

## ABSTRACT

BRANYON, SUSANNA G. "...To Hell With It": A Progression of Realities in O'Connor's Fiction. (Under the direction of Dr. Lucinda MacKethan.)

In a 1955 letter to her friend Betty Hester, Flannery O'Connor states that, "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; that is, nobody in your audience..." (*Habit of Being* 92). This paper explores the ways in which O'Connor translates her understanding of the Incarnation into fictional characters that "reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in the concrete, observable reality" (*Mystery and Manners* 148) —primarily, the reality of the body. Additionally, this paper proposes that O'Connor's writing focuses increasingly on the body as whole—inextricably physical *and* spiritual.

O'Connor's unyielding focus on the body was, I propose, born of her orthodox Roman Catholicism. This world-view included the doctrine of transubstantiation; that is, the belief that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are literally changed in substance to be the body and blood of Christ. O'Connor's concrete understanding of the Eucharist reveals a progression of realities, from literal or bodily reality (what the Roman Catholic Church calls "accidental" reality), to transubstantiating violence, and finally, to spiritual reality, what O'Connor called "ultimate reality." She launched her characters into several variations of this Eucharistic process by incarnating, via novels and short stories, body-centric individuals (her characters) who reveal their spiritual nature only after physical or emotional violence.

Because O'Connor's treatment of her characters changed over her writing career, I will address her works chronologically, beginning with her first novel, *Wise Blood*. I will

then move to two stories from each of her published short fiction collections: “Good Country People” and “The Temple of the Holy Ghost” from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation” from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Though every piece of O’Connor’s fiction contains at least one character who follows the Eucharistic process from bodily reality to violent action to spiritual reality, these works contain characters who highlight the initial portion of the transubstantiative process—the bodily reality.

These particular pieces also trace the evolution of O’Connor’s “incarnational imagination” as it relates to the bodily treatment of her characters—a matter not frequently addressed in O’Connor scholarship. While most of the critical mass focuses on either the acts of violence committed upon characters’ bodies or the ultimate *insignificance* of characters’ bodily reality in the presence of a spiritual reality, I propose that O’Connor creates bodies that are significant, integral elements—in fact, increasingly integral elements—in both the violent and ultimate spiritual realities of her characters. As her writing processes from *Wise Blood* to *A Good Man is Hard to Find* to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O’Connor creates characters who are increasingly grounded in their bodily realities, so that in later O’Connor works, the inevitable “moment of grace” (or, in my argument, moment of transubstantiation) does not end the bodily reality or discount the bodily reality in light of the characters’ new spiritual reality (*Mystery and Manners* 112). Rather, the moment of transubstantiation highlights the characters’ persistent incarnation—their persistent corporeal existence—in the midst of a new spiritual reality. O’Connor forces her later characters to keep on living—and living bodily—so that, in the space beyond the page, they must reconcile their accidental reality with their transubstantiated reality. This evolution of

O'Connor's development of her characters suggests that the body is perhaps her most useful literary tool: as a concrete signpost that points both characters and audience toward her "ultimate reality," the body is, in fact, O'Connor's art (*Habit of Being* 92).

“...To Hell With It”: A Progression of Realities  
in O’Connor’s Fiction

by  
Susanna Gail Branyon

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Thomas Lisk

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Dr. Barbara Bennett

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Dr. Lucinda MacKethan  
Chair of Advisory Committee

## DEDICATION

"The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual."

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1941)

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Susanna Branyon began exploring the South in 1981. She became enamored with the thoughts of “intelektuals” as an undergrad at Furman University, and hasn’t stopped reading, writing, and question-asking since. She earned a Master of Arts in Teaching at UNC-Chapel Hill; taught (and more importantly, was taught) at Peace College; and, most recently, earned a Master of Arts in English at NC State.

She fancies that, time and place permitting, she would have had the wit, the intellect, and the faith to befriend Flannery O’Connor. She suspects that, alas, O’Connor would not have agreed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I couldn't have finished this paper without also having logistical support. Mom & Dad, thanks for the awesome new computer! Thanks to the Brothers of Gethsemane Abbey who welcomed me into their community and broke the silence in order to answer my questions. Thanks to the folks at the O'Connor archives at GSCU who stayed after hours so that I could look at *one more story*...Thanks to the security guards at the NCSU library who escorted me back to my car on so many late nights and didn't laugh at my paranoia...At least not in front of me. And thanks, finally, to my friends who brought their support in the form of coffee, wine, Bojangles kids meals, good tunes, and enforced study breaks.

Thank you to my family for unfailing support, during this thesis project and always.

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## Introduction

### “...To Hell With It”: A Progression of Realities in O’Connor’s Fiction

*Eating human flesh*: it’s an unsettling idea, isn’t it? Particularly when the flesh belongs to a two-thousand year old Jewish carpenter...and particularly when it looks, smells, and tastes a lot like the multi-grain loaf you bought yesterday at the Piggly Wiggly. It is the Eucharist, and it is cringe-worthy, yes. According to Flannery O’Connor, the Eucharist is also true—Truth itself, even, with a capital “T”. And “truth,” she reminds us in a typically feisty proclamation “does not change according to our ability to stomach it” (*Habit of Being* 10).

Classified variously as Southern writer, Gothic writer, and Regional writer, Flannery O’Connor most heartily embraced a different label: that of Catholic writer. A lifelong and dedicated member of the Roman Catholic Church, O’Connor insisted that her faith was fundamental to her art. She explained in her essay “The Church and the Fiction Writer” that “When people have told me that because I am Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist” (*Mystery and Manners* 146). O’Connor’s deep-rooted sense that her vocation as a writer was inextricable from her faith did not lead her to use her art as a means of defending or proselytizing; rather, she interpreted the pairing as a challenge to create art that could “stand on its own feet and be complete and self-sufficient and impregnable in its own right” (*Mystery and Manners* 146). Christina Beiber-Lake, in *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor*, explains a bit further the author’s holistic approach to integrating faith and art. She notes, “O’Connor staked everything on her conviction that art as art, story as story, is

necessarily theological. She did not consider art—especially her own—as theological for its purportedly didactic role as justification or explanation of the faith, but because, like life and like God, it is embodied” (10).

It is the idea of embodiment—particularly the embodiment of God— that O’Connor identified as “the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories” (*The Habit of Being* 227). Though her adherence to Roman Catholic doctrine was orthodox and all-encompassing, one portion of the church’s theology particularly guided her belief and her art: the corporeality—the *bodilyness*—of Jesus Christ. In a letter to her friend Betty Hester, O’Connor articulated how her singular focus shaped her art:

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; that is, nobody in your audience... (*Habit of Being* 92)

This theological and artistic focus on the physicality of God in the form of Jesus, together with the reality of her largely unbelieving audience, led O’Connor to write vehemently against the Manichean belief that bodily and material entities were evil, while only pure spirit was good<sup>1</sup>. She lamented that this strictly dualistic understanding of nature was “pretty much the modern spirit,” and concluded that “for the sensibility infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art” (*Mystery and Manners* 68). Since God revealed Himself incarnationally—in the person of Christ and

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<sup>1</sup> Manichaeism is a form of Gnostic thinking. O’Connor preferred to pinpoint Manichaeism because it represents what Christina Bieber-Lake calls a “severe and insidious form” of Gnosticism. Lake explains that the Manicheans believed that each human birth “created a further dispersal of the original unity of ‘good’ into matter that is ‘evil’” (4).

through his people, rather than in abstract theorem—it seems fitting that fiction should do the same (Bieber-Lake 29).

Variations on this sentiment about the art of writing are shared by many other writers—Catholic and non-Catholic alike—who refer to its working form as the “incarnational imagination.” Of course in a strictly secular sense, all writers exercise an incarnational imagination—an imagination that gives life to characters, situations, and places. But O’Connor’s rootedness in the Roman Catholic Church invests the phrase with even greater significance. For her, an “incarnational imagination” involved fictional creations born not just of her writing mind, but also of a belief in an Incarnate God. Her fiction was her creed incarnate—a material translation of her steadfastly Roman Catholic worldview.

On a practical level, the observance of worship in the Roman Catholic Church involves a definitive focus on incarnational—or bodily—elements, a focus that is highlighted when Roman Catholicism is juxtaposed with other sects of Christianity. A typical Roman Catholic Mass, for example, invites all of the bodily senses to participate via standing and kneeling, chanting, song, and strong incense. Additionally, most Roman Catholic sanctuaries are inundated with iconic decor—incarnated representations of Christ, Mary, and various saints. Many of these icons are rather graphic: it is not atypical to see a bloody, suffering Christ hanging on the cross at the front of a Roman Catholic sanctuary. Mortification of one’s flesh, though not practiced by modern Roman Catholics, is an important part of the Church’s history and is recreated every Mass through the Eucharist. The stories of the lives

(and gruesome deaths) of oft-iconicized saints reinforce this Roman Catholic focus on bodily-ness...and might also enlighten the brutal end of so many O'Connor characters.<sup>2</sup>

To O'Connor, incarnation is not only a literary practice, but also a theological and historical reality that manifests itself both spiritually and physically, even tangibly— “a unique intervention in history” that (according to *The Misfit*) “thown everything off balance” (*The Habit of Being* 27). Through the traditional Roman Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, O'Connor celebrated and internalized this “intervention” of Christ’s bodily life and sacrificial death. The Eucharist is the centerpiece of the Roman Catholic Mass, and involves a recreation of Christ’s Last Supper with his disciples. The Roman Catholic understanding of Eucharist (which means “thanksgiving” in Greek) may be best understood in contrast to some Protestant understandings of a similar sacrament, Communion. Communion in non-liturgical Protestant Churches recreates the Last Supper through partaking of bread and wine or grape juice—elements that symbolize Christ’s body and blood. These Christians believe that the bread and wine go through a process of transignification—a shift from signifying flour and grapes to signifying Christ’s bodily sacrifice. However, the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist maintains that the bread and wine are not merely changed in significance, but rather are transubstantiated—literally changed in substance from bread and wine into the body and blood of the incarnate God.

Because the Eucharist is a literal recreation of Christ’s Last Supper, the doctrine of transubstantiation necessitates that the original bread and wine at the feast actually be

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<sup>2</sup> St. Sebastian, for example, was beaten to death and “arrow-ed.” He is usually portrayed tied to a stake with arrows sticking out of him. St. Bartholomew was flayed, and is typically portrayed holding his own skin. St. Agatha of Sicily was tortured, and her breasts cut off. She is often iconicized holding her breasts on a platter (Farmer).

changed in substance. When Christ said at the Last Supper, “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” he held actual bread and wine. The Roman Catholic Church, however, designates the qualities associated with bread and wine (crustiness, liquidity, etc.) as merely the “accidents” of an object, meaning the non-essential elements. What remains are, of course, the essential or non-accidental elements—the substances of the bread and wine that are, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, actually the body and blood of Christ. The term “accidental” has not always been a part of the Christian lexicon: Aristotle used the phrase in his *Metaphysics* (published before the birth of Christianity) as a means of classifying the properties of matter—discriminating between those essential (or substantial) properties and those which are non-essential (or accidental). St. Thomas Aquinas then synthesized this classification system with Christian theology in his *Summa Theologica*, using Aristotle’s taxonomies of substance to explain the process of transubstantiation through a question, objection, and answer format.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the query of Part III, Chapter LXXV, Article I— “Whether the body of Christ be in this sacrament in very truth, or merely as in a figure or sign?”—Aquinas explained that the relation between substantial and accidental properties in the bread and wine of the Eucharist is not necessarily detectable to human perception:

Christ's body is not in this sacrament in the same way as a body is in a place, which by its dimensions is commensurate with the place; but in a special manner which is proper to this sacrament. Hence we say that Christ's body is upon many altars, not as in different places, but "sacramentally": and thereby we do not understand that Christ

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<sup>3</sup> The system of thought born of Aquinas’ unification of classical thinking with Christian theology is often called Scholasticism or Thomism. O’Connor identifies herself as a “hillbilly Thomist” (*Habit of Being* 81).

is there only as in a sign, although a sacrament is a kind of sign; but that Christ's body is here after a fashion proper to this sacrament.

The accidents or physical appearances, then, of the bread and wine do not change; but their essential substance—their underlying reality—transforms into Christ's body and blood. After he addresses in detail the process of transubstantiation, Aquinas concludes that, "The presence of Christ's true body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority." Thus, with each celebration of the Eucharist, O'Connor literally fed her "incarnational imagination" with Christ—a bodily and spiritual Christ made whole and available to her only through a Biblical act of extreme violence: the Crucifixion.

Although intimately familiar with Aquinas' arguments and well versed in contemporary Roman Catholic scholars (also called neo-Thomist scholars)<sup>4</sup>, O'Connor never displayed a sense of entitlement or superiority in her knowledge of—and access to—the most important of Roman Catholic sacraments. In her letters, O'Connor recounted a dinner party with several "Big Intellectuals" in which one fellow guest noted that the bread and wine of the Eucharist were "pretty good" symbols. O'Connor's response to the comment managed to embody an unpretentious (and now legendary) gravitas:

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

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<sup>4</sup> Bieber-Lake lists "Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, William Lynch, Teilhard De Chardin, the writers of *Cross Currents*, Baron von Hügel, Romano Guardini, Claude Tresmontant" among the then-contemporary Roman Catholic scholars in O'Connor's personal library at Andalusia (16).

about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable. (*Habit of Being* 389)

O'Connor's "center," then, was one of Incarnation—of *embodiment*. With this unyielding focus on the body, its necessary "accidental" elements, and its role in faith and art, O'Connor's work begs to be examined in light of the recently renewed discipline of body studies. This discipline defies boundaries set by scientific study of the body to explore the literary, philosophical, social, and historical construction of bodies, and then to probe the ramifications of these constructions. In *The Culture of the Body: Genealogies of Modernity*, Dalia Judovitz introduces the field of study by explaining how it relates to previous explorations of "body:" "Rather than treating the body as a given, these studies compel us to question and explore its conditions of possibility" (1). Thus, body studies—a quickly and, it seems, constantly expanding discipline—examines representation, subjectivity, and identity both of and through the body, while exploring the implications of a body that is not only physical, but also spiritual, sexual, artistic, and political in nature (Scarry, Thomson, Doyle). One arm of the discipline that proves quite instructive to O'Connor's work is the study of the grotesque body. More comprehensive than "disability studies," but including it among its foci, the study of the embodied grotesque often addresses the politics of dual-gender, extreme size and weight, and physical handicap (Thomson), all of which might be found among the characters of O'Connor's fictional landscape.

