



A Limit with Infinite Measure

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Mary Flannery O'Connor

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925. Her ancestors had emigrated from Ireland and settled in Georgia in the 1800s. She grew up in an Irish Catholic enclave, in the cosmopolitan coastal city of Savannah. There, her house was located just across the square from the cathedral and the convent school that she attended.



An only child, Flannery shared a special bond with her father Edward, whom she delighted with her creativity and wit. Even as a child, Flannery's feisty independence and unsentimental humor were evident.

"To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality. It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what other writers have to go elsewhere seeking."

(M&M, 54)

I went to the Sisters to school for the first 6 years or so... at their hands I developed something the Freudians have not named—anti-angel aggression, call it. From 8 to 12 years it was my habit to seclude myself in a locked room every so often and with a fierce (and evil) face, whirl around in a circle with my fists knotted, socking the angel. This was the guardian angel with which the Sisters assured us we were all equipped. He never left you. My dislike of him was poisonous. I'm sure I even kicked at him and landed on the floor. You couldn't hurt an angel but I would have been happy to know I had dirtied his feathers—I conceived of him in feathers.

(HoB 131-132)



Flannery O'Connor



At age 13, Flannery and her family moved in with relatives in Milledgeville, a smaller town halfway between Savannah and Atlanta, where the first Mass in the county had been celebrated in her great-grandfather's apartment in 1845. Only three years later, when Flannery was 16, her father Edward died of lupus, the disease that would ultimately take Flannery's own life.



The reality of death has come upon us and a consciousness of the power of God has broken our complacency like a bullet in the side. A sense of the dramatic, of the tragic, of the infinite, has descended upon us, filling us with grief, but even above grief, wonder. Our plans were so beautifully laid out, ready to be carried to action, but with magnificent certainty God laid them aside and said, "You have forgotten---Mine?"

(From Flannery's journal, featured in the Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 10 [1981]: 17)





Flannery attended high school and college in Georgia, making a name for herself by drawing satirical political cartoons in school publications. She left home to attend the State University of Iowa's prestigious Writer's Workshop. While she was still a student there, Accent magazine published her first short story, "The Geranium."

One year later, she won the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for a first novel, with a part of what would eventually become *Wise Blood*. She was beginning, even at this young age, to be recognized. After taking her Master's degree, she moved to New York City and continued work there on her novel.



I didn't really start to read until I went to Graduate School and then I began to read and write at the same time. When I went to Iowa I had never heard of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, much less read them. Then I began to read everything at once, so much so that I didn't have time I suppose to be influenced by any one writer. I read all the Catholic novelists, Mauriac, Bernanos, Bloy, Greene, Waugh; I read all the nuts like Djuna Barnes and Dorothy Richardson and Va. Woolf (unfair to the dear lady of course); I read the best Southern writers like Faulkner and the Tates, K.A. Porter, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor; read the Russians, not Tolstoy so much but Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov and Gogol. I became a great admirer of Conrad and have read almost all his fiction. I have totally skipped such people as Dreiser, Anderson (except for a few stories) and Thomas Wolfe. I have learned something from Hawthorne, Flaubert, Balzac and something from Kafka, though I have never been able to finish one of his novels. I've read almost all of Henry James from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nevertheless.

(HoB, 98-99)

Flannery O'Connor



Flannery soon moved into the Connecticut home of the Fitzgerald family as a boarder. Robert and Sally would remain Flannery's dear friends for her entire life. They shared not only a love of letters but were among the few, within their circle of writer friends, who shared the Catholic faith.



In late 1950, while still in Connecticut Flannery fell ill and returned home to Georgia, where the doctor Regina O'Connor that her daughter was dying of lupus. Flannery's plans to return north were curtailed; instead, she and her mother took up residence at Andalusia, the family farm outside of Milledgeville. There, while submitting to a strict diet and beginning daily shots of a drug treatment for her illness, she began to regain her strength and took up again the task of finishing her novel *Wise Blood*. Andalusia would become her permanent home, which she would share with her mother, their farm help, and her peacocks. It was the place where, for years to come, she would welcome numerous visitors, friends, and sometimes strangers.

