showing but his stomach which rose over the top like over-leavened bread" (CW 337). A fundamentalist, the old man not only wanted a cross over his dead body but he also engraved the words "WITH GOD" on the lid of his coffin to show his faith, to show that he was concerned only about spirit. But, very ironically, when he is in the coffin, we see nothing of him but his "over-leavened" flesh: his flesh overwhelming his proclaimed spiritual superiority. This comic presentation of the old man destroys or, at least, calls into question

the "true prophet" label that O'Connor and some critics intend to impose on him.

Having doubts about what the old man taught him, young Tarwater, after waking up from his drunken sleep, sets the place on fire and decides, against the old man's will, to go to the city (to Rayber) "to find out how much of it [the old man's teaching] is true" (CW 380). Completely destroying the kingdom/property the old man attempted so desperately to preserve, the boy's action highlights the failure of the old man's "spiritual"/material designs, bringing the satire on him to a climax. As the story moves from Powderhead to the city, its focus shifts from the old man to Rayber, from a satire on the old man's frenetic fundamentalism to a censure of the school teacher's equally frenzied scientism--a metamorphosed fundamentalist fanaticism. On the surface, Rayber seems the opposite of old Tarwater. He is a "rationalist," believing in neither God nor anything else supernatural. But, in reality, he is, like the old man, a believer, a fanatic believer in modern science and technology, his displaced gods. He is so obsessed with modern psychology and statistics that he fails to realize what he believes in is merely another artificial system, another man-made text not truly different from religion.

Rayber's total belief in and dependence on science and technology is very obvious, for he lives physically on artificial devices. When young Tarwater arrives at Rayber's house and sees him (it is also Rayber's first appearance in

the story), the boy is struck by the latter's dependence on machines:

> He [Rayber] came back [to the door] almost at once, plugging something into his ear. He had thrust on the black-rimmed glasses and he was sticking a metal box into the waist-band of his pajamas. This was joined by a cord to the plug in his ear. For an instant the boy had the thought that his head ran by electricity. (CW 386).

Rayber's hearing aid is so conspicuous on his head that his "face might have been only an appendage to it [the machine]" (CW 395). So young Tarwater cannot help asking him, "Do you think in the box [the machine's metal box] . . . or do you think in your head" (CW 396). Moreover, even Rayber's eyes look mechanical: "his eyes had a peculiar look--like something human trapped in a switch box" (CW 426). Rayber's dependence on science/technology is not, however, limited to physicality. He relies completely on psychological theories in dealing with people, including himself; his understanding of people comes purely from the tests he gives them (he is an expert in testing at the school). Testing has in fact become Rayber's gospel, and people are merely pieces of information, as the old man points out in warning young Tarwater not to live with the school teacher: he tells the boy if he lives with the teacher, he will be only "a piece of information inside his [Rayber's] head. If you were living with him, you'd be information right now . . ." (CW

339). Rayber is so obsessed with testing that he not only gives the old man a full test in "studying" him but he also tries to conduct a series of tests on young Tarwater.

Soon after young Tarwater comes to his house, Rayber decides to "save" the boy from the old man's insane influence, and he intends to do so by testing him: "Rayber had intended giving him the standard ones, intelligence and aptitude, and then going on to some he had perfected himself dealing with emotional factors. He had thought that in this way he could ferret to the center of the emotional infection" (_CW_ 399). Rayber is interested in testing because he believes that, by testing, he not only learns the truth about people but he can also make his professional decisions scientifically without involving his personal opinions (_CW_ 402). Yet he is wrong. Any test, being man-made, is not really objective; it always involves human subjectivity, for the test writer has to decide what to test and what not to. The process of writing a test is, thus, no different from the process men use to create their linguistic knowledge of the world--subjectively choosing what to encode and decode. Rayber's way of understanding people does not escape this subjectivity, despite his apparent strict scientific approach.

A look at Rayber's view of Bishop will illustrate the point:

> His normal way of looking on Bishop was an _x_ signifying the general hideousness of fate . . .

