"Erasing Angel": The Lucifer-Trickster Figure in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction

Melita Schaum

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Erasing Angel : The Lucifer-Trickster Figure in Flannery O Connor s Short Fiction

by Melita Schaum

"A dimension taken away is one thing; a dimension added is another."
—*Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country"*

"The origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures," writes cultural historian Lewis Hyde, "require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that culture is based on" (9). In his excellent study *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), Hyde joins a long and distinguished line of critics examining the archetypal trickster-figure in world mythologies: a figure of mischievous disruption characterized by rule-breaking, lies, theft, shape-shifting, and wordplay; a citizen of contingencies and thresholds who, while subverting and denigrating existing orders, paradoxically thereby allows for a creative reanimation and restoration of social and metaphysical order. The fraternity of trickster-figures is a familiar one in folklore and myth: Hermes in Greek antiquity, the Chinese Monkey King, the Norse prankster Loki and East Africa's spider-god Anansi (transformed in American Gulla dialect to the folkloric "Aunt Nancy"), the Native American figures of Coyote and Raven, the Yoruba Eshu and the Maori trickster Maui, to mention just a few. From Puck to Prometheus, the pervasiveness of this image in human narrative suggests its centrality as an emblem for redemptive chaos and transformative disorder.

Although Flannery O'Connor's short fiction has long been anchored in the genre of Christian allegory, I believe that viewing her works through the lens of this archetype can expand received readings of her fiction. It may offer new insights as well into O'Connor's unique blend of comedy and corruption that characterizes her rendition of evil in the world. Specifically, her caricatures of Lucifer in four of her more allegorical stories of

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the 1950s—Tom Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Manley Pointer in "Good Country People," The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and Powell Boyd in "A Circle in the Fire"—share much with the folkloric figure of Trickster, not merely in their individual aspects as agents of chaos, but in the paradoxically redemptive function they perform.

Such folkloric and mythic elements in O'Connor have so far received scant critical attention. Of various genre studies, only one extended work—Ruthann Knechel Johansen's *The Narrative Secret of Flannery O'Connor: The Trickster as Interpreter* (1994)—takes up at any length the figure of the trickster in O'Connor. However, I believe Johansen's depiction of this archetypal figure manages to be on the one hand too broad, and on the other too benign. In the context of a narratological analysis of O'Connor's prose, Johansen associates tricksters with "interpreters": Hebraic prophets, mediators, inspired "newsbearers," and facilitators who are "always on the side of human beings" (31)—and ultimately she sees trickster as an emblem of the narrative act itself, a psychic embodiment of "the ironic imagination." While hermeneutically interesting, this more benevolent expansion of the archetype downplays much of the disruptive, purposeless, and chaotic nature of both the mythic trickster and O'Connor's use of him.

Far from being a "Christlike" seducer or helpful reconciler of conflicts (31), Trickster classically functions far more dynamically as the principle of disorder, a catalyst for subversion and loss. He is the "border breaker," the outlaw, the anomaly; deceiver and trick player, shape-shifter and situation-inverter; sacred messenger and "lewd bricoleur"[1]—one who, according to Joseph Campbell, "doesn't respect the values that you've set up for yourself, and smashes them" (qtd in Hynes and Doty 1). While Johansen does capture the essential ambiguity of this figure and acknowledges his "havoc-wreaking" as a ritual of renewal, in many ways her reading, when applied to O'Connor's fiction, becomes overly inclusive of all ironic or indeterminate figures. Johansen incorporates such characters as Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Hulga in "Good Country People," and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" under the porous category of "tricksters." Indeed, Johansen labels even the Holy Spirit a "trickster" because it "mediates between the unknowable God and the Christ, God made flesh" (104).[2] Yet not all ambiguous characters are tricksters, and to conflate duped, self-important, or misguided characters—or emblems of divinity like the Holy Spirit—with the profane, demonic "con artist" of the Trickster is to expand the category beyond usefulness.