I have a disease called lupus and I take a medicine called ACTH and I manage well enough to live with both. Lupus is one of those things in the rheumatic department; it comes and goes, when it comes I retire and when it goes, I venture forth. My father had it some twelve or fifteen years ago but at that time there was nothing for it but the undertaker; now it can be controlled with the ACTH. I have enough energy to write with and as that is all I have any business doing anyhow, I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing.

(HoB, 57)



Flannery O'Connor





If Flannery was demoralized by the lupus, she did not often let on to her many friends and correspondents. In fact, she usually spoke about the limits imposed on her by the lupus, and by the effects of its various treatments, with her typically wry humor.

I have decided I must be a pretty pathetic sight with these crutches. I was in Atlanta the other day in Davison's. An old lady got on the elevator behind me and as soon as I turned around she fixed me with a moist gleaming eye and said in a loud voice, "Bless you, darling!" I felt exactly like the Misfit and I gave her a weakly lethal look, whereupon greatly encouraged, she grabbed my arm and whispered (very loud) in my ear. "Remember what they said to John at the gate, darling!" It was not my floor but I got off and I suppose the old lady was astounded at how quick I could get away on crutches. I have a one-legged friend and I asked her what they said to John at the gate. She said she reckoned they said, "The lame shall enter first." This may be because the lame will be able to knock everybody else aside with their crutches.

(HoB, 117)



By 1953, Flannery had settled into a fairly quiet life of writing at the farm with her mother, keeping in touch with friends through letters that came to form *The Habit of Being*. She pursued her vocation as a writer with a singleness of purpose that her friends described as “monastic.”



I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound (...). I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there.

(HoB, 242)



Flannery read avidly. There was hardly a letter mailed from Andalusia that did not mention the latest book currently being read, or recommend another, while she also attended to classic Catholic theology, which she thought made her writing “bolder.”

Total non-retention has kept my education from being a burden to me. So, I couldn't make any judgment on the *Summa* (Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas), except to say this: I read it for about twenty minutes every night before bed. If my mother were to come in during the process and say, “Turn off that light. It's late,” I with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression, would reply, “On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes,” or some such thing.

(HoB, 93 - 94)

Flannery O'Connor





GO TO
CHURCH
Or the *Devil* Will Get You!

the protestant south



As a Catholic, Flannery O'Connor was part of a minority of just 5% in Georgia: her native country was thus both foreign to her and wholly her own. Returning "home" to the small town of Milledgeville—a typical Southern environment in many ways—proved a boon to her writings, as her characters and settings sometimes leapt from her local inspiration. She had a feel for the manners, the dialect, and above all the religion of the "Bible Belt," which she described not as Christ-centered but as "Christ-haunted."

Flannery's stories are almost exclusively about this "Christ-haunted" Protestant culture in which she was immersed. To generalize broadly, the culture prized the individual's personal emotional experience and interpretation of the Bible, while excluding fundamental Catholic reference points such as the objectivity of Christ's presence in the sacraments and through the Church hierarchy. This tension reverberates in her stories: in many of them, the turning point is the encounter between the subjective world of her characters and the objective nature of reality.

The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. (...) But when he penetrates to the human aspiration beneath (the kind of religion that has influenced Southern life), he sees not only what has been lost to the life he observes, but more, the terrible loss to us in the Church of human faith and passion.

(M & M, 206-207)



Flannery O'Connor



Flannery felt her Catholicism deeply, and her writing cannot be separated from it.

What one has as a born Catholic is something given and accepted before it is experienced. I am only slowly coming to experience things that I have all along accepted. I suppose the fullest writing comes from what has been accepted and experienced both and that I have just not got that far yet all the time. Conviction without experience makes for harshness.