O'Connor's incarnational imagination certainly acknowledged that the outward characteristics of the body—the accidents, as it were—implicate more than simply physical appearance. Though her main characters are consistently, vividly, and often shockingly

engrossed in their own bodies, O'Connor never leaves a character's physical traits in a merely physical realm. While fashioning characters deeply absorbed in their own bodily realities, O'Connor uses those states as a means through which to reveal an "ultimate" or spiritual reality (*Habit of Being* 92). Of course, no O'Connor character reaches this higher consciousness without first enduring physical and often emotional suffering—usually suffering that is the result of some personal bodily obsession.

This progression of O'Connor's characters from bodily reality, to violence, to spiritual reality represents a transposition of catechism into fictional process—an incarnation of O'Connor's interest in the bodily into body-centric characters who follow the progression of the Roman Catholic Eucharist. She shaped a concrete process of character development out of her experience with the Roman Catholic narrative of transubstantiation—from embodied God in the form of Jesus Christ, to a violent crucifixion, to the supernatural reality of the Holy Spirit. Though critics sometimes accuse O'Connor of being horrified by the body—particularly its sexual nature<sup>5</sup>—I suggest that she considered the body not a horror, but rather a form of sacrament. She incarnates—via novels and short stories—body-centric, fictional characters who “reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in the concrete, observable reality” (*Mystery and Manners* 148). Her characters are, in keeping with the Eucharistic process, transubstantiated—but only after experiencing an act of extreme brutality. When her characters are viewed in light of this process, it becomes clear that O'Connor's use of fictional violence is not gratuitous, but instead a necessary element of the

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<sup>5</sup> Critic Warren Coffey, for example, notes that O'Connor's writing uncovers what he calls her “Jansenist” preoccupations: “the pride of intellect, the corruption of the heart, the horror of sex” (96).



Sacramental equation—a concrete signpost that points both unaware characters and in the end, an unaware audience, toward her “ultimate reality” (*Habit of Being* 92).

In the following chapters, I will explore O’Connor’s transubstantiative process of character development, emphasizing the implications of characters’ accidental / physical / bodily realities as a necessary step to their experience of eventual catalytic violence, and ultimately to a potential acceptance of spiritual reality. These chapters will attempt to answer several questions: What techniques does O’Connor use to incarnate characters with accidental or bodily preoccupations? How do these techniques evolve over the space of her writing? If the accidental reality is a space from which O’Connor sends her characters beyond their own corporeality, what is the relation between the bodily reality and the inevitable violence that follows? What is the relation between the bodily reality and the ultimate spiritual reality? Is the latter, in the tradition of the Eucharist, a relationship that “cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority” (Aquinas III. LXXV. I)? Because O’Connor’s treatment of her characters changed over her writing career, I will address her works chronologically, beginning with her first novel, *Wise Blood*. I will then move to two stories from each of her published short fiction collections: “Good Country People” and “The Temple of the Holy Ghost” from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation” from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Though every piece of O’Connor’s fiction contains at least one character who follows the Eucharistic process from bodily reality to violent action to spiritual reality, these works contain characters who highlight the initial portion of the transubstantiative process—the bodily reality.

These particular pieces also trace the evolution of O'Connor's "incarnational imagination" as it relates to the bodily treatment of her characters—a matter that is not frequently addressed in O'Connor scholarship. While most of the critical mass focuses on either the acts of violence committed upon characters' bodies or the ultimate *insignificance* of characters' bodily reality in the presence of a spiritual reality, I propose that O'Connor creates bodies that are significant, integral elements—in fact, increasingly integral elements—in both the violent and ultimate spiritual realities of her characters. As her writing processes from *Wise Blood* to *A Good Man is Hard to Find* to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor creates characters who are more and more grounded in their bodily realities, so that in later O'Connor works, the inevitable "moment of grace" (or, in my argument, moment of transubstantiation) does not end the bodily reality or discount the bodily reality in light of the characters' new spiritual reality (*Mystery and Manners* 112). Rather, the moment of transubstantiation highlights the characters' persistent incarnation—their persistent corporeal existence—in the midst of a new spiritual reality. O'Connor forces her later characters to keep on living—and living bodily—so that, in the space beyond the page, they must reconcile their accidental reality with their transubstantiated reality. This evolution of O'Connor's development of her characters suggests that the body is not a horror to the author, nor is it merely the writer's tool for giving and receiving violence: as a concrete signpost that points both characters and audience toward her "ultimate reality," the body is, in fact, O'Connor's art (*Habit of Being* 92).

## Chapter 1

### Body as History in *Wise Blood*

In *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, Anthony Di Renzo says of O'Connor, "God for her is not found in vapor but in sweat, not in the sublimity of the mind but the comedy of the body" (81). Comedy of the body—and its dual purpose as humor and as a means for approaching the Divine—is a repeated technique in O'Connor's work. But it is perhaps never so apparent as in her first novel, *Wise Blood*. Though O'Connor diagnoses *Wise Blood* as "very serious," she also calls it a comedy "about a Christian *malgre lui*"<sup>6</sup> (Author's Note to the Second Edition). And indeed, much of the novel's humor—as well as its tragedy—is born of tension: tension between the body and the mind, the body and other bodies, and ultimately, the body and its Creator and Redeemer. In the following pages, I will examine these three forms of tension as a means of delineating Haze's progressive awareness of his own body's nature.

O'Connor introduces the novel's protagonist, Hazel Motes, as a man fighting against himself: Haze's body—his accidental reality—will not, as he would like, let him escape his mind, most specifically in the intrusions of his childhood memories. The 22-year-old is constantly confronted with this relationship between body and memory in the form of his own face, which "repeated almost exactly" the face of his Grandfather, a hellfire and brimstone preacher in his hometown of Eastrod. Haze's face serves as an inescapable and haunting embodiment—a living, breathing memorial—to his fundamentalist upbringing. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Malgre lui* is French for "in spite of himself" (Oxford English Dictionary).

Grandfather, during roaring sermons from the nose of his car, would point to young Haze as an illustration for his audience:

Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten million deaths before he would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin! Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget that he was redeemed. What did the sinner think was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end! (22)

The rhetoric aimed at the boy was vindictive, a result of the Grandfather's "particular disrespect" for Haze, even as a child, because he felt his grandson's facial similarities "mocked" him (*Wise Blood* 22). In his sermons, the Grandfather created a representation of Jesus that was cruel and unrelenting, and that image eventually haunted Haze: "Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, and where he might be walking on water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown" (22). Within the story's chronological present, an adult Hazel sees, when he looks in the mirror, a visage of his Grandfather—the very man who shamed him and singled him out with what must have sounded to a young Haze like threats. Jesus, his elder double told him, would "chase him," "never let him forget" and "have him in the end" (22). Haze's face—his Grandfather's face—haunts his body through his memories: Haze's physical, emotional, and

spiritual realities are shaped by physically triggered and inescapable memories of his Fundamentalist past.

Haze outwardly demonstrates the control that his memory-haunted mind has over his will when he inadvertently (or perhaps subconsciously) dresses the part of his Grandfather as well. Haze buys a new hat, “stiff, black, broad-brimmed...a hat that an elderly country preacher would wear” (10). What might have been meant as a way to disguise the face that haunts his memory instead enshrouds his head in a concrete memento of the mental image he is trying to escape: he symbolically crowns his head—already haunted by memories of his grandfather—with an iconic physical marker of his ghost. What appears to be an accidental purchase in fact confirms the inescapable nature of Haze’s memory—one that even manifests itself in physical form<sup>7</sup>.

In an attempt to escape the “ragged figure” of Jesus by bodily leaving the place where he grew up, Haze takes the train to Taulkingham. The trip literally moves him away from his memories in Eastrod, a place he says no body can return to, not even if he wanted to (18): in Eastrod there are “no more Motes, no more Ashfields, no more Blasengames, Feys, Jacksons...or Parrums—even niggers wouldn’t have it” (21). Haze is still, of course, a Motes, even when he is distant from the place of his roots. But the trip to Taulkingham seems

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<sup>7</sup> In an early draft of *Wise Blood*, Haze did not buy a preacher’s hat, but rather bought a “beige straw hat with a wide brim and a maroon band.” He muses after buying it that, “The store clerk had put something over on him, no other man that he had seen had such a hat.” Apparently Haze had hoped the hat would help him blend in. When it didn’t, he “looked at the hat a minute and then he sent it shooting down the length of the bench.” Haze then pulls out his old hat: “It was brown felt, a lighter brown where the band should have been. He thumped some shape into it and then he hung it on his knee” (Archival drafts of *Wise Blood*). While this original “hat” narrative implies a return to his past like the final narrative does, the original is a much more deliberate return to the past than the later draft when Haze buys—apparently by accident—a hat that looks like his Grandfather’s. O’Connor’s revision—adding the unintentional nature of the hat purchase— emphasizes the futility in Haze’s attempted escape from his past.

to allow Haze to run from his past and also to move—just as literally—*toward* something, even if at first he can only define that goal as “some things I never have done before” (13). He hopes—consciously or unconsciously—to drown his memories in physical pleasure, though initially he defines this pleasure by what it is *not*. He is running deliberately toward *nothing*: he is going to Taulkingham because there is nothing to remember there. When asked why he is going to his destination in particular, he says, “You might as well go one place as another, that’s all I know” (14).

In her archived plans for *Wise Blood*, O’Connor explains the motivation for Hazel’s trip to Taulkingham in Catholic terms: “the sense of sin is the only key he has to finding a sanctuary and he begins unconsciously to search for God through sin” (*Wise Blood* Plans). Haze’s search manifests itself in his dogged attempt to live wholly through physical pleasures. The sins that O’Connor calls the medium of his unintentional search are, specifically, sins of the body—of his accidental reality. But though Haze is determined to live a life consumed by physical pleasures and thus forget his Grandfather’s rigid theology and, indeed, any meaning beyond the physical, he cannot escape his past. His choices lead him again and again to confrontations with his past and with his Grandfather’s legacy. As O’Connor points out in her introduction to *Wise Blood*, Haze reluctantly reaches a vision of God *malgre lui*, only after a long and violent attempt to escape it—a struggle that always involves the “accidental” reality of his physical nature.

On his train ride to Taulkingham, Haze shares a berth with Mrs. Wally B. Hitchcock, who epitomizes an O’Connor Southern lady—chatty, vapid, and politely taken aback by her cabin-mate’s strange mannerisms. She assesses his new clothes—the preacher’s hat, the

“glaring blue” suit with the \$11.98 price tag “still stapled on the sleeve of it” (10)—and then finds herself “squinting instead at his eyes, trying almost to look into them” (10):

[His eyes] were the color of pecan shells and set in deep sockets. The outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent...He had a nose like a shrike’s bill and a long vertical crease on either side of his mouth; his hair looked as if it had been permanently flattened under the heavy hat, but his eyes were what held her attention the longest. Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere... (*Wise Blood* 10-11)

Mrs. Wally B. Hitchcock has no idea (and most likely does not care) where those passages might lead. But to the reader who has been introduced to the history that Haze’s eyes have witnessed, Mrs. Hitchcock’s observation is unintentionally astute. Haze’s eyes are passages to his past—a past which he hopes to lose in part through that very train ride. Moreover, Haze’s eyes, so filled with what came before, are also searching for something to move him beyond that past—a juxtaposition that will eventually lead him beyond the boundaries of his own body.

As Haze soon discovers, Taulkingham is an appropriate destination for pursuits such as his. In fact, some critics point out that Taulkingham is so unyieldingly physical as to be almost animalistic, with everything from cars to houses to people described in carnal terms, and with a zoo as the town’s centerpiece (Girard, Asals). The residents of Taulkingham, appropriately, are also animalistic caricatures: Leora Watts, the “big,” “greasy” (32-33) prostitute; Enoch Embry, the lascivious zoo watchman “with a knowing in his blood” (80);

Asa Hawks, the preacher-turned-conman who claims to have blinded himself for Jesus; and Sabbath Hawks, his scheming and salacious illegitimate child.

When Haze arrives to Taulkingham, he finds Leora Watts' number scratched on the bathroom wall under the seedy superlative, "friendliest bed in town" (30). He hires a cab to seek her out, thus initiating what he hopes will be a process of losing himself. The cabbie acts surprised at his passenger's requested destination, mistaking Haze for a preacher because of his hat. This mistake is, of course, a sensitive one for Haze, and he retorts, "Listen, I'm not a preacher...get this: I don't believe in anything" (31-32). It is apparent, though, that Haze does believe in something, even if at that moment what he believes in does not reach beyond the restorative powers of "the friendliest bed in town" (30).

When Haze arrives at Leora's, his eyes—constantly searching for a passage away from the past—take in the dingy house, the "big woman with very yellow hair," the "pink nightgown that would better have fit a smaller figure," and the "small, pointed" teeth, "speckled with green," with a "wide space between each one" (33). The image is raw, repulsive, animalistic, and erotic; in other words, it is purely physical. Haze's "senses were stirred to the limit" (33). He hesitantly sits on Leora's bed—obviously this is his first sexual encounter—and when she grabs his arm and drawls, "You huntin' something?" Haze almost "leaped out the window" (34). He tells her, "I come for the usual business," and then, after looking at Leora in silence for almost a minute, he says "in a voice that was higher than his usual voice," "What I mean to have you know is: I'm no goddam preacher" (34). His initiation into his new reality—one that he hopes will be fully corporeal—proves to be



awkward and uncomfortably emotional. Haze begins to realize that casting off his memories will not be as easy as he thought.