I suggest instead that O'Connor uses the trickster archetype in a far more focused fashion, to provide a multi-faceted caricature of the Lucifer-

figure in her debut collection of "stories about original sin," *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.[3] By drawing on folk elements and the archetypal principles of chaos and liminality, O'Connor manages in this early work to provide a depiction of evil that is at once humorous and penetrating, accessible and didactic, just as the profanity it touches upon also reaches into realms of the sacred. Moreover, it is ultimately a figure that moves beyond myth to tie into theories of the redemptive process put forth by Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, who posited evil as "an annihilation which makes room for God's entry into the world" (Montgomery 36).

I should say at the start that critics caution against a direct confusion of Trickster with the conventional Christian Devil, a distinction that becomes clear when one considers a doctrinal view of Satan. Hyde writes:

> The Devil and the trickster are not the same thing, though they have regularly been confused. . . . The Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *a*moral, not *im*moral. . . . One doesn't usually hear said of the Christian Devil what the anthropologist Paul Radin says of the Native American trickster:
>
> > Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. . . . He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social . . . yet through his actions all values come into being. (10)

Yet I would argue that O'Connor's fictive Lucifer in these stories is *precisely* such a figure: not the conventional theological Satan, but an ambiguous character that draws as much on the rhythms of folklore and on narrative traditions such as the grotesque (with its template character of prankster-criminal-madman-clown) as it does on Church doctrine. The result is a figure of evil at once compelling and comic, duping *and* duped himself, as much Br'er Rabbit as Beelzebub.

O'Connor's Trickster poses as a *spiritual* confidence man—liar, thief, smooth operator, the injector of disorder and bankruptor of souls—yet he is himself as often as not comically evil, snared by his own devices, and unwittingly conscripted into the service of divine good. Moreover, by breaking the rigid and sterile orders of misplaced human pride, righteousness, egoism, or appetitive greed, he becomes the disruptive force that paradoxically makes possible social and spiritual renewal. I propose to examine certain characteristics of the trickster-figure in "The Life You Save," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and "Good Country People"—

characteristics of aimlessness, language play, appetitiveness, and theft—then focus more extensively on "A Circle in the Fire" as a parable of property that uses the mythic trickster narrative to advance its lesson about sterility, chaos, and transformation. In this way I hope to show how O'Connor claims a view not at all inconsistent with her deeply-faceted theology, yet one that offers a radically individual and resonantly universal sense of the mysteries of evil and redemption in the modern world.

One of the predominant characteristics of Trickster is his restless, wandering nature. Like Br'er Rabbit or Br'er Fox—or like Hermes, god of roadways—we continually meet him "coming down the road" as the tale begins. As a traveler, he is an emblem of indeterminacy, a figure "at the crossroads" or in the liminal space between communities, ever "on the open road." This device of wandering functions as more than a simple framing device for these narratives. In itself, the idea of wandering introduces the theme of disruption and the overthrow of certainties: literally, to be (or come from) outside the city gates, from "who knows where," is to be or come from a place outside of law, order, and the known. Joseph Campbell situates Trickster "beyond the system" (qtd in Hynes and Doty 1) and William Hynes labels him "an 'out' person . . . outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order" (34). Lewis Hyde places him in historical context: "'To travel from place to place in the ancient world was not only unusual, it was often taken to be a sign of mental derangement (if a story began 'So and so was wandering around aimlessly,' listeners knew immediately that trouble was at hand)" (11). Unsettled and unsettling, the drifter is he who interjects the unpredictable into structures resistant to change, he who forces newness and the unexpected, sometimes in the form of divine accident, into the smugly self-contained.

Tom Shiftlet, in O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is just such a classic wanderer, agent of chaos and change. As with so many of O'Connor's Lucifer-Trickster figures, we first meet him coming up the road, an out-of-town (indeed, out-of-this-world) stranger who seems to arrive at the Crater homestead literally from nowhere. True to his shifty, shiftless name and nature, he dodges Mrs. Crater's questions about his origins: "'You from around here?' 'Name Tom T. Shiftlet,' he murmured, looking at the tires. . . . 'Where you come from, Mr. Shiftlet?' He didn't answer" (*Stories* 146–147). Yet we do learn that he is the quintessential drifter, as liminal in name and identity as he is in locale:

> A sly look came into his face. "Lady," he said, "nowadays, people'll do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain't lying? How you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?"
>
> "I don't know nothing about you," the old woman muttered, irked. (147–148)

As the Father of Lies, O'Connor's Lucifer-Trickster has already rocked the assumed stabilities of truthtelling, identity, and judgement. True to classic trickster form, "he is a vagabond, an intruder to proper society, and an unpredictable liar who throws doubt on the concept of truth itself" (Vecsey 106). Indeed, having unsettled these certainties, his very next question goes to the moral riddle at the heart of O'Connor's stories: "Listen, lady, . . . what is a man?" (*Stories* 147).