(HoB, 97)

In a now-famous anecdote, Flannery once told of how she was invited to a dinner party in New York City at the home of some "Big Intellectuals." At one o'clock in the morning, she had not yet opened her mouth once.



Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward the morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was supposed to defend. The hostess, a former Catholic,) said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the "most portable" person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.

(HoB, 125)



Flannery O'Connor



Vocation implies limitation

Flannery discovered the fresh originality of her voice precisely by plumbing the depths of her limits as a writer. She understood that writing is a vocation, both allowed and ordained by God. Her stories came to life not because she grasped at empty novelty, but because she received deeply what she had been given to see and live. For Flannery, Christian dogma was no constraint on her creativity. On the contrary: it was “about the only thing left in the world” that “guards and respects mystery,” and can guarantee that the writer does the same.



There is really only one answer to the people who complain about one's writing about “unpleasant” people—and that is that one writes what one can. Vocation implies limitation but few people realize it who don't actually practice an art.

(to Cecil Dawkins, 19 May 1957, HoB 221)





Vocation implies limitation



Fiction is supposed to represent life, and the fiction writer has to use as many aspects of life as are necessary to make his total picture convincing. The fiction writer doesn't state, he shows, renders. It's the nature of fiction and it can't be helped.

(...) What offends my taste in fiction is when right is held up as wrong, or wrong as right. Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived.

(to Eileen Hall, 10 March 1956, HoB 143, 144)

The ironical part of my silent reception by Catholics is the fact that I write the way I do because and only because I am a Catholic. I feel that if I were not Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything.

(To John Lynch, 6 November 1955, HoB 114)





The purpose of art

For Flannery, fiction writing was that form of art charged with the capacity to reveal the intimate relationship between the finite world and the mystery of being. It is clear, especially from her correspondence with other writers, that, for Flannery, her fiction would live only by its recognition of the unity underlying all of reality. While crafting stories, building characters, and even in choosing words, she knew she had one task: in Joseph Conrad's words, she was to "render the highest possible justice to the visible universe," because the visible universe reflects "the invisible one."



Fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art.
(M&M, 68)

Fiction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics for the very reasons that make it what it is.
(M&M, 192)

As the late John Peale Bishop said: "You can't say Cézanne painted apples and a tablecloth and have said what Cézanne painted."
(M&M, 75)





The purpose of art



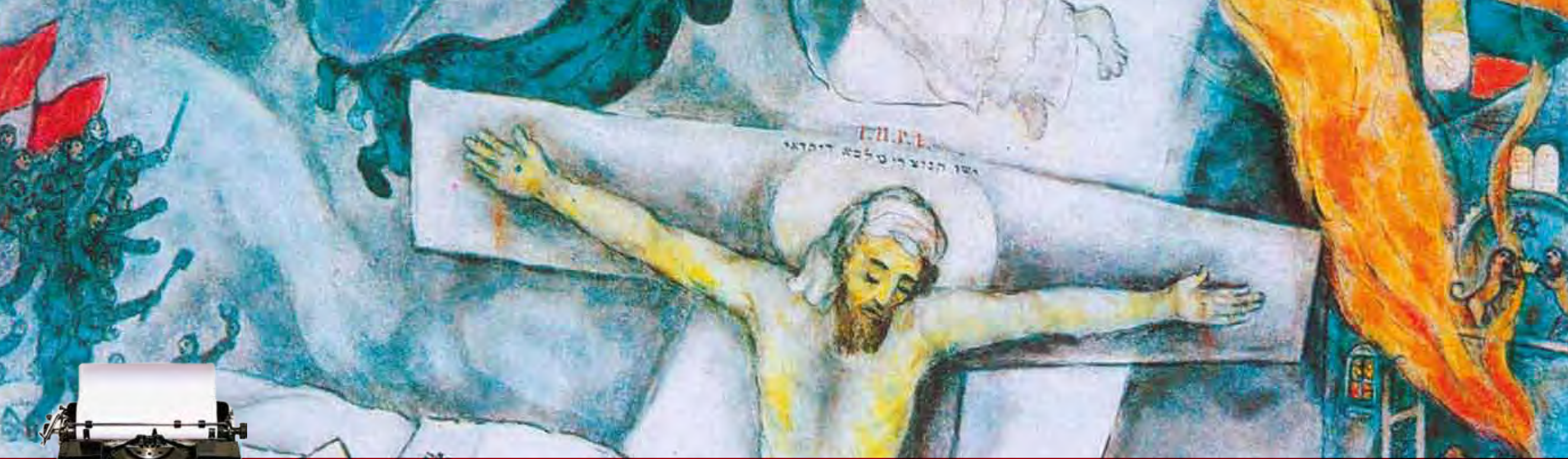
St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do. The danger for the writer who is spurred by the religious view of the world is that he will consider this to be two operations instead of one. He will try to enshrine the mystery without the fact, and there will follow a further set of separations which are inimical to art. Judgment will be separated from vision, nature from grace, and reason from imagination.