Taulkingham, though, seems to welcome Haze's efforts, however fumbling. He quickly finds that the city's residents—Leora, Sabbath, Asa, Enoch—share his craving for the flesh. After a few days in this atmosphere, Haze acknowledges an overwhelming urge to add a different sort of body to his growing menagerie: he decides to purchase a car. The idea of buying a car had never occurred to him before—he didn't have a license—but when he woke up one particular morning in Leora's bed, "the thought was full grown in his head...he didn't think of anything else" (67). So, he buys a car—an ancient, "rat-colored" (203) Essex—at the first used car lot he visits, excited to have in his new purchase a house, a means of transport and soon, a pulpit. This car also serves for Haze as the subconscious sanctuary that O'Connor noted in her archived description of his search. The car is something he can believe in: it is tangible, material, and own-able. And most importantly, this new "body"—this new object of his faith—grants Haze mobility, thus allowing him to continue to run from his past.

But, of course, *malgre lui*, Haze returns to his past even as he runs from it. Haze takes to preaching on top of his car in the manner of his Grandfather. The gospel he preaches in the style of his Grandfather is, in fact, the opposite of his Grandfather's gospel. So, while he uses the "bodily" structure that his Grandfather employed, his theology is the opposite of his Grandfather's message that Jesus was crucified for all sinners. Haze instead preaches "the truth without Jesus Christ Crucified"; that is, the truth without any element of a Jesus who was at once man and God, both bodily and spiritual reality (55). Haze's theology does not

point to any higher power, or even offer hope beyond the present, physical realm; rather, he focuses his doctrine—and thus, his audience—on the present and on the body. The physical, he says, will be redemption; in the body, there is truth. He even implies that his own body *is* the truth:

Listen, you people, I take the truth with me wherever I go. I'm going to preach it to whoever'll listen at whatever place. I'm going to preach that 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.  
(105)

This lying Jesus—all man, no God—contrasts with his Grandfather's "soul-hungry" Jesus (21) who "would have died ten million deaths, had His arms and legs stretched on the cross and nailed ten million times for one of them" (22).

In Haze's theology we see the beginning of O'Connor's campaign against Manichaeism—of the heresy that devalues the body. By removing the significance of Jesus—both human being and God—from his theology, Haze removes any consociation of body and spirit, in keeping with the Manicheistic ideal that sees the body as evil. In fighting the image of a powerful, spiritual Jesus that has haunted him since his youth, he preaches a theology that separates his own body from that image: he creates a church where "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (105). Haze takes the Manichaeism O'Connor considers heretical and turns it on its head, creating an equally heretical theological interpretation: instead of striving to lose the body for what Manicheans consider the higher life of the soul, Haze attempts to lose the soul for what he thinks will be

the higher life of the body. Of course, when O'Connor voices these ideas via the clearly disturbed Hazel Motes—a character who is running away from the author's Truth—she highlights quite a different agenda: humans are both spirit and body because Jesus was both God and man.

Haze takes his upside-down Manichaeism to comic lengths. In one of his sermons from the nose of his car, Haze requests from his audience a new Jesus who “can't waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him” (121). By theologically reducing Jesus to an object that is, in a sense, request-able and made-to-order, Haze theologically dismisses the confluence of body and soul: in discrediting Jesus' bodily divinity, he discredits *all* bodies as Christian theology sees them, i.e. as both corporeal and spiritual. Haze's theology, conveniently, justifies his pursuit of sins of the flesh as a means fleeing his past...and as a means, of course, of losing the Jesus from that past—both body and spirit—that haunts him. Although Haze's request for a new Jesus is actually a request for an abstract idea—a mental escape from the old Jesus—it is Enoch's literal, bodily response to the request that forces Haze into the final, violent stage of his spirit-denying, purely corporeal existence.

Enoch Embry is a newcomer to the carnal ways of Taulkingham, but he seems to fit right into the cityscape: as a teenage zoo watchman whose entire existence is dictated by his body, Enoch does not think, but rather *senses* his way through life. Enoch hears Haze's request for a new Jesus and, at the command of his “wise blood,” begins the act of *habeas corpus*: he steals a mummy, a body with no blood to waste “redeeming people” (121), from the MVSEVM and delivers it to Haze, who is now “camped out” in a hotel with the young,

seductive girl who bears the interesting name, Sabbath. The body Enoch delivers to Haze in the pouring rain—this “dead, shriveled-up half-nigger dwarf” (176)—may be empty of life, but Enoch’s act imbues the body with meaning: this, he believes, is the new Jesus. Because Haze is asleep when Enoch arrives, Enoch delivers the mummy, swaddled in newspapers, to Sabbath, who promises to give it to Haze. Instead of delivering it, she takes the new Jesus in the bathroom and begins to rock it in her arms.

The deranged parallel of Mary and Jesus that results saturates the mummified body with life. When Sabbath enters Haze’s room and declares, “Call me Momma now” (187), the picture is complete: Haze is implicated as the father of this now-spiritualized new Jesus. Through Enoch’s actions of idolatry and Sabbath’s maternal acceptance, the new Jesus has been infused with life and, in a sense, spirit. The mummified body in Haze’s arms is not the Jesus of the church where “what’s dead stays that way.” Rather, it is a warped rendition of his Grandfather’s Jesus: Haze’s request for a new Jesus yields yet another iteration of the “ragged figure” to torture his Christ-haunted mind. The very thing he is running from—an amalgamation of body and spirit—is suddenly incarnate before him, and he knows he must destroy it, or have the foundation of his theology—his entire way of being in Taulkingham—shaken. He “lunged and snatched the shriveled body and threw it against the wall. The head popped and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust” (188).

Bieber-Lake calls Haze’s actions “redemption by rejection” (87), claiming that Haze “retains enough of what his mother gave him to recognize this perversion for what it is” (85). Another view of the scene would be that “What his mother gave him” is a vision of Jesus that is his Grandfather’s Jesus—a divine, soul-hungry body. Thus, Haze does, indeed, see the new

jesus as a perversion, but not the perversion that Bieber-Lake alludes to. Haze finds the mummy perverse not in its distortion, but rather in its *likeness* to the Biblical figure of Jesus he remembers from his childhood. Critics who recognize this irony often lament that the scene is anti-climactic, and find Haze's denunciation of the new jesus—a jesus unavoidably body and spirit—overly abstract and thus unsatisfying. O'Connor, however, did not see it that way. She wrote in a letter:

That Haze rejects that mummy suggests everything. What he has been looking for with body and soul throughout the book is suddenly presented to him and he sees it has to be rejected, he sees it ain't really what he's looking for. I don't see it in any abstracted sense at all... (*Habit of Being* 404)

What Haze “has been looking for with body and soul” is a body in which he might lose his past. At this juncture in Haze's character development, he realizes that he has not found that body yet, not in Leora, not in Sabbath, not in the Essex, and certainly not in the new jesus.

In destroying the new jesus that “ain't really what he's looking for,” Haze moves from an accidental or bodily reality into violence. This violence, however, is not yet transubstantiating. Haze's essence has not yet changed; in fact, he is perhaps more than ever determined to live solely in his body, to live out the theology of the Church Without Christ. Thus Haze's forceful rejection of the mummy, though not transubstantiating violence, is catalytic nonetheless. It represents the first of three violent events that finally give the reluctant Haze a vision of spiritual reality. None of these three episodes includes violence to Haze's actual, physical body; in fact, Haze himself provides the destructive force in his first two violent encounters. However, each violent episode, even the final action, which he does

not instigate, constitutes for Haze a reckoning with his intention to live without spirit. If Haze is “unconsciously search[ing] for God through sin” as O’Connor said, and the sins he very intentionally chooses are sins of the body, then each violent episode represents a failure—a misstep—in Haze’s search for God (one that he is making in spite of himself) through sins of the body. Each episode, therefore, is a step toward a kind of transubstantiation, a change of Haze’s essence.

Haze’s first turn to violence—the destruction of the mummy—had been preceded by a theological revision in the Church Without Christ—a revision that no doubt made Haze’s encounter with the spiritualized mummy ever more unnerving to him. In a conversation with Onnie J. Holy (Hoover Shoats) before Haze’s encounter with the mummy, Haze denies that a new jesus could literally exist. He admits, “there’s no such thing as any new jesus. That ain’t anything but a way to say something” (158). Haze had, in fact, stopped telling his “congregation” about a jesus who is “all man and ain’t got any God in him” (121); instead, he preached a sort of self-contained redemption:

Nothing outside you can give you any place. You needn’t to look at the sky because it’s not going to open up and show no place behind it... You can’t go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy’s time... In yourself right now is all the place you’ve got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and your body can they be? (166)

In this theology, all of history, all of the universe, exists in “your time and your body.” The new jesus that he later so vehemently rejects is literally from outside his own time and body

(in the form of an ancient mummy), and its spiritual nature, though contrived, alludes to a historical Jesus who was also outside Haze's time and body. Haze's change in theology displays his increasing reliance on his own body—on the self—which no doubt made the spiritualized "other" of the new Jesus all the more abhorrent to him.

While preaching this body-centric and self-centric theology from the top of his Essex outside the Odeon theater, Hazel Motes sees his own body replicated almost exactly in the form of another car-top preacher. Haze's double claims to be from the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, and the man—"gaunt and thin" and in a "glare-blue suit" just like Haze's—was what Hoover Shoats had promised Haze: a little competition. This encounter is, in a way, a precursor to Haze's encounter with the mummy: he sees a bodily "other" who is also apparently a spiritual "other," and thus is faced with a challenge to his body- and self-dependent theology. Shoats introduces Haze's newest opposition as the True Prophet, who looks so similar to Haze that a woman asks, "Him and you twins?" Haze replies (clearly speaking to himself), "If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you" (168). O'Connor here uses Haze's revised theology to set the stage for his first encounter with violence—his physical rejection of a new Jesus, at once bodily and spiritual. O'Connor also uses this scene to establish the motivation for Haze's second violent episode: the murder of The True Prophet.

Haze's first act of violence—destroying the new Jesus—was born of fear: the mummy makes Haze realize that the current state of his existence cannot continue if he senses divinity in a bodily "other." His second violent act, therefore, is born of a challenge to his initial ambition in Taulkingham—trying to lose his past through his own body. Haze's self-centric

theology (“In yourself right now is all the place you’ve got” (166)) is shaken by the appearance of a second “self.” The True Prophet not only challenges Haze’s theology, but also serves as another painful memorial to Haze’s Grandfather and the past that Haze is so deliberately running from. Haze knows he must destroy this “other,” as he destroyed the new Jesus.

From his “high rat-colored” Essex, Haze watches the Prophet (whose real name is Solace Layfield) preach to the crowd outside the movie theater. He tails Layfield onto a dirt road outside Taulkingham, and then runs the Essex into the back of his car. In a physical confrontation, Haze accuses his body double of preaching what he does not believe—essentially, he accuses his second “self” of believing in Jesus. Solace replies, “Whatsit to you? What you knockt my car off the road for?” (203). Haze then demands that Solace take off the suit and hat that make the two look so similar. When Solace refuses, Haze perpetrates his second and much more horrific act of violence:

‘Take it all off,’ Haze yelled, with his face close to the window. The Prophet began to run in earnest. He tore off his shirt and unbuckled his belt and ran out of his trousers. He began grabbing for his feet as if he would take off his shoes too, but before he could get at them, the Essex knocked him flat and ran over him. (204)

While Solace lies in the road dying, Haze pokes him with his toe as though disgusted. He declares, “Two things I can’t stand—a man that ain’t true and one that mocks what is. You shouldn’t ever have tampered with me if you didn’t want what you got” (204).

After committing this brutal murder, Haze is clearly unmoved: in fact, his first concern is the well-being of his Essex—the only “body” in which he can still put his faith.



Before leaving the crime scene, Haze wipes the blood spots off the Essex, not wanting its body—his home, his pulpit, his sanctuary— defiled with the bodily remains of another.

Armed with the credo that “nobody with a good car needs to be justified,” Haze takes the car to a filling station to prep it for a trip: he is traveling to a new town to preach *The Church Without Christ*. The gas station attendant looks immediately skeptical when Haze tells him his plans, obviously diagnosing the car as being far past hope of resurrection. Sensing the attendant’s doubt, Haze “tap[s] the boy on the front of his shirt” and reproaches him: “nobody with a good car need[s] to worry about anything. Do you understand that?” (206). The boy obliges Haze by working on his hopeless car; while he works, Haze follows him around, preaching to him: “It [is] not right to believe anything you couldn’t see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth” (206). The car is for Haze yet another iteration of the new Jesus. In the Essex, Haze finds a body “with no blood to waste redeeming people;” a body that is not a threat to his theology; a body that is tangible, ownable, soulless, and therefore, a body worthy of worship and capable of “justifying,” i.e. “saving” man.