Mrs. Crater, representative of a smug world that thinks it "knows it all," is a prime candidate for Trickster's wiles. She is venal, greedy, duplicitous, faithless; most importantly, she believes that she can dupe this "tramp," but is soon to learn that in a game of wits the devil always wins. Far from being "no one to be afraid of" (*Stories* 145), Shiftlet proceeds to con her out of her daughter, her automobile, $17.50, and her immortal soul, in a hoax with which she is wonderfully complicitous, "done in" by her own greed and folly. Tom Shiftlet, drifter and con man, fans out his deck of identities like a pack of cards:

> He had been a gospel singer, a foreman on the railroad, an assistant in an undertaking parlor, and he come over the radio for three months with Uncle Roy and his Red Creek Wranglers. He said he had fought and bled in the Arm Service of his country and visited every foreign land and that everywhere he had seen people that didn't care if they did a thing one way or another. (148)

True to type, at the story's close the trickster-figure is once more in motion, "on the road" towards Mobile and further pranks in parts unknown.

Tom Shiftlet's list of identities is echoed in the wander-litany of The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which seems to roam both in space and time, from modern to Biblical days:

> "I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and

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> abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet . . . I even seen a woman flogged," he said. (*Stories* 129–130)

At this story's outset we learn he is "aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida" (117), most assuredly an intermediary between the worlds of chaos and law. He is escaped, "loose" and unpredictable, yet in some ways, as we shall see, inevitable. As the figure of chance, he represents *accident* in its profoundest sense: a gesture or event that not only shatters received complacencies but also reanimates rigid, narrow orders and reopens them to mystery.

O'Connor herself referred to "the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" in defending her use of violence in this story as revelatory and catalytic. In "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," she explains:

> Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. . . . In my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (*Collected Works* 203)

And, I would add, in the folkloric tradition as well, this view posits Trickster as the principle of necessary disruption when individuals or societies have become too rigid in their beliefs. When order threatens to become sterility—whether social or spiritual—the strange traveler arrives to shatter complacency, the result of which is either downfall or, in the Grandmother's case in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," a redemptive transformation.

A third wanderer-catalyst-trickster is Manley Pointer, the itinerant Bible salesman of "Good Country People."[4] He arrives at the door of the Hopewell farm, introducing himself as someone "not even from a place, just from near a place" (*Stories* 279), and announces that his goal is to become a "missionary," one who travels the world bearing his message—only in this case, ironically, it is a message of disruption. With Hulga, his self-satisfied and unwitting victim, he wanders into the countryside on their

imaginary picnic, leading her progressively further from the known—first towards the barn at the edge of the property, and then up into the hayloft where the comic scene of reverse seduction and trickery will unfold. In traveler's lingo, proud Hulga needs to "lose her bearings." He lures her by way of her own vanity into crossing boundaries from the world she thinks she knows and claims to be master of, to one both unpredictable and revelatory.

Trickster uses disorientation as a tool, as Manley Pointer does when he removes Hulga's glasses in the hayloft and pockets them, leaving her practically blind, seeing the world in inversions of blue and green shapes, mistaking earth for water. Yet obviously this is only an emblem for the inversions and blindnesses she has willed upon herself by way of her nihilistic philosophy and pride; Hulga—as is the case for all those caught in the falsity of intellectual hubris—has long been duping herself. When Manley Pointer finally reveals his true nature—opening his Bible suitcase to pull out whiskey, condoms, and obscene playing cards—he hoists her on her own petard in a final, memorable inversion—"'Aren't you,' she murmured, 'aren't you just good country people?'" (*Stories* 290)—and with the theft of her leg, her soul, and her complacency, the demonic picaro once again resumes his wandering: "And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long" (291).