(M&M, 184)

We are not content to stay within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God. The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists. He must first of all be aware of his limitations as an artist - for art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.

(M&M, 171)





Nature & Grace

Flannery's understanding of fiction-writing bears within itself a deep insight into the relationship between God and the world. Her paradigm for creating fiction was the Incarnation of Jesus Christ: that God became a man of flesh in the world, and that he remains in time and space through the visible Church. In turn, this mystery takes its own 'flesh' in her stories. Just as the Church, even in the lives of her saints, is no stranger to the pain of sin, neither is Flannery's fiction comprised of 'stable' characters. Rather, they are those caught up in the crux of conversion, apprehended right in the thick of their lives by the intrusion of 'the timeless.'



Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical. Cutting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, requiring a real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul.

(to John Hawkes, 14 April 1, 1960, HoB, 389)

A gift of any kind is a considerable responsibility. It is a mystery in itself, something gratuitous and wholly undeserved, something whose real uses will probably always be hidden from us.

(M&M, 81)





Nature & Grace



Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. The devil's greatest wile, Baudelaire has said, is to convince us that he does not exist. (...) I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (M&M, 112)

Story-writers are always talking about what makes a story "work." From my own experience in trying to make stories "work," I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace. This is not a piece of knowledge that I consciously put into my stories; it is a discovery that I get out of them. I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. (M&M, 118)



The Stories:

“A sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality.”

“Grace in Territory Held Largely by the Devil”
“A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 1953



In Flannery's stories it often happens that her characters, after beginning in an everyday setting described with sharp humor, are led to an action of grace by passing through something grotesque or shocking that exposes their inner truth. No story better illustrates how, for Flannery, there is nothing which stands as a barrier between grace and her characters, than her classic “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” published in 1953. O'Connor herself describes “A Good Man is Hard to Find” saying,

I'll tell you that this is the story of a family of six which, on its way driving to Florida, gets wiped out by an escaped convict who calls himself the Misfit.(...) The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely.

(M&M, 109, 110)



“Grace in Territory Held Largely by the Devil”
“A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 1953

In a ditch next to the family’s wrecked car, the prim and prideful grandmother dialogues with the rebellious Misfit and comes to a profound recognition of what unites them.

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

(CS, 132)

“It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.

(CS, 132)



“Grace in Territory Held Largely by the Devil”
“A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 1953

“She would have been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” “Some fun!” Bobby Lee said. “Shut up, Bobby Lee,” The Misfit said. “It’s no real pleasure in life.”

(CS, 133)

The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as a child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in Him and he pronounces a judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life

(HoB, 389)



“Judgment begins in the details (the writer) sees and how he sees them”: “Revelation,” 1965

The story begins in a doctor’s waiting room, where Ruby Turpin accompanies her husband who has been kicked in the shin by a cow. As she waits, she surveys the other patients also sitting in the waiting room. Ruby very quickly reveals to the reader her sense of her own superiority. She congratulates herself on her “good disposition,” which distinguishes her from the “white trash,” common folk, and “niggers” that surround her. Her easy self-assurance is only partially disrupted by a college girl with an ugly face and uglier manners.