The new object of his faith, the attendant reports after some fiddling, has multiple leaks and a bum tire and would “last twenty miles if he went slow” (207). Haze retorts, “Listen, this car is just beginning its life! A lightning bolt couldn’t stop it!” Here O’Connor foretells Haze’s third and final encounter with violence—violence this time received instead of delivered. After Haze has driven only a few miles, a policeman pulls him over, telling him, “I just don’t like your face” (208)—a sentiment Haze would likely agree with. The sentiment is also, significantly, similar to Haze’s sentiment toward *The True Prophet* and the mummy. After ironically ticketing Haze for driving without a license, the patrolman asks Haze if he

would mind driving his car up to the top of the next hill: “I want you to see the view from up there, puttiest view you ever did see” (208). Haze obliges with a shrug, taking his beloved Essex—his new Jesus, “just beginning its life!”—up a thirty-foot embankment, a grassy Golgotha. When Haze gets out to observe the view, the policeman pushes the car over the cliff. The car lands “on its top, with the three wheels that stayed on, spinning. The motor bounced out and rolled some distance away and various odd pieces scattered this way and that” (209). The policeman’s violence to this “body”—Haze’s new Jesus, his false means of bodily redemption—is a rendition of Haze’s rejection of the mummy and his murder of the True Prophet: both men destroy the body that threatens their respective truths. This third and final episode of violence changes Haze with its unsettling irony: his redeemer—a redeemer he could see and touch and “test with his teeth”—has been crucified, never to be resurrected. In receiving this single act of violence, Haze’s theology is invalidated, his ability to run from his past destroyed, and his own body reduced, or perhaps returned, to the very reality he has been fighting—flesh inextricable from spirit, body inseparable from memory. O’Connor depicts Haze’s change, his transubstantiative moment, as one of both surrender and disbelief:

Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over at the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space. His knees bent under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over. (209)

In the lifeless, broken car below him, Haze sees the emptiness of his purely bodily existence. He glimpses in the mangled body—"the puttiest view [he] ever did see"—his own total loss, and in the resulting despair, his need for bodily and spiritual redemption.

But Haze is not practiced in accepting what he cannot see. Though he has come to understand his own need for redemption, he does not believe that his redemption is possible through the crucifixion of the Jesus that he remembers from his Grandfather's preaching. He turns to his body, as he has for the entirety of the novel, for the answer, abusing the physical thing that he sees as the agent of his fall. With his mystified landlady, Mrs. Flood, as ultimate witness, Haze blinds himself with lime, puts gravel in his shoes, and binds himself with barbed wire. When Mrs. Flood asks him why he does these things that "people have quit doing, like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats" (224), Haze answers, "to pay" (222) and "because I'm not clean" (224). Mrs. Flood notes several times that, "the blind man had the look of seeing something. He face had a peculiar pushing look, as if it were going forward after something it could just distinguish in the distance" (214). Haze, from his transubstantiated state, can glimpse a spiritual reality. But the means of embracing it, of surrendering to redemption by faith, are just beyond his reach.

While some critics point to Haze's self-blinding and self-mortification as a Manichean act—a turn away from the physical world—it is in fact a turn toward it. Brinkmeyer proposes that Haze's abuse to his body "represents not a rejection of the body, but a plunge into it" (89). He concludes that "Haze's self-mutilations collapse the external world into himself" (83). Therefore, Haze's transubstantiation, though beyond his grasp in its implications, does leave him acknowledging his body in O'Connor's terms—as a sacrament.

Mrs. Flood, in her suspicion that she is being “cheated in some special way” by her self-blinded tenant (214), acknowledges Haze’s sacramental behavior in the form of an accusation:

You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church. I wouldn’t be surprised if you weren’t some kind of agent of the pope or got some connection with something funny. (225)

And indeed, Haze finds himself, as both O’Connor and Mrs. Flood diagnose, a “Christian *malgre lui*”—one whose integrity “lies in what he is not able to do,” that is, escape the figure of Jesus (Author’s Note to the Second Edition). He arrives at this state—at a “connection with something funny”—despite all of his efforts, and through the transubstantiative narrative of the Eucharist. However, the transubstantiation that effects a Christian *malgre lui* in Haze also brings about a new obstruction to a holistic embrace of faith: he finds that in the context of possible spiritual reality, he is a body *malgre lui*. In viewing his body sacramentally, he views it not as a means to redemption, but as a hindrance to redemption: instead of treating his body as part of a whole being in need of justification, he treats it as the singular cause of his fall. With the realization that his body is inextricable from his soul, Haze has reason to abhor his sinful body. Thus, just as Haze ran from the idea of an incarnate God—Jesus as both flesh and spirit—he now cannot accept his own flesh as part of a spiritual being. His self-mutilations, though perhaps an opening of the body to the divine, as Brinkmeyer suggests, are more likely Haze’s failed attempt at reconciling his bodily sin with

his newfound realization of the possibility of redemption—a failed attempt to reach that something, that spiritual reality, that he “could just distinguish in the distance” (214).

Haze never has to work out how to *live* with the knowledge that both his body and soul are redeemed through “a unique intervention in history” that he could neither cause nor prevent (*Habit of Being* 226). He never has to work through the reality that his Grandfather was, at least in one respect, right: “Jesus will have you in the end” (22). O’Connor does not dramatize the possibility that Haze might overcome these obstacles to his faith, to reconcile his flesh with his hope for redemption, to live in his transubstantiated state. Haze dies still running, still paying, still not believing that as a Christian *malgre lui*, his bodily sins are already paid for.

The narratives of Hazel Motes and of the other early O’Connor characters who die without full knowledge within the story’s frame parallel the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, but do not fully realize its implications. The Eucharist entails a “Real Presence” in its transubstantiated state—one that *is* the bread and wine again and again, and one that the celebrants physically carry with them as they carve out their daily existence, learning to live as both flesh and spirit. This element of O’Connor’s Eucharistic narrative will evolve over the course of her writing, eventually demanding of her characters a painful, humbling living out of their transubstantiated reality—a daily reckoning of body and soul. Despite Haze’s early end, however, he sets a precedent for O’Connor’s masterful comedy of the body that will continue throughout her stories to point grotesquely, bodily, to the Divine.

## Chapter 2

### Gendered Bodies in “Good Country People” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”

In her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* (1955), O'Connor continues her exploration of—really, her quarrel with—Manicæistic dualism. *Wise Blood* began the improvisation on the theme: Haze, in an effort to escape his memory, tries to live solely in his body. Through a series of violent, physical events, this effort collapses, leading him to abuse his body in search of the higher life of the soul. The story ends with Hazel Motes in a diminished, ultimately fatal version of the Gnostic belief system—one that rejects the material world in hopes of experiencing the realm of the spiritual.

In two short stories published in the 1955 collection, “Good Country People” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O'Connor again exposes Gnosticism to her “acid pen” (Catholic Layman's Assoc.). Although the female main characters of these stories—Hulga and “the child,” respectively—live in worlds that are equally as fleshly as Taulkingham (if in different ways), these characters do not seek out the pleasures of the body as Haze does. Rather, each takes pride in living almost entirely in her head. For Hulga, the result is high intellectualism; for “the child,” a runaway imagination. But for each, the result of her cerebral existence is the same: both characters, for their own distinct reasons, discount their bodies' gendered nature and sexual capacity. O'Connor's first collection of short stories views these bodily issues through various lenses—age, race, social status, and gender. In the following pages, I will explore how gender shapes the Eucharistic narratives of Hulga in “Good Country People” and of “the child” in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.”

When Harcourt Brace & Co. published *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* in 1955, reviewers responded with decidedly mixed commentary. An interesting thread, though, between the favorable and not-so-favorable reviews is their consistent choice of corporeal language: again and again, reviewers chose bodily terms to describe O'Connor's writing. They described the stories in the collection as "shocking like...a blow between the eyes" (Prescott *NY Times*), "packing a wallop like that of a mule kick" (Myrick *Macon Telegraph*), and "inflicting upon one...an indefensible blow delivered in the dark" (Sibley *Atlanta Constitution*).<sup>8</sup> It seems that O'Connor had achieved her goal: her literature was "embodied," both in character and effect. Critics also noted—and rightly, if a bit dismissively—that the young author's stories seemed repetitive, as if "trapped in the machinery of a ready-made" narrative (*Hudson Review*). No doubt O'Connor would have disliked the implications of the word "trapped," but probably would have agreed that the narrative frame she chose again and again was "ready-made"—it was the story of the Eucharist, her "center of existence" (*Habit of Being* 389).

*A Good Man Is Hard To Find* is the beginning of a transition in the way O'Connor creates and shapes bodies through this recurring narrative of the Eucharist. In all of her fiction—both novels and short stories—she uses physical bodies as a means of grounding the Catholic narration of the Eucharist: the body remains constantly present during the progression from bodily reality to transubstantiating violence to spiritual reality. But in this collection, we see an emphasis on the body in the realm of the final reality: *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* contains stories (approximately half the collection) in which the main

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<sup>8</sup> These reviews are filed together, along with many others that employ similar bodily language, in O'Connor's archives at Georgia State College and University.

characters survive the “mule kick” or the “blow between the eyes”—they live beyond their violent moment of transubstantiation. But only in the unknown time beyond the story’s frame will these characters, we assume, be forced to reconcile their new, spiritual reality with their former bodily one.

This collection plays with the possibilities of body, stretching its definitions, roles, and boundaries. For example, O’Connor explores the body as a means for control in “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” body as a means for labeling “other” in “The Displaced Person,” and body as icon in “A Late Encounter With the Enemy.” But no bodily discourse, no interpretive lens, intrigues and incenses 21<sup>st</sup> century critics quite like that of gender. In general, when it comes to the issues of sexuality and gender, O’Connor cannot win with her critical audience.<sup>9</sup> Most feminist scholars berate O’Connor for abuses to her female characters—particularly those with intellectual leanings. They additionally note that she abuses them with a masculine God—*her* masculine God—thus upholding the societal patriarchy (Bieber-Lake). A few daring (or perhaps euphemistic) critics come to O’Connor’s

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<sup>9</sup> The critics even get personal about O’Connor’s treatment of gender: because O’Connor never (as far as we know from available archival sources) had a love affair with a man, she has sometimes been assumed to have been a homosexual who suppressed her sexual identity because of her connections with the church. When this accusation came out in 1998, Sally Fitzgerald defended O’Connor’s heterosexuality with an article in the *Georgia Review* entitled “Flannery O’Connor: Patterns of Friendship, Patterns of Love,” which told of the author’s long periods of unrequited love with Erik Langkjaer. For a complete description of this unrequited love affair, complete with an interview with Mr. Langkjaer (commonly assumed to be the basis for Manly Pointer in “Good Country People”), see Mark Rosco’s “Consenting to Love: Autobiographical Roots of ‘Good Country People’”. I personally maintain that there is not enough available evidence to prove anything conclusive about O’Connor’s sexuality. Even if one day conclusive evidence of her sexuality does become available, I’m doubtful she would have wanted us to let it flavor our reading of her work.



defense, placing her among feminist writers.<sup>10</sup> But O'Connor's writing, admittedly, seems out of place there, at least among canonical feminist texts.

O'Connor herself would have likely not thought this a battle worth fighting. In a letter to Betty Hester (who, it should be noted, was a passionate feminist), she dismisses any idea that feminism is a focus of hers: "...on the subject of the feminist business, I just never think, that is never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine. I suppose I divide people into two classes: the Irksome and the Non-Irksome without regard to sex" (*Habit of Being* 176). And indeed, O'Connor's writings reveal that she was egalitarian in her treatment of male and female characters: both genders are hardheaded, both tend to pride, both need redemption. Rare indeed is the O'Connor character—male or female—who gets a flattering portrait in her writing. She abuses them all—male, female, intellectual, ignorant, young, and old. Still, critics cite O'Connor's remark to Hester to argue that the author suppressed gender differences—probably, they imply, because of her association with what they deem a misogynistic church.<sup>11</sup>

But the fact that O'Connor classifies people into categories that do not involve gender does not mean that she ignores the issue of gender altogether. Rather, she uses the lens of gender to point to a larger interpretive lens—that of the Incarnation. In "Good Country People" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," for example, the female protagonists are both coming to terms with their respective female-ness in bodily—and predictably grotesque—

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<sup>10</sup> In a collection of essays entitled *On the subject of the feminist business* aimed at "re-reading Flannery O'Connor" (Caruso) in light of the influx of recent feminist criticism, Natalie Wilsom says her "fiction speaks in a feminist, corporealized voice (95) and Robert Donahoo links her to Betty Friedan (11).

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that many of the misogynist accusations associated with the Church are founded accusations, if you assume that the church denounces the body while celebrating the spirit. Remember, though, that O'Connor's version of Christianity is not Gnostic. It is focused on the Incarnation—a merging of spirit and flesh that are both good.

ways, despite their efforts to live entirely analytically. During this process of discovery, O'Connor provides both main characters with foils—other female characters who are entirely body-focused, thus falling on the opposite side of the Gnostic divide. These characters—really caricatures—define themselves only by sexual desire, highlighting by contrast the spiritually tending, Manichaestic leanings of Hulga and “the child.” Thus, O'Connor treats gender not as a way to undergird or undermine feminism, but as yet another weapon with which to challenge Manichaeistic isolation of body from spirit and point, ultimately, to an Incarnate God.

However, O'Connor's treatment of gender in these stories is far more nuanced: gender is for the main characters an agency of deviance, of self-exploration, and ultimately, of change. When considering Hulga and “the child's” interaction with issues of gender, it should be remembered that these stories were written and published in the 1950s, which saw an increasingly dualistic view of gender, iconicized by the opposing ideals of the model housewife and Betty Friedan. The definition of “female-ness” was increasingly up for grabs. But it seems O'Connor sweeps away the need for definitions and categories when she suggests through these two stories a different role for females. A woman, she proposes—no different from a man on this count—“cannot and must not avoid her immanence” (Bieber-Lake 123). These stories illustrate that a woman, outside all other categories, is a divine body, infused with spirit, functioning in a world that tries to compartmentalize what was made to be whole.

### **“Good Country People”**

Like many male characters she so viciously mocks in other stories, O'Connor introduces Joy Hopewell as a dualist: she is a character determined to live in a world constructed entirely by her own genius—one entirely apart from her bodily reality. She takes her arrogant Gnosticism to comic lengths, disconnecting herself from her own birth, from those around her, and most significantly, from her female body. In the following pages, I will explore how O'Connor uses Hulga's disengagement with her gender to shape a Eucharistic narrative that points her toward the unified ideal of the Incarnation—a merging of body and spirit.