> . The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution, except at the moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love. (CW 401)

For all his use of scientific signs and terms like "x" and "equation", his notion of Bishop is merely his own reading of the boy, not a purely objective interpretation based on some truth or reality outside of his consciousness. Since he thinks it unfair for him to have a retarded son, he considers Bishop a signifier of "the general hideousness of fate." Rayber does not like Bishop--he confesses to young Tarwater that he has once tried to drown the child (CW 435)--because, to him, a "scientist," the child, as McFarland points out, "embodies all that Rayber wants to resist--all that is irrational and inexplicable, and that cannot be used for some pragmatic purpose" (98). That is, to him, the child, like the old man, is a total "other." Thus what Rayber does in his study and analysis is, to use old Tarwater's words, simply to put people "in his head and grind [them]," treating them in a totally subjective manner as if they were merely "parts and numbers" (CW 379, 341).

Rayber is so entrapped in his "scientific studies" that he becomes no less a fanatic than the old man in several ways. While the old man confined himself in a reclusive place and talked about nothing but prophecies, the school teacher lives, though in the city, a "rigid ascetic" life:

"He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions. He slept in a narrow iron bed, worked sitting in a straight-backed chair, ate frugally, spoke little, and cultivated the dullest for friends" (<u>CW</u> 402). Furthermore, like the old man, who is preoccupied with "rescuing" others from evil by baptism, Rayber is fully obsessed with "saving" people from insecurity or mental illness by using psychoanalysis. Besides trying to transform the old man, Rayber has attempted to "help" his sister and to "save" young Tarwater. However, his efforts, like the old man's, prove in vain. When the old man comes to live with Rayber for a short time trying to convert him, the school teacher does a thorough study of the old man in an attempt to "cure" his fanaticism. But, when Rayber finishes the study and shows it to the old man, the latter becomes so enraged that he kidnaps young Tarwater (who is then a baby): "The next morning when he [Rayber] went to the crib to give the baby his bottle, he found nothing in it but the blue magazine with the old man's message scrawled on the back of it: THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN" (<u>CW</u> 379).

His effort to help his sister (young Tarwater's mother) fared no better. When he learned that his sister had become a prostitute like their mother, Rayber considered it the result of her lack of self-confidence and procured her a lover "because he thought it would contribute to her <u>self-confidence</u>" (<u>CW</u> 366; emphasis original). Yet, to his

disappointment, his sister remained the same, and the only result from the love affair was the birth of young Tarwater. Rayber's total failure to "save" young Tarwater from the old man's influence, a major issue of the second part of the novel, further highlights the satire on the school teacher's preoccupation with scientism. In order to bring the boy back into the "real world," Rayber, besides trying to give the boy a series of tests, also takes him to visit the products of modern technology, believing these things will interest the boy enough to turn him around: "In four days they had been to the art gallery and the movies, they had toured department stores, ridden escalators, visited the supermarkets, inspected the water works . . .", and when the boy "had paused at a window where a small red car turned slowly on a revolving platform," Rayber, "seizing on the display of interest . . . had said that perhaps when he was sixteen, he could have a car of his own," but the boy was not impressed, for "he viewed everything with the same noncommittal eye as if he found nothing here worth holding his attention . . ." (_CW_ 398).

Rayber will not give up, however. He later takes the boy to a "natural history museum," intending to "stretch the boy's mind" (_CW_ 417). His decision betrays his logocentric belief in history as objective truth and knowledge, as something that should enlighten the mind. History, as we know, is not really a truthful record of what has happened; rather it is our interpretation, our encoding and decoding,

of the past, i.e., it is merely another man-made product. Hence, Rayber's design will not have any effect on the boy, who, in fact, does not even bother to go into the museum. The fact that the things Rayber uses to interest young Tarwater are not real/true as he deems them to be is symbolically shown in the bottle-opener he purchases for the boy as a present. The opener, as many critics have pointed out, is a very important symbol in the story: it symbolizes Rayber's scientism, as the country preacher's hat that the old man gave young Tarwater signifies the old man's fundamentalism,[3] though the two are not, as I would like to argue, really different in the final analysis.