“If it’s one thing I am,” Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, “it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’ It could have been different!” (...) “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” she cried aloud. The book struck her directly over her left eye.

(CS, 499)



“Judgment begins in the details (the writer) sees and how he sees them”: “Revelation,” 1965

This surprise attack is followed up moments later by an accusation from the crazed book-thrower.

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's. “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered.

(CS, 500)

Later, Mrs. Turpin wrestles with the event.

“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. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath.

(CS, 502)



“Certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself”:
“Good Country People,” 1955

In “Good Country People,” the main drama occurs between a seemingly timid Bible salesman and Hulga, a girl with a wooden leg who prides herself on her Ph.D. in philosophy and her rejection of any meaning in the world. After their first encounter, the girl's thoughts are bent on seducing the unsuspecting Bible salesman and converting him to her own nihilistic ideology. Speaking of the detail of the wooden leg as a means to unfold meaning within the story, Flannery wrote:

Early in the story, we're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg.

(M & M, 99)



“Certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself”:
“Good Country People,” 1955

The setting is the hayloft in Hulga's family's barn.

(...) She was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away. “No,” she said.

“I know it,” he muttered, sitting up. “You're just playing me for a sucker.”

“Oh no no!” she cried. “It joins at the knee. Only at the knee. Why do you want to see it?”

The boy gave her a long penetrating look. “Because,” he said, “it's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody else.”

She sat staring at him. There was nothing about her face or her round freezing-blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her.

When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, “All right,” it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.
(CS, 288-289)



“Certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself”:
“Good Country People,” 1955

After inadvertently discovering that she cannot account for the totality of her own life, that this boy, in exposing her own innocence, had “touched the truth about her,” Hulga is lured into showing the boy how to remove her wooden leg.

“Put it back on,” she said. She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again. “Put it back on,” she said.

“Not yet,” he murmured, setting it on its foot out of her reach. “Leave it off for a while. You got me instead.”

She gave a little cry of alarm but he pushed her down and began to kiss her again. Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at. (...) Finally she pushed him off and said, “Put it back on me now.”
(CS, 289)



“Certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself”:
“Good Country People,” 1955

Suddenly, the boy opens his valise to reveal a hollow, fake Bible containing a flask of whiskey, obscene playing cards, and condoms. Hulga realizes that she is not as smart and sophisticated as she thought she was.

“Give me my leg!” she screeched. He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg and then she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends. He slammed the lid shut and snatched up the valise and swung it down the hole and then stepped through himself.

(CS, 290)

The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, and how the country woman on the place feels about it; and finally, by the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.

(M&M, 98)



“The action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it”:
“Parker’s Back,” 1965

O.E. Parker was "as ordinary as a loaf of bread" until "he saw a man in a fair, tattooed from head to foot (...). The man (...) flexed his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin seemed to have a subtle motion all its own (...). Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. (...) He had his first tattoo some time after - the eagle perched on the cannon."

(CS, 513-514)

(He) would be satisfied with each tattoo about a month, then something about it that had attracted him would wear off. Whenever a decent sized mirror was available, he would get in front of it and study his overall look. The effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up. The front of Parker was completely covered but there were no tattoos on his back, he had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself. As the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew.

(CS, 514)



“The action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it”:
“Parker’s Back,” 1965

Parker’s dissatisfaction with himself is mirrored by his disdain for his very Biblical given name. He meets his future wife, the daughter of a Protestant preacher, while selling apples on back-country roads.