When Joy Hopewell's mother thinks of her daughter's chosen name—Hulga— she thinks of “the broad blank hull of a battleship” (*The Complete Stories* 274). The prim Mrs. Hopewell is uncomfortable with the fact that Hulga's name does in fact describe her daughter: “big and bespectacled” (275), “bloated...and squint-eyed” (276), with unkempt blonde hair and a partiality for a faded yellow cowboy sweatshirt that hardly flatters her thirty-two year old body (276). Hulga, on the other hand, considers choosing her own name her “highest creative act” (275). Indeed, the decision to separate herself from her birth name supports her wish to have a completely cerebral and autonomous existence. And the name, which she picked “purely on the basis of its ugly sound,” does, of course, separate her from her mother who christened her Joy. But as Hulga thinks about her self-made name, the “full genius of its fitness” strikes her as she imagines it “working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called” (275). The name, in short, isolates Hulga in her own misery, putting her in a position of

power in which she must allow people to approach her. This, of course, is precisely what she wants.

Hulga invents social handicaps for herself, but she also capitalizes on her physical handicap as an agent of isolation. What enables her to get fully into the character of her chosen name—to sever all ties both to the old Joy and to those around her—is her wooden leg. She zestfully clunks around on it whenever she thinks anyone is nearby to be appalled. The habit, in fact, makes her name almost onomatopoeic.

Hulga's attempt to detach herself from her gendered body serves to detach her from others: those around her distance themselves—or perhaps *are distanced*—by the physical grotesqueness, the departure from typical femininity, which Hulga determinedly emphasizes. Hulga's methodical creation of an ugly, repellent persona reflects her lack of regard for those around her: with a PhD in Philosophy and a self-proclaimed disdain for “illusions” (287), Hulga has little respect for her mother or for the neighboring renters, the Freemans, whom she identifies as simple and predictable. Both her mother and the Freemans value a pleasing appearance; therefore, Hulga's accidental reality—her deliberately unattractive appearance—functions as a barrier between herself and those around her whom she considers inferior. This barrier—so deliberately constructed—that Hulga builds between herself and others is part of a larger barrier that she builds to isolate herself from the world outside her mind. She builds the barriers out of fear: with a repellent appearance and personality and interests that are entirely abstract and intellectual, Hulga hopes to avoid confronting her own sexuality.

This avoidance requires a resolved detachment from the non-academic, physically-focused environment that she is forced to live in. Though the Hopewell farm is hardly the

animalistic maze of Taulkingham, Hulga still cannot escape assaults—in the form of gendered female and male bodies—to her single-mindedly cerebral existence. Within the narrative, the first of these assaults comes as a sort of Gnostic antitheses—two sisters whom O'Connor defines entirely by their bodies. Glynese and Carramae Freeman live on the Hopewell farm and, much to Hulga's annoyance, share meals with the family. The sisters fit a definition of femininity that revolves around male desire, and in doing so, they meet gender role expectations that are clearly accepted within the household. Glynese is "eighteen and had many admirers" and Carramae, "fifteen, but already married and pregnant" (272). By this standard, Hulga—who "look[s] at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (276)—should have already been married with children by age thirty-two. Hulga's hoped-for genderlessness is further encouraged by her mother's rhetoric. Mrs. Hopewell tells people that Glynese and Carramae Freeman are "two of the finest girls she knew" and that the meddling Mrs. Freeman is "a *lady*;" Hulga, on the other hand, she refers to only as a sexless "child." It seems Hulga's strategy has worked: by fostering a physical and emotional persona that belittles all that is outside her own intellect, Hulga is able to disregard gender roles and evade the consideration of her body as a sexual entity. Of course, in this process of deliberately avoiding gender stereotypes, Hulga ironically calls attention to her own physical identity.

O'Connor's response to Hulga's determined dualism—her belittling of the physical to promote her intellectual nature—is, not surprisingly, incarnational. She drags Hulga back through her body—an explicitly (if awkwardly unpracticed) female, sexual body. Hulga's calculatingly constructed intellectual barriers begin visibly to crumble when a seemingly

simple-minded Bible salesman—Manly Pointer—arrives on the scene. At first glance, he is the quintessence of all she detests—the epitome of good country people. But in her plot to seduce the salesman and thus open his eyes to the futility of his faith, she finds her defenses and in turn, her appearance, softening—a softening that eventually leads Hulga to a violent (and violating) reality.

For her secret meeting with Manly Pointer—her imagined site of seduction—she awkwardly embraces her mother’s idea of femininity the only way she knows how. She upgrades from her “six-year-old skirt and faded yellow sweatshirt” into “a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt” and then “put some Vapex on the collar...since she did not own any perfume” (284). Though this ensemble sounds less than attractive, it is Hulga’s attempt to seem appealing—the first crack in her armor of erudite stoicism. Hulga allows Manly Pointer to break down more barriers when she climbs (or more likely, clumps) into the barn loft with the Bible salesman and allows him to kiss her. More significant still is that she kisses him back: with this act that triggers awakening in her body as well as her mind, her defenses are weakening.

The remains of Hulga’s intellectual barriers come crashing down when she agrees to remove her leg at the request of her now fully empowered loft-mate. Her original plan of seducing Manly Pointer and unveiling his stupidity disappears: “with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, he had touched the truth about her” (289). Hulga admits that removing the leg “was like surrendering to him completely,” “like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (289). The agreement to remove her leg is an agreement of trust and surrender: the language O’Connor chooses to describe it is the language of a Christian’s

surrender to Christ. Her word choice also implies two becoming one—a common description of sexual intercourse and, significantly, also of the Incarnation.

This vulnerability, this expression of desire so tied up in her female body, is new territory for Hulga. With the last of her carefully crafted barriers—her physical means of separating herself from her surroundings— now literally out of her own hands, she must greet a violent realization: she has not, in fact, “come face to face with real innocence” in the form of Manly Pointer (289). He places Hulga’s leg just out of reach and proceeds to pull a flask, cards, and condoms out of his Bible suitcase. Just when he has astonished her out of all her defenses, he grabs her leg, packs it in his suitcase between his decoy Bibles, and takes off down the barn ladder, leaving her lying helpless in the hay. This induction into knowledge through violent reality might of itself have been enough to make Hulga reconsider her posture toward good country people, but to bring home his smug point, Mr. Pointer turns around on the ladder and violates his victim’s intellect as well: “‘I’ll tell you another thing Hulga,’ he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, ‘you ain’t smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’” (291). Then he is off, leaving Hulga sexually violated, lopsided, and, horror of horrors, intellectually equated to the Bible salesman in a pose of common disbelief.

Hulga, points out Bieber-Lake, has met her counterpart in Manly Pointer—an incarnation of what she *thinks* she believes. The conman is her fellow, if inverted, dualist, reducing people to their bodies to be used for his own gain, and attempting to deny any spiritual dimension. When Hulga is presented with this reality, she finds—much like Haze found in the new Jesus—that “it ain’t really what [s]he’s looking for” (*Habit of Being* 404).

The violence that Hulga meets precipitates her confrontation with a necessary spiritual reality: the need to call out for physical help—for grace in the form of both bodily and spiritual rescue—from the very people whom she so stubbornly snubbed both with and because of her determined intellectualism only hours before.

Hulga's introduction to a "disarming" violent reality breaks down the separation she has made rigid, resuscitating her gendered body as part of a whole being, and rejoining it with her mind. She survives her transubstantiation—at least for the time being. It would certainly not be out of character for her to choose starvation in the loft to admitting her humiliating mistake! Assuming she lives beyond her immediate situation, though, Hulga must face the fall-out of her missing leg, her revived and then immediately violated sexuality, her invalidated Gnosticism. The reader is left to wonder how Hulga might change because of her Eucharistic experience, particularly considering how her last encounter with violence—the hunting accident that took her leg at the age of twelve—seems to have shaped her reality thus far. Certainly twenty years of constructing barriers will make a substantial change—that is, a change in essence—more difficult. At the end of the narrative, however, Hulga has no choice but to surrender—and loudly—or remain stuck in a hayloft. In that moment, Joy / Hulga has the potential to know what she thought she could teach her own mother and the "innocent" Manly Pointer: "We are not our own light" (276).<sup>12</sup> Certainly, O'Connor points

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<sup>12</sup> "We are not our own light" are the words of Nicolas Malebranch, a French philosopher who is most famous for synthesizing the ideas of St. Augustine and Rene Descartes. One result of this synthesis is Malebranch's conclusion that "we see bodies through ideas in God" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). This is significant because Hulga, a determined Cartesian at the point when she cries Malebranch's phrase in exasperation at the dinner table, is on the brink of a violent dose of St. Augustine's view of the body.



her readers to this truth through Hulga's suffering. Whether or not Hulga will embrace this potentially vision-altering moment is less certain.

### **"A Temple of the Holy Ghost"**

At the age of twelve, Mary Flannery O'Connor scrawled in her diary in large script, "Do not see why children twelve years old have to take dancein" [*sic*] (Archives). The complaint sounds like it could come from the tinsel-toothed mouth of the straight talking protagonist in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." Along with "Good Country People,"<sup>13</sup> "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is often thought to be one of O'Connor's most autobiographical stories; indeed, the author's childhood sketches and cartoons reveal a creative and bold imagination, much like that of "the child." At twelve years old<sup>14</sup>, the main character of the story lives primarily in her imagination—a sort of prepubescent Hulga—unaware as yet of sex and oblivious of how gender shapes societal roles and expectations. In the following pages, I will explore how "the child," through her imagination, arrives at an understanding of gender that subordinates sexual categories under a more all-encompassing designation: O'Connor's "ready-made" narrative (*Hudson Review*) points the young girl toward the model of the Eucharist itself.

Before we even meet "the child," we first meet her Gnostic antitheses. As in "Good Country People," this opposition comes in the form of two sisters, the child's second cousins, fourteen-year-olds who define themselves entirely in relation to male desire. Joanne and Susan—or Temple One and Temple Two, as they call themselves—bring their sexually-

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<sup>13</sup> O'Connor herself acknowledged the similarities between herself and Hulga in a letter, but reminded the recipient that she couldn't have written Hulga if she *were* Hulga (*Habit of Being* 106)

<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on the age of 12, both in "Good Country People" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is significant: in the Roman Catholic Church, this is the age at which most children receive their first Eucharist.

charged, giggle-y adolescence to the child's house for a weekend away from "the salt mines" of their Roman Catholic boarding school (246):

They came in the brown convent uniforms they had to wear at Mount St. Scholastica but as soon as they opened their suitcases, they took off the uniforms and put on red skirts and loud blouses. They put on lipstick and their Sunday shoes and walked around in the high heels all over the house, always passing the long mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs. (236)

O'Connor's first characterization of the main character—whom she only refers to by the sexless term "child"—is in relation to the sisters. She notes that "none of [the cousins'] ways are lost on the child" who, having observed Joanne and Susan for a few hours, concludes 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" (236). The child views their ultra-feminine affect as "other"; she considers the sisters silly and dull, and does not align herself with them as members of the same gender category. In fact, she separates herself from them as much as possible, glad that—at least genetically—the sisters were foreign to her.

The gulf between the child and her cousins is highlighted again by a dinner table explanation of the girls' nicknames—Temple One and Temple Two. The girls recount Sister Perpetua's advice that if a young man should "behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile," they should say, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" The girls think the advice to be absurd and hilarious; the child, though, "sat up off the floor with a blank face" (238). Having no understanding of sex, and thus no understanding of the social impropriety of the hypothetical situation (or, for that matter, of the irony of a nun

dispensing dating advice), the child sees nothing funny about Sister Perpetua's statement. In fact, she rather likes the idea of herself as a Temple of the Holy Ghost—a place God has chosen to live: it “made her feel as if somebody had given her a present” (238).

Thus, the child, unaware of sex, is oblivious of the biology of sexual differences: to her, Joanne and Susan are as equally different from her as are Wendell and Cory Wilkins. This innocence also leaves the child consciously unaware (though certainly with some understanding) of gender-specific expectations for behavior and ambitions. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, she breaks all the “rules” with her appearance, her actions, and her imagination. O'Connor describes her as having “fat cheeks” and “braces...that glared like tin,” and emphasizes her indifference to—or perhaps blatant disregard of—expectations of femininity at a dinner-table scene with all the women in the house. When it is jokingly proposed that Mr. Cheatum escort the cousins to the fair, all at the table (excepting the child) react within the bounds of feminine decorum: the mother “laughed in a guarded way,” the girls “giggled,” and Miss Kirby only “blushed” (236-237). But the child responds in a manner more typical of a boy her age: she “convulsed...threw herself backward in her chair, fell out of it, rolled on the floor and lay there heaving” (237). Even her mischief tends toward the masculine: when the sisters are away on their date, she considers sneaking something “cold and clammy” like “a chicken carcass or a piece of beef liver” into their bed (243-244).

But most significantly—as it is the force that seems to govern her character for most of the story—the child disregards gender expectations in her imagination. In an imaginary world in which anything is possible, the child does not imagine herself as submissive, fragile, or coy—stereotypical feminine characteristics. Instead, she imagines herself as a strong,

brave, and intelligent woman who pushes the limits of what is expected and appropriate for a female in the 1950s. She day dreams about saving men from Japanese suicide divers (242), becoming a doctor or an engineer (243), and even dying as a Christian martyr:

The lions liked her so much she even slept with them and 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. (243)

She is ruled by her imagination, by her mind, and when she perceives that others—Joanne and Susan, for example, and the boys from the Church of God—do not share her intellect and vision, she dismisses them as “stupid idiots” (242). It seems the child defines people in much the same way as O’Connor—“Irksome and Non-Irksome, without regard to sex” (*Habit of Being* 176)—albeit with the cocky pride of a twelve-year old.