If Trickster is a figure of displacement and indeterminacy, then boundaries and thresholds are sites where he is to be found. Tricksters are "edge men" according to anthropologist Victor Turner (580); for Hynes "the trickster appears on the edge or just beyond existing borders, classifications, and categories. . . . Visitor everywhere, especially to those places that are off limits, the trickster seems to dwell in no single place but to be in continual transit through all realms marginal and liminal" (34–35). In O'Connor's fiction he appears perpetually at doorways or gates, or at the edges of owned property. He is also, like Hermes, "particularly active at the twilight margins between daylight and darkness" (Doty 48), a crepuscular figure arriving like Tom Shiftlet at sunset, most present in the indeterminate, "in-between" times.

Trickster thus resides at the junctures between worlds—the known and the unknown, the orderly and the chaotic, temporal and divine. One of his functions is to lure his victims into the "traveler's space" of "uncanny ter-

ritory" (Hyde 72), a not-at-homeness (*Unheimlichkeit*) in which they lose their bearings and find themselves between or on the outside of situations and certainties that conventionally orient them. The climactic moment of disillusion and revelation that follows—whether it be the comic comeuppance of Hulga Hopewell or the sudden penetrating vision of love that transforms the Grandmother of "A Good Man is Hard to Find"—completes Trickster's ambivalent, double-edged task. As a figure of *aporia* and transition, his purpose is both to confound and clarify—or rather, to clarify by first confounding. Like the mercuric prankster Hermes, he creates illusion, but he also unveils it; his is the "magic" (Doty 52) that "both enchants and disenchants the world around him" (Hyde 227).

Just as the trickster-figure is situated at junctures that are in-between states, so too is he located linguistically in the shadowland between truth and falsity, a realm where the true and the false are no longer clearly demarcated. This is the place of "crooked speech," of lies and riddles, of snares of rhetoric and sophistry, of duplicity, of the serpentine speech of Milton's Satan. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Trickster is "he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language . . . repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act" (235).[5] It is again a transitional site of disorientation: "Under [Trickster's] enchantment, illusion sinks below the threshold of consciousness and appears to be the truth" (Hyde 78); referentiality is upended so that language offers "not one meaning, but the possibility of meaningfulness" (Doueihi 199). But in this liminal space we can also find the ambiguity that clarifies: paradoxically, the inflexibility of the literal must at times be shattered and revivified by riddle, metaphor, or truth of a different order.

One identifying trait of O'Connor's Lucifer-Trickster is precisely this use of bent language, wordplay, and riddle. Tom Shiftlet in "The Life You Save" does not merely evade Mrs. Crater's questions, nor does he completely dissemble in the course of their discussions. Instead, he answers her in riddles, telling the truth but telling it slant. Asked where he hails from, Shiftlet does not respond directly, but instead lights a match and brings the fire dramatically close to his face. It is a visual clue to his infernal origins that Lucynell Jr., emblem of the mute innocent soul, understands perfectly, and that her literal-minded mother cannot or will not comprehend (*Stories* 147). Similarly, Shiftlet's announced desire to live where he could see a sunset every evening (146) suggests that he comes from someplace not of this world; and when he claims to be someone for whom "some things mean more . . . than money" (148), the reader attuned to his

real identity (and able to decode the "hermetic" messages he sends) understands that his currency is human souls. "Don't ever let any *man* take her away from you," Shiftlet cunningly advises Mrs. Crater about Lucynell, and indeed the unwitting Mrs. Crater complies. The bizarre truths of her own misguided statements—"I would give her up for nothing on earth. . . . I wouldn't give her up for a casket of jewels" (149)—become evident as she sells her immortal soul to the devil for $17.50 and the cost of a fan belt.