"What's your name?" she asked. "O.E. Parker," he said. "What does the O.E. stand for?" "Never mind," Parker said. "What's yours?" "I'll tell you when you tell me what them letters are the short of," she said. There was just a hint of flirtatiousness in her voice and it went rapidly to Parker's head (...). Then he reached for the girl's neck, drew her ear close to his mouth and revealed the name in a low voice. "Obadiah," she whispered. Her face slowly brightened as if the name came as a sign to her. "Obadiah Elihue."

The name still stank in Parker's estimation.

(CS 517)



“The action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it”:
“Parker’s Back,” 1965

After an accident, Parker flees and returns to the tattoo parlor in search of the answer to a question he has not yet articulated.

Dissatisfaction began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo. It had to be his back. There was no help for it. A dim half-formed inspiration began to work in his mind.

(CS, 519)

On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK. Parker returned to the picture—a haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes. He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power. “You found what you want?” the artist asked. Parker’s throat was too dry to speak. He got up and thrust the book at the artist, opened at the picture.

(CS, 522)



**“The action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it”:
“Parker’s Back,” 1965**

Once the tattoo is on him, Parker decides never to look at it, but the tattoo artist forces him.

The eyes in the reflected face continued to look at him—still straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence.
(CS, 525-526)

He tries to drink away the memory of those eyes, but the men at the pool hall discover his Christ tattoo and toss him out into the street.

Parker sat for a long time on the ground in the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary to him in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything. Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth.
(CS, 527)

The creative action of a
Christian's life is to prepare
his death in Christ

(M&M, 223)

prepare



In February 1964, Flannery had surgery to remove a fibroid tumor that reactivated her lupus. She spent all of June in the hospital and received the sacrament of the sick in July. She must have known the end was near, though she rarely mentioned in her letters how quickly she was deteriorating, except obliquely.

"The wolf, I'm afraid, is
inside tearing up the place."

(HoB, 591)



She raced to complete her final collection of stories, writing even in the hospital and hiding her manuscript from the doctors under her pillow lest they compel her to rest.

What it meant for Flannery to meet her suffering with faith was to be obedient to the eyes of the One who had impressed his own image upon her life: she had to continue to see and "to show, to render" what she saw.

In those last few months, she produced three short stories of exceptional quality: "Revelation," "Judgment Day," and "Parker's Back."



Flannery O'Connor



Flannery's faith was as far removed from sentimentality as her fiction. As she confessed to a friend:

I hate to say most of these (novenas) written by saints-in-an-emotional-state. You feel you are wearing somebody else's finery and I can never describe my heart as "burning" to the Lord (who knows better) without snickering.

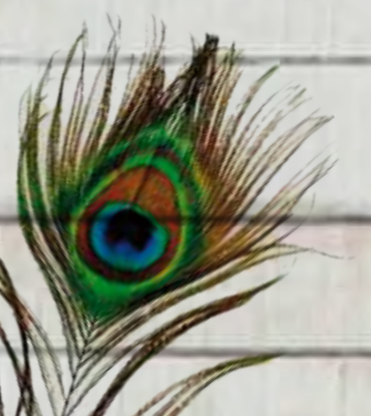
(HoB, 145)

Nevertheless, she did make peace with the angels and seems to have found a novena that expressed her inner state. Despite her fatigue, less than a month before her death she typed out for a friend a prayer to St. Raphael that she said every day for many years.



(Flannery) must have felt the natural sorrow of separation, and physical misery, too...but in her last note she is troubled for the safety of (a friend), rather than for her own. For herself she was not so much stoical as quite serene.

—Sally Fitzgerald.



Flannery O'Connor



O Raphael

Oh Raphael

O Raphael, lead us toward those we are waiting for, those who are waiting for us: Raphael, Angel of happy meeting, lead us by the hand toward those we are looking for. May all our movements be guided by your Light and transfigured by your joy.

Angel, guide of Tobias, lay the request we now address to you at the feet of Him on whose unveiled Face you are privileged to gaze. Lonely and tired, crushed by the separations and sorrows of life, we feel the need of calling you and of pleading for the protection of your wings, so that we may not be as strangers in the province of joy, all ignorant of the concerns of our country.