The child has just finished dismissing the latest assaults on her intellect in the form of a prayer—“Lord Lord, thank You that I’m not in the Church of God, thank You Lord, Thank You!”—when her cousins arrive home with news from the evening. They had “seen all kinds of freaks” (244) at the fair, but what had made the biggest impression upon them was a freak who was “a man and woman both” (245). It had pulled up its dress and showed them, the sisters recount, much to the child’s bewilderment. Then the freak—a hermaphrodite— had said, “God made me thisaway...this is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way” (245). The child did not understand how it could be possible to be “a man and woman both without two heads,” and she strained to grasp the concept “as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself” (245). This new idea—that

someone could be both man and woman—throws everything she thinks she knows about people off balance. It disorganizes her vague understanding of gender. The hermaphrodite is, even to a child with a seemingly infinite imagination, a real mystery—something, observes Bieber-Lake, that “cannot be explained by the binary systems of the Joannes and Susans of the world” (137).

The child lay in bed trying to figure it out, “trying to picture the tent with the freak in it,” but dozed off instead, ushering in a dream vision that would begin to point her toward some understanding of “the riddle” (245). In her vision, she is in a fair tent, which merges slowly into the image of a church. The hermaphrodite is in the front, with his audience—his congregation—“standing as if they were waiting for the first note of the piano to begin the hymn” (246). The hermaphrodite says, “God made me thisaway and I don’t dispute hit” and his listeners answer, “Amen. Amen” (246). He eventually charges his congregation, “Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God’s temple, don’t you know?” To which they respond again, “Amen. Amen.” Finally, he turns upon himself, bringing the dream to a conclusion: “I am a temple of the Holy Ghost.” The congregation replies once more, “Amen” and the vision ends in soft clapping, “as if there were a child near, half asleep” (246).

In the child’s vision, O’Connor merges the body of the hermaphrodite with the role of a preacher to disorganize the rules for the reader, to push beyond gender conventions and view the hermaphrodite primarily as a person, as a dwelling of God—a definition that precedes the definitions created by gender identification or sexual desire. This vision is a violent one, if only because it throws off our expectations of what is Holy. To a child who

does not yet understand “the rules” of gender—with reference to the sacred or to anything else—the identification of a hermaphrodite as a temple of the Holy Ghost is likely not at all uncomfortable. And indeed, it seems that—at least at first—the child is unchanged by her vision.

The morning after her dream, the child accompanies her mother to deliver her cousins back to “the salt mines” of Mount St. Scholastica. She is as unruly as ever: after dodging a nun’s kiss, she joins the sisters and the students for mass, thinking with her usual sarcasm, “You put your foot in the door and they get you praying” (247). She is well into the mass and *Tantum Ergo* before “her ugly thoughts stopped and she realized she was in the presence of God” (247). She begins her mechanical prayers—“Hep me not to be so mean...Hep me not to give her so much sass...”—but her mind becomes quiet, then empty as the Eucharist begins:

...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. (248)

The child’s twelve-year-old mind equates two men who have taken up God’s roles for their bodies: Christ—a man who accepts that God created Him to be crucified as a sacrifice—and the hermaphrodite, who accepts that God created him to suffer as a “freak.” Here again is a juxtaposition that makes readers squirm: that Christ’s male body and the hermaphrodite’s body—both male and female—should be merged in the form of the Eucharist seems uncomfortable, even blasphemous. But we are reminded through Sister Perpetua’s warning and the child’s vision that bodies are more than just flesh: the

hermaphrodite, like Christ, is a temple of the Holy Ghost. With that assumption at the center of our discourse, we have a new lens with which to view both Eucharist and gender: the Holy Ghost displaces the importance of gender by encompassing both genders.

It should be noted that while this idea of a genderless—or perhaps bi-gendered—Holy Ghost does displace gender, it does not eliminate the categories of male and female, or even suggest that somehow those categories *should* be eliminated. Rather, the unifying entity of the Holy Ghost—one that unites Christ, the hermaphrodite, the child, and the reader—functions to put gender in perspective, posturing sex and sexual desire as less important categories than the category of the Body of Christ. To the child who does not yet fit into a sexual category—she has not chosen to be defined by male or female desire—this exchange of gender for a different mode of self-definition is entirely understandable. Though by a less humiliating route, the child arrives at the same conclusion as Hulga: the body—her female body—is both physical and spiritual.

Although her experience with the Eucharist marks the child's change—her moment of transubstantiation—it is not nearly as violent an awakening as most O'Connor characters must endure. In fact, we are left to wonder if, at the age of twelve, the child is capable of grasping the implications of her vision. A moment near the end of the story, however, seems to seal the child's Eucharistic vision, hinting that whether she understands or misunderstands its implications, her exploration of the body as a spiritual entity will not end at the sanctuary doors. After mass, a nun “swoops down on [the child] mischievously and nearly smothered her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched

onto her belt” (248). The moment, observes Bieber-Lake, is “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” in microcosm (139): the child is physically marked with Christ through the body of another.

The moment might even be seen as a microcosm of O’Connor’s entire oeuvre—a collection of characters who are marked or labeled by another. Certainly, though, the way bodies are physically marked varies a great deal, even within the two short stories considered here. The child’s induction into a violent, transubstantiating reality is significantly less traumatic than Hulga’s: the child’s equation of the hermaphrodite and Christ in a quiet sanctuary highlights the violence, by contrast, of Hulga’s humiliating and soon-to-be public situation in the dirty barn loft. Perhaps O’Connor spares the child her typical dose of violence because her story is so close to the author’s own experience—a possibility that would no doubt create further fodder for disapproving feminist scholars.

In any case, these characters’ respective violences point Hulga and the child past their own minds, past their awkwardly female bodies, and ultimately toward the unified ideal of Christ—a distinctly gendered and yet Divine body. These women, neither of whom is comfortable in her role as a female, must learn that their bodies were not mistakes: their bodies, distinctly female, are part and parcel of a whole being that is physical, sexual, intellectual, and spiritual, made to be a dwelling place, a temple, for the divine. We assume that outside the frames of “Good Country People” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the main characters continue to reconcile their intellect with their female bodies, echoing the words of the hermaphrodite: “I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be” (248).



### Chapter 3

#### **“I have known you by name”: Called Bodies in “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation”**

It was during her final battle with lupus that O’Connor wrote several of the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) from her home in Milledgeville and then from the Baldwin County Hospital. Farrar, Straus and Giroux published the collection posthumously and upon its release, critics immediately compared the collection with *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955). They noted that the settings in her final collection seemed more familiar than those in her earlier writing, the characters more ordinary. The cast of her first collection—a peg-legged philosopher, a one-armed wanderer, a hermaphrodite prophet, a parrot-clad outlaw—had been replaced by a somewhat (though not entirely) average bunch, at least in terms of the body. With the exception of O.E. Parker and Rufus Johnson, the bodies in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* are bodies that readers could judge as “normal.” The critics also noted—and seemed oddly disappointed—that the majority of the main characters in the later collection *survive*: seven out of nine live through the end of their own story. From these observations, one critic concluded (and others seemed to agree) that O’Connor had “tempered her prose” due to her illness and impending death (Scott, *The Nation*). Correct as they are in noting that her final collection is quite different from her first, it is far from “tempered”: in fact, it is because of these differences (and perhaps, in part, because of the author’s declining health) that O’Connor’s final collection is her most focused, compelling, and assertive.

Her “ready-made narrative” remains (*Hudson Review*), but its final rendition is sharper and more nuanced than ever before; it is also startlingly insistent. That seven characters survive this “ready-made narrative” is not a symptom of fiction that is “tempered” and has lost its edge: rather, it is the reasonable culmination of O’Connor’s too-small oeuvre that points unrelentingly to the significance of the living, spiritual body.

As is alluded to in the title,<sup>15</sup> *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is yet another instance of O’Connor’s quarrel with Manichaeistic dualism—the Gnostic belief system that attempts to separate body from mind, spirit from flesh. In “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation,” O’Connor explores the futility of this belief system by entrenching the main characters in their own bodies. O.E. Parker and Ruby Turpin—Gnostic opposites of Hulga and “the child,”—define themselves and others only by that which is physical and material. The development of these characters, like so many of O’Connor’s, parallels the narration of the Roman Catholic Eucharist, progressing from incarnate body to transubstantiating violence, and finally to the potential for a higher reality—at once bodily and spiritual. However, for O.E. and Mrs. Turpin, the parallel is subtly (though not mercifully) shifted: it is an emotional violence rather than a physical violence that is ultimately transubstantiating.

The selfhoods of O.E. Parker and Ruby Turpin are shattered when their bodies are *named*—labeled by other characters in such a way that the protagonists must, for the first time, see themselves as unified beings, physical bodies in need of spiritual grace. The act of

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<sup>15</sup> “Everything that rises must converge” is an evolutionary claim made by Jesuit priest and geopaentologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his controversial 1955 book entitled *Le Phenomene Humain* or *The Human Phenomenon*, which was in O’Connor’s personal library. His theory of evolution claims that the directional movement of matter, then life, and finally thought is “both forward and upward to a mystical union with God-Omega, the beginning and end of cosmic evolution” (Birx). Teilhard’s theory, like O’Connor’s fiction, points toward human wholeness and eschews the idea that body and spirit can endure separately.

being “called” or “named” by another displaces O.E. and Mrs. Turpin: hearing the truth about themselves violently repositions them outside their own bodies to quite literally view their own bodies in light of O’Connor’s Truth. These “callings” from fellow characters disorder Parker’s and Mrs. Turpin’s bodily identities, leaving them to re-order their respective existences within the framework of a potentially higher “calling.”

In a 1975 homecoming address to Georgia State College and University, Rev. Ed Nelson noted that O’Connor, a GSCU alumna, turned her characters “inside out, hindside before, and upside down” (Archives). And indeed, this remains true especially in her final collection: the bodies that inhabit the pages of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* continue to push, flip, and twist typical understandings of the body. For example, “Judgment Day” and the collection’s title story, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” challenge classed and racialized bodies; “A View of the Woods” questions the value of human bodies at odds with the natural world; “The Enduring Chill” plays with the consequences of bodies that are—tragically or, perhaps blessedly—mortal. But perhaps the most sacramental analysis of the body in this collection explores the naming of bodies—that is, the *calling* of bodies both away from and then back to their incarnate forms. In “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation,” this calling comes in a literal, verbal, and uncomfortably personal form: O.E. and Mrs. Turpin have names, and thus identities, imposed upon them by other characters, quite against their will.

In O’Connor criticism, much is made of characters’ names, and for good reason. We have archival proof that the author chose them carefully: early drafts of her work show name changes in many of the O’Connor characters whose final names we now consider an integral

part of their identity.<sup>16</sup> We might also speculate that O'Connor modeled the naming in her fiction on the Biblical significance of names. In O'Connor's copy of Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, she marked the following passage:

...each individual is created for his own sake. The Hebrew metaphysics of individuation is illustrated by the significance of the proper name in the Bible. "I have known you by name." God speaks to Jeremiah as to the particular being that he is: "before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you," for particular beings are willed and created for their own sake. Each one's name, each one's essence is unique and irreplaceable...*apax legomenon*. (Bieber-Lake 236)

Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas, from whose *Summa Theologica* O'Connor read nightly, links a thing's essence with its name. In Part I, Chapter XVIII, Article III of the *Summa*, Aquinas speaks of naming "a thing in accordance with our knowledge of it." He continues, "...from external properties names are often imposed to signify essences." Certainly, O'Connor, it seems, was aware of the sacramental power of naming—of calling someone truthfully, or exactly, as he or she *is*.

O'Connor's emphasis on nomenclature is certainly rich fodder for criticism, and it has led to a tendency among O'Connor scholars to probe the author's name choices on an almost extra-literary level (Browning 92). However, we need only review the way in which O'Connor *uses* characters' names in her fiction to realize that the act of being called

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<sup>16</sup> This is true with *Wise Blood's* Hazel Motes, for example, who was originally Hazel Wickers. The main character in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian Godhigh, was originally Julian Grandleigh (Archives).

something—anything— is imbued with social, spiritual, and sometimes, political power. We witnessed, for example, the power of a given name and one woman’s reaction to it to in the story of Joy / Hulga Hopewell; conversely, we witnessed in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” the power of being left *unnamed*, like “the child.” Being given a name, then, allowing someone else to define the body, gives (or denies) a way to see the self. This is something humans cannot fully do without the view of an “other.” In “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation,” the main characters are called away from themselves in order that they might see and subsequently claim their own bodies as O’Connor would have them: as hosts—as temples— of the spiritual.

### **“Parker’s Back”**

When we meet O.E. Parker, he is sitting on the front porch with his wife, Sarah Ruth—“plain, plain, plain”—trying to figure out how it came to be that the pregnant woman snapping beans next to him had “conjured” him into continued matrimony (*Complete Stories* 510). Sarah Ruth is a dogmatic, nagging, fundamentalist and, notes Parker, “in addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin”: she didn’t “smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language, or paint her face, and God knew some paint would have improved it” (510). Parker thinks maybe she married him to save him, and he doesn’t have to think twice about why he had married her—“he couldn’t have got her any other way” (510). Why he has stayed with her, though, is genuinely puzzling to him: “he could account for [Sarah Ruth] one way or another; it was himself he could not understand” (510).

The character dynamics of “Parker’s Back” reveal that O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker are two parts of a whole: the humorously Gnostic tendencies of each highlight the imbalance

of both. In a 1964 letter her friend Betty Hester, O'Connor mentions that Caroline Gordon (O'Connor's long-time sounding board) had praised her for "dramatiz[ing] a heresy" in "Parker's Back." In a follow-up letter, she clarifies exactly what was heretical about the story: "No, Caroline didn't mean the tattoos were the heresy. Sarah Ruth was the heretic—the notion that you can worship pure spirit" (*Habit of Being* 593). For O'Connor, whose "center of existence" was the Incarnation, worship of a purely spiritual God was a solemn theological affliction. Sarah Ruth Cates, the daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, is (or at least *acts as though* she is) a Manichean *in extremis*. Her aversion to all that is "of the world" extends to cars, color, and of course, her husband's tattoos.