Mrs. Crater is dismayingly literal, as imaginatively hollow as her name implies. She is not only linguistically but spiritually locked into the surface of things—surface meanings, surface values—an emptiness that not only invites but assures her downfall. Tom Shiftlet's numerous requests to contemplate the deeper metaphysical truths neither impress nor engage her:

> "'The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always. . .'"
>
> "Listen, Mr. Shiftlet," she said, "my well never goes dry and my house is always warm in the winter and there's no mortgage on a thing about this place." (*Stories* 152)
>
> • • •
>
> He told the old woman then that all most people were interested in was money, but he asked what a man was made for. He asked her if a man was made for money, or what. He asked her what she thought she was made for but she didn't answer, she only sat rocking and wondered if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house. (148)
>
> • • •
>
> "I got," he said, tapping his knuckles on the floor to emphasize the immensity of what he was going to say, "a moral intelligence!" and his face pierced out of the darkness into a shaft of doorlight and he stared at her as if he were astonished himself at this impossible truth.
>
> The old woman was not impressed with the phrase. "I told you you could hang around and work for food," she said, "if you don't mind sleeping in that car yonder."
>
> "Why listen, lady," he said with a grin of delight, "the monks of old slept in their coffins!"
>
> "They wasn't as advanced as we are," the old woman said. (149)

Part of the didactic comedy and instructive play of riddling, here and elsewhere in O'Connor, is the sense that the "impossible truth" of divine

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grace *is* everywhere evident, if we would only be willing, alert, and flexible enough to see. Lucifer doesn't deceive us—we deceive ourselves. Trickster laughingly affords us every opportunity to unpack the truth. It is our own stiff-necked certainty, intellectual pride, and myopic literalism that blind us.

Riddling also informs Manley Pointer's interaction with the purportedly brilliant doctor of philosophy, Hulga, and becomes a way to subvert and reveal the foolishness of intellectual pride. With meretricious suspensefulness, the trickster sets up his verbal con:

> For almost a minute he didn't say anything. Then on what seemed an insuck of breath, he whispered, "You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?"
>
> The girl looked at him stonily. He might have just put this questions up for consideration at the meeting of a philosophical association. "Yes," she presently replied as if she had considered it from all angles.
>
> "It must have been mighty small!" he said triumphantly and shook all over with little nervous giggles, getting very red in the face, and subsiding finally into his gaze of complete admiration, while the girl's expression remained exactly the same. (*Stories* 283)

Pointer deftly makes a fool of Hulga and a mockery of philosophy and intellectual sophistry, which O'Connor's description suggests is nothing more than word-games.[6] All humanity's hubristic attempts to deny the existence of God (to know "nothing of Nothing" [*Stories* 277]), and instead to glorify rationalism through nihilistic wordplay, appear here as witless and shallow as a bad pun. Moreover, despite her degrees, and despite (or because of) her cynical superiority as a philosopher, Hulga is an inflexible thinker with a head as wooden and unbending as her artificial leg, one who cannot "think on her feet," who clearly "ain't so smart" after all. When it comes to confabulation and wordplay, Trickster rules.

If Trickster is the master-player with words and truths, he also reveals duplicity and falsehood in others. O'Connor's stories are replete with characters who distort or attempt to refashion the truth on their own terms, on levels both small and large. Virtually everyone in these stories is fluidly dishonest "in the little things," salting the truth with what appear to be small-scale mendacities. Mrs. Crater lies casually about Lucynell's age, calling the girl "Fifteen, sixteen," although she is nearly thirty years old (*Stories* 151). Thirty-two-year-old Hulga also tells Manley she is seventeen (*Stories* 283), then later in a flurry of sham confession announces "'I must tell you something. There mustn't be anything dishonest between us.'

She lifted his head and looked him in the eye. 'I am thirty years old,' she said. 'I have a number of degrees' " (288). Mrs. Hopewell lies easily about the Bible by her bedside ("'This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere" [*Stories* 278]), just as the Grandmother lies about the cat under her valise and about alluring details of the old plantation that she wants to visit ("'There was a secret panel in this house,' she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were. . ." [*Stories* 123]), all apparently trivial prevarications that nonetheless will lead to their demise.