The implied association between the opener and Rayber's scientism is best manifested in young Tarwater's unusual admiration (though short-lived) for the instrument: the boy "pulled out the schoolteacher's present and began to admire it. . . . The little instrument glittered in the center of his palm as if it promised to open great things for him . . . . [He] held it there in his hand as if henceforth it would be his talisman" (CW 466-67). The boy seems to think that the wine of knowledge the instrument is symbolically supposed to open will lead him to some truth. But, ironically, the opener, the symbolic key to truth, had been bought in a shop noted for selling fake things and, more important, it was placed side by side with these fakes: when Rayber went into the shop to buy a present for the boy, "[h]is eye roved over a shelf of false hands, imitation buck

teeth, boxes of simulated dog dung to put on the rug, wooden plaques with cynical mottos burnt on them. Finally he saw a combination corkscrew-bottleopener that fit in the palm of the hand. He bought it and left" (CW 446). Symbolized by the opener that is associated with fakes, Rayber's scientism is thus exposed to be a purely man-made system like the old man's fundamentalism. The narrator stresses, again symbolically, the close relationship between Rayber's scientism and the old man's fundamentalism when she has the "stranger"--who gives young Tarwater a ride back to Powderhead at the end of the story and whom many consider the devil's agent--take from the boy both his country preacher's hat and the opener after he rapes the boy: "In about an hour, the stranger emerged alone and looked furtively about him. He was carrying the boy's hat for a souvenir and also the corkscrew-bottle opener" (CW 472). It is very ironic and significant that the symbols of both the old man and Rayber finally find the same possessor in the devil/stranger.

Rayber is like the old man, also because he, too, wants to be a Saviour. For example, he tells young Tarwater, "'you need help. You need be saved right here now from the old man and everything he stands for. And I'm the one who can save you.' With his hat turned down all around he look like a fanatical country preacher" (CW 438). The last sentence in the passage also points to the similarity between Rayber and the old man, for the former is depicted

here exactly like the latter, "a fanatical country preacher." Rayber's purpose in "understanding" and "helping" others is, like that of the old man, to dominate them, a fact best shown in his struggle with the old man over the control of young Tarwater. Neither he nor the old man will allow the boy to have anything to do with the other. No sooner has the old man kidnapped the boy than Rayber goes to Powderhead to repossess him, and he gives up his effort only after the old man shoots and severely wounds him.

After the old man's death, Rayber attempts desperately to reassert his control over young Tarwater. He tries to be the boy's father. For example, he tells the boy, "Listen, listen Frankie . . . you're not alone any more. You have a friend. You have more than a friend. You have a father" (CW 396-97). And he treats the boy literally as his son: when they are registering at a hotel and the receptionist questions him whether young Tarwater is also his son (for the boy does not look like him), Rayber answers, "Certainly he's mine too [besides Bishop]," an answer that angers the boy, who, resenting his uncle's urge to possess him, tells the receptionist: "I ain't it [his son]" (CW 425). Rayber's urge to control others is so strong that he betrays his purpose of "understanding" when he tells young Tarwater, "What we understand, we can control" (CW 450). But, ironically, his scientific understanding produces no better results than the old man's preaching in helping him "save"

others, showing his "understanding" of others to be no understanding, if not indeed misunderstanding.

Yet, as is the case with the old man, what is most ironic here is not Rayber's failure to "rescue" his relatives. It is his stubborn insistence on his distinction from the old man, while, as I have shown above, he is not very much different from the latter. His preoccupation with psychological "studies" is no less fanatical than the old man's obsession with "prophecies." His psycho analyses are, like the old man's close observation of sun when he waited for it to burst, subjective expectations and self-projections rather than truth-finding. In their attempt to "save" others, both men are, to use Rayber's words about the old man, "self-called;" both are motivated by their urge for control and domination. Most important of all, while each insists in living in a different world, their worlds are the same world with two different faces. Listen to Rayber ask old Tarwater to come back to his "real world': "'You've got to be born again, Uncle,' he said, 'by your own efforts, back to the <u>real world</u> where there's no saviour but yourself'" (<u>CW</u> 379; emphasis added). Here we can see Rayber's world is not really one without a saviour: rather, each person himself becomes the Saviour.