However, O.E. Parker, "the walking panner rammer" (519), delights in the flesh—in the revelry, the sexuality, the aesthetic possibility, and the wonder inherent to the human body. A series of flashbacks reveals that in Parker's twenty-eight years, his body has served as his capital, his canvas, and also, in a sense, his compass. Like Enoch Emery, O.E. Parker lives entirely by instinct. Also like Enoch, Parker's instinct is startlingly self-aware: he is able to sense through intuition what he does not have the background or vocabulary to articulate. It is this intuition—a bodily wisdom—that drives Parker on an unconscious search for self-understanding.

O'Connor illuminates this search in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," when she proposes that "to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks" (*Mystery and Manners* 35). "Parker's Back" is the narrative of O.E. Parker's intuitive, fumbling, and bodily search for what he lacks—a way to be called, named, and valued by a force outside himself. Parker's search, though centered in the body, points continuously past his body and toward

the Incarnation, ultimately forcing him to step outside himself in order to see himself more clearly. For Obadiah Elihue Parker, it is ultimately not being named, but naming *himself* that leads to an understanding of a spiritual identity *through*—not in spite of—his body.

The first of Parker's unsatisfying experiments with identity begins at the age of fourteen. During a trip to the fair, a teen-aged O.E. sees a man completely covered in tattoos—"a single, intricate design of brilliant color," "an arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin" (512-513). O'Connor treats this moment with the reverence of a vision: when O.E. sees this man from the back of the tent, it is "as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed" (513). Though initially blind to the implications of the sight before him, Parker internalizes the knowledge that the tattooed man possessed something he physically needs—a body defined and valued, both by its creators (its artists) and its observers. He also senses some semblance of order among the pictures on the man's body—wholeness, balance, and cohesiveness that appeals to him. In the fair tent before young Parker is an aperture into self-definition that even he, "ordinary as a loaf of bread" (513), can understand and perhaps attain.

During the writing of "Parker's Back," O'Connor was reading a book about tattooing entitled *Memoirs of a Tattooist*. In a letter to Betty Hester, she comments that the author (a professional tattoo artist) chose a picture of his wife for the cover of the book—"very demure Victorian lady in off-shoulder gown." O'Connor goes on to write, "Everything you can see except her face and hands is tattooed. Looks like fabric. HE DID IT" (*The Habit of Being* 594). While tattoos may seem like an odd fetish to impose upon a fictional character, O'Connor's last emphatic comment—"HE DID IT"—explains why she chose this fixation

for Parker. The act of getting a tattoo is the act of being marked—pierced, again and again—*by another*.

Here, as in so many O'Connor stories, a character plays unconsciously into the story of the Eucharist, offering up to O'Connor, as a sacrifice, the incarnational artist's most apropos canvas—the body. Tattoos offer the same fictional illustration as the crucifix imprinted in “the child's” face in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”: a body is marked through the power of and from the perspective of another. Parker gets his first tattoo quite a while after his vision at the fair, and the feeling of individuality it gives him quickly turns an experiment in identity into an obsession. He soon discovers that the tattooist's needle only provides a fleeting sense of self-definition: each colorful addition interests him for about a month, at which time a “huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up” (514). But Parker's dissatisfaction with the result is put into perspective when he meets an “other” who truly despises his tattoos: his future wife.

“A terrible bristly claw slammed the side of his face,” a harbinger of its owner's righteous anger: “You don't talk no filth here!” (511). Sarah Ruth Cates, as Parker learns when his head stops spinning, is the first person who is—ostensibly—unimpressed with the tattoos he had worked so long to perfect. “Vanity of vanities<sup>17</sup>,” she shrills (515). Parker is intrigued. In Sarah Ruth, daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, Parker is face to face with something he unconsciously wants, but does not know how to access: a sense of meaning beyond his body. He reacts to her brush-off with the same awe-struck disbelief as he had at

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<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2



the sight of the tattooed man: he “remained for almost five minutes, looking agape at the dark door she had entered” (515). Parker’s desire for Sarah Ruth—similar to his desire for tattoos—is as yet instinctive: it is again “as though a blind boy had been turned” and “did not know his destination had been changed” (513).

Richard Giannone explains why Parker might be so enamored with a woman to whom his entire self-definition is a “heap of vanities” (515). In *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love*, Giannone compares Sarah Ruth to a tattooist’s instruments: her piercing “ice pick” eyes, her cutting words—he calls them “Scriptural shibboleths” (222)—mark Parker, define him, and offer his largely unconscious self something to “directly and creatively oppose” (223). What he opposes—bodily, colorfully, unavoidably—is Sarah Ruth’s all-encompassing fear of graven images: her heretical Manichaeism. This challenge, the manifestation of his clear opposite, makes Parker all the more determined to woo Sarah Ruth. But it is not until he speaks her language—unconsciously creating a dialogue of “Scriptural shibboleth” (222)—that he begins to make progress in both pursuing Sarah Ruth and claiming his own identity.

During his third trip to the Cates household, O.E. Parker unknowingly receives his first taste of real identity—that elusive calling which he has been seeking with body and soul. O.E. arrives to find that Sarah Ruth is ready to show some interest in something other than his obligatory offering of food: “What’s your name?” she asks (517). Having never revealed his name to anyone, he whispers it in her ear—Obadiah Elihue—and Sarah Ruth’s “face slowly brighten[s] as if the name came as a sign to her” (517). When O.E. calls himself by his name, she sees something she recognizes in his “heap of vanities”: along with the

heroic Biblical characters with the same names, “Obadiah” and “Elihue” mean “Servant of the Lord” and “My God is He” (Orvell 169). O.E. is oblivious to what he has just called himself—that he has just, in a sense, solved his own identity crisis—but his future wife recognizes that in O.E.’s name there is at least hope, if not something of a hero. She repeats his name in a reverent voice, to which he responds, “If you call me that aloud, I’ll bust you head open. What’s yours?” (517).

Sarah Ruth Cates and Obadiah Elihue Parker are married at the County Ordinary’s office: the bride, in her most extreme declaration of Manichaeism, declares churches to be idolatrous. As proved true with his tattoos, marrying Sarah Ruth does not satisfy O.E.’s need to be “called”—to have another acknowledge and value him. They remain two parts of a whole—body and spirit—but the result is not balance and fulfillment; rather, it is a frustrating inability of each to acknowledge the other—call the other—in a way that is true or loving. Their imbalanced relationship is mirrored in the bedroom: “except in total darkness, [Sarah Ruth] preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down” (519). Sarah Ruth, ever the Gnostic, prefers her husband as she prefers her God: as conceptual as possible. With the images on his body out of sight, O.E. is just a voice to her: she can accept his word without accepting (except in the literal, sexual sense) his flesh. Parker is miserable. Not only is his wife “ugly and pregnant and no cook” (519), but she is also unwaveringly critical of the one thing he thinks he understands about himself—his body.

Parker’s decision to get a tattoo his wife cannot resist—“a religious subject”—reveals how desperately he wants her to accept his bodily identity. So does its placement: the only space left on his body is his back, which he cannot admire unless he stands between two

mirrors and “make[s] an idiot of himself” (518). Though he claims the object of the tattoo is to “bring Sarah Ruth to heel,” the desire that moves him and the sincere thought he puts into the decision—especially his willingness to put a tattoo where only others can see it—suggest that Parker is consciously, and perhaps for the first time, acknowledging that he needs an “other” in order to value himself. Bieber-Lake notes that the story’s title becomes, through Parker’s need, both possessive and declarative: try as he might to free himself from Sarah Ruth, ultimately, Parker’s back is why Parker keeps coming back, in search of a way to be called (228).

The next day a call explodes—quite literally—into Parker’s workday. His mind occupied with his next tattoo, Parker runs his tractor into a tree. In a moment of vivid theophany, the tree reaches out to overturn his tractor and sends Parker flying, hearing himself call out the very name he has so long been avoiding: “GOD ABOVE!” The tractor bursts into flame; Parker’s shoes, which have flown off in the crash, burst into flame; from his spot on the ground, Parker can “feel the hot breath of the burning tree” (520). The Mosaic allusion of the burning bush and the cast-off sandals make it clear that the accident is, in fact, no accident: God is calling Parker, deliberately charging him with the daunting task ahead of him. Like Moses who hides his face in response to God’s call, O.E. takes to the hills, crawling, then running toward his truck—toward escape. O’Connor describes his terrified scramble across the field as a “forward-bent run from which he collapsed on his knees twice” (521). Giannone proposes that this is a bodily allusion to Christ carrying his cross: the balance it creates of Old Testament Mosaic imagery with New Testament crucifical imagery implies that O.E. is in the midst of fulfilling a prophecy (225). And indeed, Parker speeds to

town with only an instinct for what he has to do: “He only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished” (*The Complete Works* 521).

When Parker, still barefooted, enters into the tattooist’s studio, he is there to arrive at a decision already made for him—and to be marked with a name he is already called. He flips backwards through a book of potential pictures of God to use as a tattoo—The Good Shepherd, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician’s Friend—until one face glances at him and sternly commands from a couple pages later, “GO BACK” (522). The command at once leads Parker to the image of a Byzantine Christ and verifies its ordained placement: “GO BACK.” The picture Parker hands the artist is “stern” and “haloed” with “all-demanding eyes”: Parker is at once terrified and “brought to life with a subtle power” (522). After a self-baptism in the studio sink, he submits himself to the artist’s iodine pencils. The tattooing is work for two days—significantly, the amount of time Christ spent in the tomb—and so Parker, with a half-drawn Christ on his back, spends the night at the Haven of Light Mission, “long[ing] miserably for Sarah Ruth” in the glow of a phosphorescent cross (524).

When the artist finishes his tattoo the next day, Parker does not want to look at the result. His refusal to look incenses the artist, who—playing an unknowing role in Parker’s self-discovery—sets up mirrors and demands that Parker admire his work. When Parker—now a walking tabernacle—looks in the mirror, he feels “as transparent as the wing of a fly” (524). In looking at once at his own back and into the eyes of Christ, Obadiah Elihue Parker is seeing himself as he really is—an incarnational being, both body and spirit. The truth etched in his back, though, terrifies him: with those eyes—“still, straight, all-demanding”—

on his back, Parker can no longer escape the connection between his body and Christ's body that has been drawn—quite literally—for him.

Parker cannot yet, however, connect the picture on his back with the implications for his own body: he does not see that his body has led him to the Incarnation—to *be* an Incarnation. After a bottle of whisky to blur the memory of the all-knowing eyes, Parker discovers that others are as confused by his tattoo as he is. The crowd at the pool hall reacts in shocked silence; in response, Parker starts a fight and is kicked out “as if the long barn like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea” (527).

So he heads, at last, back home, hoping that Sarah Ruth will help him sort out his recent experiences and anticipating, of course, that she will be pleased with his new tattoo. Yet Sarah Ruth will demand that he pay, with his name, to even come into her presence. When Parker cries, “Sarah Ruth! Let me in!” he receives only a sharp “Who’s there?” from inside. His answer, “O.E.,” does not satisfy her. When she asks again, “Who’s there?,” O.E. turns around and sees “a tree of light burst over the skyline” (528)—a reminder of his earlier experience that had charged him—called him—to get the tattoo. This time, he answers with his called name: “‘Obadiah,’ he whispers, 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!’” (528).

By calling his own name—Obadiah Elihue... “Servant of the Lord” “My God is He”—Parker claims the picture on his back for his own, transubstantiating his body into a unity with his spirit—a unity he sensed in the “arabesque of colors” on the tattooed man at the fair. Though Parker has moved beyond his Gnosticism, Sarah Ruth has not moved

beyond hers: when Parker shows her the tattoo of Christ, she screams, “Idolatry!” and beats him across the back with a broom until he staggers out the door. Having marked himself with Christ, Parker is now going to *be* like Christ. Embracing at last his bodily and spiritual identity of “Servant of the Lord,” he can only weep: “There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby” (530). It is the moment of his rebirth: Parker, whom his wife has rightly called “as ordinary as a loaf of bread,” is, like the Communion wafer, a temple of the Holy Ghost.

### **“Revelation”**

Parker is able to glimpse the Divine in his body because of, not despite, his love of the flesh. Before he realizes his body is a temple of the Holy Ghost, he already considers it a temple, albeit for one for drink, girls, and tattoos. The shift for Parker—the beginning of transubstantiation—is grounded in a language he can understand. He is called, in a sense, by his own body, in order to see his body wholly, in its fleshly and spiritual fullness. Bodily image remains an agent of transformation in “Revelation,” though for Ruby Turpin, the transubstantiating image is not—at least not at first—concrete or visible: it is the self-righteous image she has mentally created of herself. Ruby Turpin must be called not *to* her own body and *by* it, like Parker, but rather *from* her own body—away from the false pride of her self-image and toward an understanding of her body that is humble, communal, and unquestionably spiritual.

O’Connor begins “Revelation”—one of her favorite stories (*Habit of Being* 551)—in a space inherently permeated with bodily concerns: the waiting room of a doctor’s office. The scene is familiarly unpleasant, with the gold potted plastic fern, limp magazines, bloody

tissues, and too-close crowd of unwell bodies inevitably found in such places. This particular lobby—“hardly bigger than a garage” (489)—is made all the more cramped with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Claud and Ruby Turpin. Ruby Turpin’s presence immediately dominates the space, filling it with her large size and loud voice, and saturating it with her sticky-sweet pleasantries. Though the majority in the room might disagree, Ruby Turpin clearly considers herself an upgrade to the space she just entered—and an upgrade to the quality of its occupants. Her forced small talk makes it clear that Ruby considers the others in the waiting room to be, not fellow bodies in need of help, but rather commodities—stock, with a fixed value. She defines people—calls people—not by what they are, but by what they have.