The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" has the comic duty of repeatedly correcting the Grandmother, both in her superficial inveracities and in her corresponding paste-and-tinsel virtues:

> "You shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart, I can just look at you and tell."
>
> "Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully. (*Stories* 128)

• • •

> "Maybe they put you in by mistake," the old lady said vaguely.
>
> "Nome," he said. "It wasn't no mistake. . ." (130)

• • •

> "If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."
>
> "That's right," The Misfit said.
>
> "Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked trembling with delight suddenly.
>
> "I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself." (130)

• • •

> "Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!"
>
> "Lady," The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, "there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip." (131–132)

Falsehoods and "counterfactual" statements, however, are merely one order of untruth. On a deeper level are the countertruths which these characters have created—profound inversions of the deepest truths that distort the universe and render it absurd. Among these are Hulga's colossal reversals of salvation and damnation, purity and impurity, blindness and insight, good and evil. "I'm one of those people who see *through* to

nothing," she boasts of her moral myopia, "some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see" (*Stories* 287–288). Her self-inflicted blindness causes her quite literally to confuse the devil with Christ, mangling the Biblical injunction to "lose one's life" in Jesus, with disastrous results: "She felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. . . . It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his" (289).

No less fatal is Mrs. Crater's remaking of truth that posits religious faith as atavism and atheism as "advancement," or the Grandmother's inversions of value, her ignoring of profound truths to focus on silly vanities and appearances. She is accessorized for her journey to perdition in white cotton gloves, organdy collar and cuffs, and a "spray of cloth violets containing a sachet" so that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (*Stories* 118). As if to oblige her, the Misfit is well-mannered and polite to a fault as he systematically murders this family of six, demonstrating just how much superficial niceties are worth, how lethal the idolatry of the trivial can be.

The Grandmother, Mrs. Crater, and Hulga are just a few of the individuals who worship at altars of intellect, ego, worldliness, or material vanities. Idolatry and false images are spoken of in Ezekiel, a book of the Old Testament O'Connor knew well and alludes to throughout her fiction. Here, scripture inveighs against the "false altars" erected by the heretical and rebellious, which are destined to be laid waste. "For they are impudent children and stiffhearted," the Bible reads, "impudent and hardhearted" (Ezekiel 2:4,7), and their modern counterparts—the disbelieving rationalists or stubborn materialists of O'Connor's stories—share in their doom. Here Lucifer-Trickster performs the task of ruination in his incarnation as the retrograde "erasing angel" who "cancels what humans have so carefully built" (Hyde 287).[7]

Yet Trickster himself is not always free of the false structures and traps of thinking he dismantles, and as such he can also function as a parody of the limits of intelligence. While the Misfit serves to despoil, for instance, he also represents the doubting mind taken to its paralyzing extreme. A sinister literalist who is unable to believe in Christ because he "wasn't there" to see—one who is even too literal to understand Oedipal metaphors ("It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist churchyard and you can go there

and see for yourself" [*Stories* 130])—the Misfit is not only a destructive but a tormented figure.[8] The prison he complains of is as much the trap of his rigid thinking as anything: stuck in the narrowly empirical, in the "what-is" of the material world, his is truly a case of "turn to the right, it was a wall. . . . Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor" (*Stories* 130).

Tom Shiftlet too seems to match the mythic description of the trickster as both "wise and witless," a blend that makes for the unique comedy of this form of narrative, the trickster's own blindness becoming the subject of laughter. Shiftlet's freewheeling, opportunistic impostures seem to take on a life of their own at times, even to lead him around by the nose.[9] Attempting to lure the hitchiking boy near the story's end with sappy tales of motherly love, he falls into the trap of nostalgia and actually forgets his own origins and identity.[10] When he calls to God, "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" he appears truly surprised when God complies and sends "fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops crashing over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car" (*Stories* 156). It is both part of the theological message and the deep folk humor of O'Connor to reveal that even the devil "ain't so smart."