In this sense, his world is not very different from the old man's where, as we have seen in the story, the saviour is not really God but individuals like the old man dressed as God. The two worlds are thus practically the same, with

men replacing God in each. Seen in this light, Rayber and the old man are doubles of each other: while both act as God, the former is a prophet of materialism and the latter a businessman of religion. Rayber's father's statement about himself being a "prophet of life insurance" ironically foregrounds the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon here: an insurance salesman, Rayber's father would not listen to old Tarwater's prophecies because "[h]e said he was a prophet too, a prophet of life insurance, for every right-thinking Christian, he said, knew that it was his Christian duty to protect his family and provide for them in the event of the unexpected" (CW 367). The label of prophet/salesman that Rayber's father gave himself depicts equally well both Rayber and old Tarwater despite their insistence on their distinct identities.

The problem with many critics' (including O'Connor's) interpretations of the novel is that they tend only to contrast old Tarwater and Rayber, failing to treat the similarities between the two. As a result, they all end up privileging one (mostly the old man) at the expense of the other. The character young Tarwater seems to have escaped, at least in part of the story, such a trap. In all O'Connor's canon, Young Tarwater is a very unique character. In the story, he works as a agent challenging both the old man and Rayber, i.e., he embraces neither of the two sides. In spite of the old man's inculcation, the boy will not acknowledge Powderhead's absolute superiority to the city:

under the old man's pressure, he only says that "here [Powderhead] was less bad than there. . . . Less bad don't mean good" (CW 371). So, to the boy, both worlds are not "good" and need to be questioned. As the boy's challenge against Rayber is quite obvious and direct whereas his revolt against the old man is much more complex, I will only briefly exemplify his fight against Rayber and then explore in more detail his struggle with old Tarwater.

Young Tarwater is very quick in pinning down Rayber's problem--preoccupation with science/technology. The minute he sights the school teacher, the boy notices the latter's total dependence on machines (the hearing-aid), and he also explicitly questions Rayber about whether he thinks in the box or in his head. The boy also fights Rayber by refusing to be tested, calling testing the school teacher's play. When Rayber tries to lure him into taking a test, the boy becomes infuriated: "'Play with it yourself,' he said. 'I ain't taking no test,' and he spit the word out as if it were not fit to pass his lips" (CW 400). Young Tarwater is right in calling Rayber's testing his play, for, as pointed out earlier, testing is play, a kind of solitary-play: the tester interprets whatever he is "testing" in his own terms. The boy further denounces Rayber's scientism when he refuses the school teacher's offer to take him on a plane ride: he declares, "[seen from a plane] The houses weren't nothing but matchboxes and people were invisible--like germs. I wouldn't give you nothing for no airplane" (CW 438). Rayber

wants to use a plane ride to attract the boy because airplanes are the hallmark of modern science/technology. The boy's words of refusal are very appropriate and significant, for, in a symbolic way, they hit right on the problem of scientism, its dehumanizing nature: to Rayber and his like, people are like what they seem when seen from planes, insignificant "germs" or inanimate objects. Hence, the boy's attack on Rayber is forceful and to the point.

Equally powerful is his challenge against the old man. The boy's revolt against the old man is first effectively shown in his setting fire to Powderhead and his leaving for the city against the old man's will. The boy also disputed the old man, as we learn from the flashbacks, by repeatedly questioning what the old man told and taught him. Several times, he contested the old man's claim about his knowing when God called him (CW 347, 371). Besides, when the old man had told the boy again and again about his efforts to save the school teacher, young Tarwater never fully believed his story. For example, the old man once said that he almost changed Rayber's mind by telling the latter that "I never come to live with you. I Come to die!" Hearing this, the boy rebutted the old man, "you had told him a bare-face lie. You never had no intention of dying" (CW 375). Despite the old man's repeated talk about his spiritual battle with Rayber, the boy did not think the two were significantly different and considered the conflict between the two merely the result of Rayber's insulting the old man