Remember the weak, you who are strong, you whose home lies beyond the region of thunder, in a land that is always peaceful, always serene and bright with the resplendent glory of God. Amen



Revelation



In "Revelation," the question Ruby Turpin shouts at the Lord across the hog pen: "Who do you think you are?" echoes back to her like an answer and takes the form of a vision in the evening sky.

There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. (...) Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. 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 houting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people (...)who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (...) In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

(CS, 508, 509)



Flannery O'Connor



Ruby finally sees that what is true about every person does not rest at the level of his or her apparent virtue. She sees, instead, that purifying mercy lies at the heart of every human poverty, and that gratitude for this gift is what makes life reverberate with real humanity. This is the truth of her own humiliation, and it was also the truth of Flannery's illness.



Observing that his dissatisfaction was gone, yet feeling not quite like himself, Parker returns home to a locked door and an angry wife.

"parker's back"



"Who's there?" the same unfeeling voice said. Parker turned his head as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer. The sky had lightened slightly. (...) Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline.

Parker fell back against the door as if he'd been pinned there by a lance.

"Who's there?" the voice from inside said and there was a quality about it now that seemed final. (...)

"Obadiah," he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.

"Obadiah Elihue!" he whispered.

(CS, 527,528)





ultimate

The ultimate reality
reality

The obedience that Obadiah Elihue Parker and Flannery O'Connor share is obedience to the One who both evokes and fulfills the desire for life to be great and beautiful, infinitely so. The fruit of this obedience is the discovery of the self no longer lost but called by name, by God. In accepting his prophetic name, which means "the Servant of God" in Hebrew, Parker is imprinted with what he has always longed for: that arabesque of colors, a richness now present not only on his body, but pouring through his spider web soul.

Two years before "Parker's Back," Flannery wrote: "I've been writing for sixteen years and I have the sense of having exhausted my original potentiality and being now in need of the kind of grace that deepens perception" (HoB, 468). In this story, we see the fulfillment of her desire to see, and to render what she saw. We glimpse how the gaze of Christ was etched into Flannery's own humanity, and how deep her own perception of the real had become.

For both Parker and Flannery, it is the embrace of a limitation that breaks open the way to this infinite object of desire. Parker embraces the tattoo woven into his flesh, and for the rest of his life, the emptiness of his restless 'independence' will be dominated by the all-demanding eyes of Christ. Flannery, too, was dominated by the incarnate Presence of the Mystery, who had embraced a particular life and death, so that in Him, every particular time and place could become nothing less than Everything.





Flannery O'Connor

Eternity begins in time
in time

Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor died in the early morning, on August 3, 1964.

Her last collection of stories, **Everything that Rises Must Converge**, was published in April 1965, and established her name alongside America's great writers. More acclaim followed: her **Complete Stories** won the National Book Award in 1972, and a collection of her letters, **The Habit of Being**, was also eagerly received. In the eyes of the world, her promise was "fulfilled."

Flannery would be as unswayed by her popularity today as she was by the mixed reviews her work received during her lifetime. She was retiring about her own celebrity; when she entertained guests, she preferred to be upstaged by her peacocks, and she erroneously thought she would have no biography, because "lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy" (HoB, 291). Still, she hoped her work would endure. She agreed that she "would swap a hundred readers now for ten readers in ten years" and that she would "swap those ten for one reader in a hundred years" (M & M, 187).

Her life became intriguing because she perceived the infinite Mystery present in the daily requirements of facing her illness and working out her literary vocation. She did not attempt to work as an isolated individual, but perceived everything through her belonging to the South and to the Catholic Church. It is this depth of the felt Christian life that gives her stories—at once so humorous

Her life became intriguing because she perceived the infinite Mystery present and so tragic—their enduring fascination. In becoming a master of the "humblest of arts," she continues to point us to the Absolute who dwells with us, in everything that we see and hear and touch.



Flannery O'Connor