In mythology, Trickster always begins as the thief of immortality, the serpent in the garden, the prankster whose cupidity or stupidity launches humanity into a world of labor, pain, and death. Variant myths of the Fall include that of Prometheus, whose theft of fire and meat from Zeus resulted in the end of antiquity's Golden Age and the retribution that mortals would grow old quickly and suffer pain in death. Hermes, too, because he longed to eat meat, stole and slaughtered several of Apollo's immortal cattle, thus penetrating the boundaries between the immortal and mortal worlds, and himself becoming messenger and transporter of souls to the underworld. The mischievous Monkey King of Chinese lore stole and consumed the Peaches of Immortality that belonged to the Taoist gods, just as the Norse trickster Loki introduced age and death into the world by snatching away the Apples of Immortality and tricking their keeper, the goddess Idunn. In Native American legend, the tale "Raven Becomes Voracious" details the fall from heaven when a divine prince is tricked into feeling hunger by two appetitive slaves and then, because of his voraciousness, is banished to the earthly realm where eating, eliminating, change, and death rule.[11] In each case it is destructive appetite

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which both precipitates and characterizes the Fall, the source and signature of decline. And it is perhaps as the *principle* of appetite that the trickster-figure remains forever among fallen humanity, a force to be assuaged but never eliminated, an evil that matches Flannery O'Connor's description as "not merely a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured" (*Collected Works* 862).[12]

But it is not the original Fall that interests Flannery O'Connor in her fiction, so much as it is the individual falls from grace that doom so many of her flawed and venal characters in an absurd, postlapsarian world. For the Lucifer-trickster figure in O'Connor, the theft of souls is the second theft of immortality, a reenactment of the original temptation and fall that once again strips victims of eternal life, exploiting their own unrestrained appetites, so to speak, to precipitate their Fall.

Images of eating pervade these stories—whether in Hulga's overfull coffee cup, Lucynell Jr.'s polishing off lunch "as soon as they were out of the yard" (*Stories* 154), or the Grandmother's anecdote about her watermelon-carving suitor, Edgar Atkins Teagarden, or E.A.T. But these images of consumption are merely analogues for the deeper "appetites" that dominate these characters: the voraciousness of ego, of lusts and vanities, the snares through which they "lose themselves" and subsequently lose their souls.[13] "Ravenous" Mrs. Crater is herself a gaping orifice, all mouth, made up solely of venality and material greed. The unrestraint of the Grandmother, whose peevish wants and unchecked, foolish outbursts lead her family to damnation, is another form of intemperance and prodigality that proves lethal. Hulga's indulgences span the list of the seven deadly sins—anger, vanity, gluttony, lust, avarice, envy, sloth—the unreflective appetites that erode the soul and kill the spirit. Such victims propel themselves into the infernal trap, the bargain with the Devil: indeed, they virtually snare themselves with their own blind greed. For them, it is truly the case that "the worm just sits there, the fish catches himself" (Hyde 19).[14]

Trickster-as-predator in this drama of catching and being caught has a cunning understanding of appetite. Whereas his victims indulge and get trapped, Trickster manages to work *with* desire—on the one hand, knowing precisely the right lure that will work with each victim; on the other hand, momentarily suspending his own appetites in order to snare the "prize" of their immortal souls. Tom Shiftlet is one such predator, with his "jutting steel-trap jaw" (*Stories* 146) and his demonic smile that "stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire" (152). He is as voracious as Mrs. Crater—for souls, not sons-in-law—but he "plays" with more calculated restraint in order to get what he wants. Manley Pointer too

negotiates impulse more successfully than his prey, despite the concupiscient thrust of appetite his name implies. He does indeed have "the same condition" as Hulga, yet he works his rapaciousness strategically by offering a camouflage of flattery, false humility, and pinchbeck provincialism that baits the hook her vanity cannot resist. The Devil "springs the trap" by working the prey's hungers while managing his own, thus letting his victims literally "catch themselves."

Yet Trickster is not only the arch-predator; he is more broadly and quintessentially a thief. To return to the concept of theft and loss is to reopen a subtler issue at play in the trickster-myth, that of what is truly owned and what is not. Trickster's thievery is about loss, but it is a unique loss that exposes and examines the very concept of property, ownership, and boundary. In folklore and myth, Trickster's thefts are complex acts—not merely appropriating something (Hermes stealing Apollo's cattle, the babe Krishna stealing sweet butter from his mother's larder), but doing so in a way that dismantles and blurs established distinctions. Hermes is eventually made herdsman of the divine cattle he stole, and the rank of caretaker suddenly elides the categories of belonging or not belonging to. "I didn't steal the butter," the baby Krishna reasons charmingly, dissemblingly, to his mother Yasoda. "How could I steal it? Doesn't everything in the house belong to us?" (Hyde 71). In his retelling of this tale, Lewis Hyde comments: "Our ideas about property and theft depend on a set of assumptions about how the world is divided up. Trickster's lies and thefts challenge those premises and in so doing reveal their artifice and suggest alternatives" (72).