with the published study: "The boy would think: but if the schoolteacher hadn't written that piece on him, we might all three be living in town right now" (CW 378). More important, we remember the boy literally telling the old man that his place was not much different from Rayber's: "here was only less bad than there" and " Less bad don't mean good." Therefore, the boy would not follow the old man's call: when the old man "enjoined" the boy to baptize Bishop, the boy repeatedly refused: "He [God] don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me" (CW 335); "I take my orders from the Lord . . . Not from you'" (CW 379). In refusing the old man this way, young Tarwater not only reminds the old man that he is not God but also exposes the old man's attempt to replace God.

Young Tarwater's refusal to baptize Bishop constitutes his major revolt against the old man. What makes the revolt a complicated issue is that the boy later drowns Bishop but claims that it is an accident even though he speaks the words of baptism while the child is being drowned (CW 458). Critics who follow O'Connor's interpretation of the story consider the boy's refusal as his attempt to escape God's call and his drowning of Bishop as evidence of his inability to flee from God. But such a reading is not without problems. First, to carry out the baptismal rite by drowning a mentally-retarded child is horrifying if not disgusting. Furthermore, Tarwater himself denies the drowning constitutes a baptism until the very end: "It was

an accident. I didn't mean to. . . . The worlds just come out of themselves but it don't mean nothing" (CW 458). Some people may argue that this denial best exemplifies the working of religious mysticism, of which O'Connor is an advocate. I admit that this can be a valid argument, yet if I am to accept this interpretation, I need to add that this incident intended to show the mystic power of God only serves as another example of O'Connor's use of mysticism to affirm her religious vision: by having young Tarwater mystically carry out the old man's order, O'Connor embraces the old man's fanaticism.[4] But such an embracing seems forced, a fact further demonstrated by the author's arrangement of the boy's final conversion or acceptance of his "religious mission" at the end of the story.

Even after the boy has drowned Bishop and decided to return to Powderhead, he is still resistant to the old man's call: he tells himself, "It was not a boy he returned. He returned tried in the fire of his refusal, with all the old man's fancies burnt out of him, with all the old man's madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him" (CW 465). The boy even begins "to realize that he had not adequately appreciated the schoolteacher while he had the opportunity" (CW 467). Yet, only few pages down, he is abruptly and entirely transformed: he sees himself, upon arriving at Powderhead, as "Moses glimpsing the promised land" (CW 474), and after setting fire again to the property, he marches back to the

"dark city, where children lay sleeping" (CW 479). People may defend this sudden change as a result of the boy's violent encounter with the devil/stranger, who drugged and then raped him. Yet this encounter itself appears clearly as an episode the author forced into the story in order to impose her religious vision. For example, the stranger is literally and heavy-handedly portrayed as the Devil, an act making the author's intention awkwardly obvious: the stranger is said to be "a pale, lean, old-looking young man with deep hollows under his cheekbones," and more important, after he raped the boy, "[h]is delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood" (CW 469, 472).

In fact, read closely, the denouement does not clearly suggest that young Tarwater fully embraces the old man and is ready to follow his call to be a prophet. We know that the boy sets on fire the place where the stranger had raped him, an act that, many critics argue, symbolizes the boy's annihilation of his past, a destruction of his connection with the devil. Yet the boy also sets Powderhead on fire before he finally leaves for the city. If the first burning constitutes the boy's attempt to destroy evil/the stranger, then the incineration (actually, it is the second time) of Powderhead might be his effort to eliminate the final trails of the old man's influence, for the place was the old man's Eden. And moreover, his decision to go to and stay in the city is something contrary to the old man's will. Seen in

this light, we are not sure that his marching to the city embodies his determination to carry out the old man's call. The last paragraph does not make it clear at all:

> By midnight he had left the road and the burning woods behind him and had come out on the highway once more . . . .Intermittently the boy's jagged shadow slanted across the road ahead of him as if it cleared a rough path to ward his goal. His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping. (CW 478; emphasis added)

What young Tarwater's envisioned fate is we do not know for sure, and the uncertainty is heightened by words like "as if" and "seem."