Ruby feels very fortunate with what *she* has—“a little bit of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.” She considers industry and cleanliness next to godliness, and believes herself to have mastered both. Not only does she “do for the church” (507), and stay “accountable for good order...common sense and respectable behavior,” but she is also plump, clean, and well dressed, with good skin, and “not a wrinkle in her face except around her eyes from laughing too much” (490). When she walks into the crowded waiting room, Ruby immediately allies herself with a woman whom she considers to have many of the same qualities as herself: “well dressed” (488), “stylish” (490), and “pleasant” (490). But Ruby is attracted to more than just seeing herself in this woman: the imagined alliance sets the two apart from the crowd, allowing Ruby to define herself not just by the woman, but also against everyone else. At one point, these two lock eyes and Ruby imagines them sharing a smug remark regarding the “white trash” lady: “you have to *have* certain things before you can *know* certain things.” This moment supports Joseph Henderson’s idea that the

appealing woman serves as Ruby's "double" who "reveals the gap between one's self and one's self image" (94). That "gap" is, of course, the protagonist's greatest flaw: she cannot see her self beyond the image she has created of herself. Ruby's assumption that her "double" shares her thoughts simply because the two women share the same space in her imagined social hierarchy suggests that Ruby definitely doesn't "*know* certain things."

O'Connor creates another double of sorts for Ruby Turpin, one who simultaneously explains and undermines her alliance with the "well-dressed" woman in the waiting room: Ruby's understanding of herself is manifest in the way she raises her pigs. The animals, for instance, (she makes sure everyone knows it) are raised in a pig parlor. They are "not dirty and they don't stink": "Claud scoots them down with the hose every afternoon and washes off the floor" (493). In a parallel to their owner's view on her own position in life, Ruby's pigs are even raised on concrete so that their feet never touch the ground—raised, literally, above the common, elevated above the dirt. They might *be* pigs—that might be their lot in life—but certainly they do not have to *act* like pigs, "a-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin" (506).

This philosophy of "to seem, rather than to be" is Ruby's primary lens for viewing human interaction. It extends into a hierarchical understanding of people's places in the social scale, what Giannone describes as a "closed circuit of intolerances that pass for social distinctions" (213):

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them



the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. (491)

In her racist, classist, myopic understanding of the world, people *are* their material possessions. She demonstrates this materialistic view by classifying people in the waiting room according to their shoes—that is, what raises them above the dirt, the common. She observes red and gray suede pumps for the well-dressed woman (the woman like herself), Girl Scout shoes for the ugly girl, and on the white trash woman, “bedroom slippers”—“exactly what you would have expected her to have on” (491). The quality and even the heel height of each woman’s shoe is an indication to Ruby of how far up the social ranks she belongs. Ruby, of course, is wearing her “good black patent leather pumps,” putting her far above the majority of the others (491).

Overhearing Ruby’s self-centered chatter (and perhaps sensing more of it than is actually vocalized) is Mary Grace—an “ugly” teenage girl, face blue with acne, head buried in a *Human Development* textbook, scowling at Ruby’s contrived smile (490). Mary Grace ultimately is the catalyst for Ruby’s transubstantiation—the force that emotionally violates her, names her so that she can name herself. Mary Grace can see right through Ruby’s façade and, fuming behind her textbook, has no doubt mentally named her quite a few things before actually imparting her catalytic insult. Ruby Turpin has no idea she is soon to be attacked by this girl, but she can sense that Mary Grace—“whose actions belie her being hailed as full of it,” says Burns (5)—recognizes something unpleasant about her: it is “as if [Mary Grace] had known and disliked her all her life—all of Ruby’s life, it seems too, not just all the girl’s life” (495).

And indeed, Mary Grace is the only human character who does recognize what is overwhelmingly wrong with Ruby Turpin—or at least the only character who dares to eventually vocalize the truth about her. What Mary Grace perceives is Ruby’s all too clear-cut view of the world, her overwhelming need to categorize and rank—to call—people based on their appearance, in a way that places her above them. Ruby Turpin’s name exemplifies the way she sees the world and the way she expects the world to see her. Her first name—what is known, ironically in this case, as a *Christian* name—implies value, wealth, something worthy of praise. It’s how she identifies herself, and how she assumes she is identified by others. Her last name, however, speaks the truth about her: “*turpis*” is the Latin root for “disgraceful or shameful” (Pepin 26).

Like O.E. Parker, Ruby Turpin desperately needs to be called—to know herself by name—so that she might see herself in all her disgrace. But her identity crisis is, perhaps to her detriment, almost the exact opposite of Parker’s. Because Parker has no idea where to find his identity, he searches for it indefatigably, if without self-awareness; Ruby, however, has entirely too clear an idea of her identity, and thus never bothers to look beyond it. While Parker seeks wonder (if in all the wrong places) as a means to understanding himself, Ruby is content to stay right where she is. She is representative of the sort of mild Gnosticism O’Connor called “pretty much the modern spirit” (*Mystery and Manners* 68). When Ruby thinks of bodies at all, she reduces them to abstractions—markers—for social standing, and when she thinks of spirit, she reduces it as well—specifically to her own standing within the church. For Ruby, fusing these elements of body and spirit—embracing the truth of the Incarnation—will require admitting her faults and seeing herself as spiritual *in* her

disgracefulness: it requires, as it did for Parker, a Mosaic removal of the sandals, a dirtying of the feet in holy ground—perhaps, then, even a walk around in someone else’s shoes. But this prospect, for tidy Ruby Turpin, is entirely too messy. She is perfectly content to assume what she considers a privileged position in the social hierarchy—her ordained spot, somewhere safe and clean in the middle, where there is no need to think about what is beneath her.

It is this privileged position that inspires Ruby’s thankful outburst—“Thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!”—and the outburst that pushes Mary Grace over the edge. She hurls her book, *Human Development*, at Ruby, hitting her just above the eye—the eye that pigeonholes, classifies, and yet cannot see beyond itself. Feeling pain mostly to her dignity, Ruby plans to demand an apology from Mary Grace, and “lean[s] forward until she [is] looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes” (*Complete Stories* 500) of the one character who can see her clearly. In a moment akin to Parker’s first look at the eyes tattooed on his back, Ruby looks in the eyes of her attacker and has her earlier intuition confirmed: there is now “no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, kn[o]w her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (500). Mary Grace’s eyes are described as “much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air” (500). Sloan notes that the juxtaposition of two images – “looking directly” and “a door—now open”—underscores the significance of the attack as an opportunity for Ruby to see herself, to be called truly—as God would see her (141). Locking eyes with Ruby Turpin, Mary Grace calls her truthfully—“Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (*Complete Stories* 500)—equating Ruby to the trashy, lazy people

she mentally describes as “dirtier than hog[s]” (496). Mary Grace undermines Ruby’s driving force—her self-image—and does so with an emotional violence that begins the process of Ruby’s transubstantiation. Though Ruby does not change in body, her essence here begins to shift. She starts to question her own place in society: *Is she*, Ruby wonders, *really a wart hog? From hell?*

In asking these questions, Ruby—too confused to be any longer the jovial church lady—shows that she has changed significantly. Rather than dismissing Mary Grace’s words as nonsense from someone beneath her—someone out of her mind—rather than running from her words and assuming they couldn’t possibly apply to her, Ruby internalizes them. She considers Mary Grace’s words to be a message from God, and becomes haunted by the very real possibility that the girl could have called her truthfully. Later that day, she is awakened by an image that “snorts” into her mind—“a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out from behind its ears” (502). Doubting herself now for the first time, she seeks solace in an “other” who will, no doubt, see Ruby—call her—exactly as she wants. The hired help, a quirky band of black women, do indeed affirm her identity—“you the sweetest white lady I know! Jesus satisfied with her!” (503). But what might have validated her before now only seem insincere and falsely pacifying. “Idiots,” she dismisses.

In a last, desperate attempt to maintain her self-image, Ruby does what O’Connor later acknowledges takes “a very big woman” (*Habit of Being* 577): in the setting sun around the pig parlor, she goes right to the source of Mary Grace’s message to investigate its validity. Taking up the defensive, Ruby assumes that the message was not in fact meant for her—that, certainly, God got it all wrong. For Ruby Turpin, believing that God has erred is

preferable to believing that she—that life—is not as tidy as the image of it she has created. Her whisper of “concentrated fury” demands, “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?,” admitting—really, affirming—the connection between herself and the hogs. O’Connor completes the connection by adding an “other” to confirm it: the sun—aligned with Christ in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” among other stories—looks “over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs.” Ruby is, in fact, one of the hogs God is inspecting (Sloan 143). “Go on!” she says, a bit late on the draw, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again!” And in a “final surge of fury” she roars, “Who do you think you are?” The question, directed at God, directed at Mary Grace, directed at anyone but herself, is “carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood” (507-508). Ruby Turpin, who has always known the exact answer to “who do you think you are?,” looks at the pigs and knows, “as if through the very heart of mystery,” that the answer is not what she has so long assumed. Just as an uncommonly clean pig is still a pig, Ruby Turpin is still a human—bodily, dirty, sinful—just like all those she considers beneath her.

When at last she lifts her head from this “abysmal life-giving knowledge”—knowledge of the body—she sees in the sky its incarnational complement: a vision of “a vast hoard of souls, rumbling toward heaven”—“companies of white trash” up front, “bands of black niggers in white robes,” “whole battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs” (508). Among these bodies—redeemed, spiritual bodies—Ruby Turpin is able, for the first time, to see herself clearly: bodies she recognizes as similar to her own—with “a little bit of everything and the God-given wit to use it right” (505)—are

bringing up the rear of the procession. Her body, she realizes, is not above what is common, and indeed is the *least* of those in “rank”: she is, just like the bodies of the freaks and the lunatics and the white trash—a fleshly, spiritual being. God has put “the bottom rail on top” (507): it is the base, the crass, the dirty that points Ruby Turpin toward a higher calling.

Like every O’Connor story, this one leaves us to wonder if Ruby will embrace the spiritual worldview displayed before her in the night sky. O’Connor says in a letter to Maryat Lee that Ruby “gets the vision,” continuing, “Wouldn’t have been any point in the story if she hadn’t” (*Habit of Being* 577). But perhaps of greater importance is not what Ruby does with the knowledge, but rather what has been done *to Ruby*. She has been called from her inflexible, reductive, but comfortable worldview in order that she might be made uncomfortable—a calling that comes, even more painfully, through a body she thought below her own. That people need to be called—and perhaps, uncomfortably called—by a bodily “other” is at the heart of O’Connor’s “bottom rail on top” sense of justice. That people need this uncomfortable calling again and again is at the heart of the Eucharist.

### Concluding Remarks

Though “Revelation” precedes “Parker’s Back” in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O’Connor actually began writing “Parker’s Back” long before she got the idea for Ruby Turpin’s story. Mentioned in her letters as early as December 1960 (*Habit of Being* 424) and not finished until a few weeks before her death on August 3, 1964, the story of O.E. Parker was a protracted struggle for O’Connor. In a 1961 letter to Betty Hester, the author mentioned that the writing of “Parker’s Back” was “not coming along too well.” She continued, “It is too funny to be as serious as it ought. I have a lot of trouble with getting the right tone” (*Habit of Being* 427). Her letters show that she continued to send the story to Betty Hester, Caroline Gordon, and Catherine Carver for revisions until July 15, 1964.

Perhaps O’Connor’s struggle to sharpen “Parker’s Back” stems from the fact that its narrative so closely parallels the Eucharist. Obadiah Elihue’s body comes to be a body *of* Christ—literally absorbing Christ into his flesh, acknowledging that his body is, like the Incarnate God, at once material and spiritual. A consideration of O’Connor’s oeuvre through the lens of the Eucharist—through the lens of the body—makes “Parker’s Back” the story to which all the others lead. As her most concrete celebration of the body as sacramental and redemptive, “Parker’s Back” epitomizes most visually her “center of existence”—the Incarnation (*Habit of Being* 389).

This leaves “Revelation” not as an afterthought, but rather as a coda to her most Eucharistic work. She wrote the later story quickly, “as a reward for setting in the doctor’s office” (*Habit of Being* 579), and she reports to Maryat Lee, “I have writ a story [“Revelation”] with which I am, for the time being anyway, pleased, pleased, pleased” (*Habit*

*of Being* 551). “Revelation” visualizes the “vast hoard of souls rumbling toward heaven”—an *aide memoir* of O’Connor’s cast of “freaks and lunatics” whom she points toward the divine through the medium of the body over the space of her collected works (*Complete Stories* 508). The “battalion” in the night sky might include Hazel Motes, Hula Hopewell, “the child,” and O.E. Parker, as well as Ruby Turpin—all bodily characters who O’Connor leaves, at the end of their respective stories, with some sense of the spiritual nature of their own bodies.

These bodies, O’Connor reminds us, are a good and necessary part of our human understanding of the spiritual. She demonstrates that this combination is made clear in the example of Christ who “didn’t redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form” (*Mystery and Manners* 176). O’Connor’s writing is an exploration of this spiritual embodiment—of the divine incarnate in the most unlikely and, at least initially, unsuspecting bodies. O’Connor’s characters discover the united reality of their bodies and spirits unintentionally, unwillingly, and perhaps (we can only guess), incompletely. Their faltering understanding of their own bodily significance is exemplified in the third of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1941):

"The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.  
Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual."

In the “impossible union / of spheres of existence” lies the force of O’Connor’s stories: the incarnational sacrament of the Eucharist drives her narratives and shapes her characters, generating a reality in which people are saved not *from* the physical but, essentially, *through* the physical. The Incarnation provided for O’Connor a fictional



model, an object of worship, and an understanding of her bodily and spiritual self: as these personal incarnational experiences synthesized and deepened over the course of her life, they were translated into fiction—into a sharpened ability to make manifest the drama of characters who experience and survive the redeeming “ultimate reality” of their own divinely human natures.

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