The fact that these words of indeterminacy appear here is significant and revealing because O'Connor, after Caroline Gordon complained about "technical imperfections" in this novel, had exerted great efforts in eliminating phrases like "as if" and "seem" before she published the book: she once told a friend, "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting seems and as if constructions out of it." (qtd. in Edward Kessler 51). Yet, for the most part, O'Connor failed in her intent, for many "seems" and "as ifs" still remain (in fact, they abound not only in this story but also in the rest of her work).

She fails because the problem, I believe, is not merely a stylistic one. Kessler, for example, considers the problem the result of the difficulty O'Connor had in trying to express her religious belief in fiction:

> Editorial variants could hardly do more than disguise the difficulty the author [O'Connor] was having in bringing about the marriage of fiction and belief, of worldly analogy and that mysterious power that undermines the ultimate value of the here and now. (52)

Conscious editorial efforts can neither bridge the gap nor eliminate the tension between fiction writing and belief, or in a larger sense, between language and meaning, because, on the one hand, we human beings have no control over language, and, on the other hand, as Freud repeatedly pointed out, what we suppress by conscious endeavor (editorial efforts included) will eventually resurface one way or another.

O'Connor's failure to eliminate the "as if" and "seem" structures exemplifies this point. Perhaps, consciously, in order to assert her religious vision, O'Connor wants young Tarwater to follow the old man, but, unconsciously, she is probably not so sure. The one thing about which we are certain here is that the words "as if" and "seem" add to the uncertainty of the boy's future. So, maybe, as many believe, young Tarwater is to become a preacher like his grand-uncle. But, perhaps and hopefully, he is to remain a quester, continuing to challenge people's complacent

beliefs, whether it is fundamentalism, scientism, or any other "isms" that people like to take for granted. In so doing, he may, again hopefully, not be forced into the trap of privileging one system/term over another, a trap that seems impossible for human beings to avoid. Yet questing for the impossible is paradoxically human, and it is, hence, human for young Tarwater to carry on his never-ending possible/impossible endeavor, an effort that we hope might bring us to some new understanding of ourselves and our world.

Notes

1. As is the case with some of O'Connor's other works, my interpretation of the novel differs from the author's. To O'Connor, the book stages no attack on old Tarwater who, she believes, is "a prophet in the true sense" (HB 407). In her response to some readers' criticism of the story, she labels the old man a preacher of "truth":

> People are depressed by the ending of The Violent Bear It Away because they think: poor Tarwater, his mind has been warped by that old man and he's off to make a fool or a martyr of himself. They forgot that the old man has taught him the truth and that now he's doing what is right, however, crazy. (HB 536)

O'Connor opposes old Tarwater (as the force of good) against Rayber (as the force of evil) and sides firmly with the old man: in a conversation with Granville Hicks, she said, "Old Tarwater is the hero of The Violent Bear It Away, and I'm behind him 100 percent"(CFO 83). She also believes that we have to choose between the two: in an interview with Joel Wells about the novel, she said,

> I wanted to get across the fact that the great Uncle (Old Tarwater) is the Christian--a sort of crypto-Catholic--and that the schoolteacher (Rayber) is the typical modern man. The boy (young Tarwater) has to choose which one, which way, he wants to follow. It's a matter of

vocation. (qtd. in Friedman and Lawson 258)

So far, most critics have taken O'Connor's side, though a few (mostly the earlier readers of the novel) tend to embrace Rayber and denounce Old Tarwater. Though both sides make some legitimate points in their contentions, they make their arguments flawed by falling into the trap of privileging one and condemning the other. A close reading of the story will reveal that old Tarwater and Rayber, though appearing opposites to each other, do not differ very much, and the narration seems, for the most part, to favor neither of the two. The ambiguity of the story is so obvious that O'Connor herself admitted it in a letter to Robert Giroux, her publisher: "It appears to be a book which no two people have the same thing to say about" (HB 415).

2. Some critics may question the soundness of quoting the stranger because many consider him the agent of the devil. But, evil as he is, his comments here are a valid challenging of the old man's practices, especially the old man's insistence on his distinction from the "real world." The stranger's comment also draws our attention, again, to what may be the inseparability of the religious and the commercial systems, a point I already explained in the Wise Blood chapter.

3. That the hat is a symbol of the old man's influence is also suggested by Rayber's hatred of it: "He could not look at the object [the hat] without irritation. He wished to God there were some way to get it off him [the boy]" (CW

398).

4. As cited in the first note, O'Connor once stated that the boy had to choose between old Tarwater and Rayber, and she intended the boy to choose the old man who, in her words, "had taught him [the boy] truth."

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

By examining O'Connor and her work from a post-structuralist perspective in this study, I have shown, first, how her fiction challenges people's logocentric beliefs and, then, how her writing sometimes lends itself to deconstruction. The logocentric beliefs that her work satirizes and attacks include the notion of absolute truth/reality, the belief in a transcendental meaning obtainable through the fusion of the signifier and the signified, the insistence on clear-cut identities, and, finally, the tendency to take language for reality. O'Connor's fiction has effectively exposed all these traditionally privileged beliefs to be merely the result of men's urge for power and control of both themselves and others. Yet, while decomposing these logocentric ideas manifested in her characters, O'Connor or her narrator sometimes lends herself readily to the same decomposition by affirming (often at the end of the stories) her religious vision as transcendental "truth." Most of the time, she has her protagonists renounce their own views of life and embrace her religious vision as ultimate reality, as the only life worth living. Mysticism is what she uses to

convey her "truth," for, frequently, the staunch unbelievers in her fiction are mysteriously converted by the "mystic" power of God. The implied message of these mystic conversions is that, though we cannot understand God/truth, truth still exists and we have to embrace it. O'Connor's mysticism, thus, serves the same function that her paradoxical/mystical textual movement does (as demonstrated in the first chapter): allowing her to have it both ways--denouncing others for believing in their "truth" while claiming her own, the only, "truth."

Yet, in so doing, O'Connor appears to be unaware of, or, probably, simply ignores the possibility that the religious system she affirms is but another man-made product not very different from any other social or ideological systems people create and exploit for their own ends. The fact that many of her characters (such as Hawkes and Shoats) exploit religion for material gain fully illustrates the similarities and the interwoven relationship between the religious and the commercial system. The fact that religion is indistinguishable from other "isms" and beliefs, in turn, exposes O'Connor's privileging of the former over the latter to be merely a drive for an impossible truth. This act of privileging one system over others has also been followed by those critics who emphasize O'Connor's mysticism.[1] Echoing O'Connor's claim of God being beyond human understanding, they, almost without exception, tap on this avowed mystic nature of the Divine to advocate O'Connor's religious

vision. For example, they hail Haze as O'Connor's "Christian malgre lui," they celebrate young Harry/Bevel's drowning as a sign of God's grace, and they salute old Tarwater for being a true prophet.

But, as I have attempted to demonstrate, O'Connor's stories themselves often do not fully support such a clear-cut reading; rather they generally discourage a reading that valorizes one side or certain textual evidence while suppressing the other. To avoid this "either/or" reading has been a major goal of my study, though I do not assume that I have fully escaped this trap. Nonetheless, I have, at least, given it a try, and that should suffice, for, to me, the effort is far more important than the end result. Before I lay my pen to rest, I feel I have to point out, at the risk of redundancy, that this study is solely an attempt to examine O'Connor from a new angle, and it does not claim to arrive at any truth about this great Southern writer, because truth lies beyond the approach this study employs.

Notes

1. See, for example, Baumgaertner, Feeley, Gentry, Giannone, and Walters, all of whom have explored, in one way or another, how mysticism works in O'Connor's fiction.

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