Translating this formulation into O'Connor's theological paradigm, Lucifer-Trickster's function is to unveil false ownership in a more spiritual sense; specifically, to debunk misguided notions O'Connor's characters hold about what is and is not theirs, in both the physical and metaphysical senses. In some cases, their blindness has them clinging to what is valueless, material, and transient while throwing away the one priceless thing they do own, their immortal souls. In other instances, their hubris leads them to appropriate for themselves what in O'Connor's economy in fact belongs to God. In either case, theft and loss of assets—both literal and symbolic—are necessary disruptions that result in a (sometimes cataclysmic) reassessment of property, ownership, and value.

Mrs. Crater is insulated by a false sense of ownership: her world is made up of "*their* porch," "*their* road" (*Stories* 145; emphasis added), *her* well and farm and money, *her* automobile, *her* daughter. Her empire appears to extend even to "the old woman's three mountains" (150) and beyond, as she watches proprietarily over "her" sunset, "with her arms folded across

her chest as if she were the owner of the sun" (146). Of course, her world is reoriented in the extreme when she not only loses but colludes in the theft of all she thinks she owns. Similarly, the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" dwells on material things to afford her identity and status: "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (*Stories* 119), she states smugly and blandly speculates that she should have married a past suitor "because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out" (120). She even lures her family from their appointed direction with a lie about "the family silver" hidden behind a fictitious panel in a plantation from her past. Of course, the superficial objects she so prizes are shown to be both meaningless and invariably lost. "I'll give you all the money I've got!" she screams in desperation when faced with her demise, but The Misfit's wry retort provides a tardy but effective lesson in the worthlessness of material things (132). The Grandmother's miraculous redemption—her last-minute awareness of true value—comes at the cost of her physical life, but even the latter is shown to be a material thing, itself transient and on loan, the body as an "object of property" of little worth, perhaps never really ours to begin with.

What is and is not "ours" is adumbrated in "Good Country People" with Hulga's hubristic belief that she can remake and thereby "own" herself in an originary way. By renaming and so "claiming" herself as property, she executes a heretical parody of divine Creation: "She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga" (*Stories* 275). Yet like the classic con man, the devil shows such existentialist self-creation to be nothing but a game of "tricks and mirrors" (Wadlington 299). Losing everything—her soul, her leg, her "self-possession"—to Trickster's wiles at the story's end shows the foolishness of her misguided sense of what is hers. Again, Trickster's theft is a complex one: not so much to effect his own gain as to undermine and disrupt false orders of value and property. The artificial leg, like the glass eye and other "souvenirs" of his travels, are to him inutile trophies; they literally lose their meaning by being appropriated. But it is the revelation of their meaninglessness that is perhaps the "gift" such mythic theft returns.

I have waited until now to discuss O'Connor's "A Circle in the Fire" in order to demonstrate how as a whole this story unfolds within the pattern of trickster-narratives in a particularly seamless and effective manner.

Uniting all the elements I have examined thus far, this parable of property and loss, order and disruption represents one of O'Connor's darker and more perplexing tales of grace. In a story as classic as a folk tale, the author presents the liminal forces of accident, disorder, and chaos arriving to subvert sterile notions of ownership and sanctity—Trickster as grim prophet, as the "erasing angel," most compellingly at work in his appointed task of disillusion and revelation.

Mrs. Cope, the main character of "A Circle in the Fire," is one of a sisterhood of tough, single women in O'Connor's fiction who hold and manage farms, who eke out their livings against the slings and arrows of shiftless workers, itinerant farmhands, mortgages, and bills.[15] "I have the best kept place in the county," the aptly-named Mrs. Cope boasts, "and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it. . . . I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not always looking for trouble. I take it as it comes" (*Stories* 178). Of course the ironic foreshadowing of her own words will come back to haunt her: she is indeed "not looking" for the trouble that does (with a vengeance) come.

Mrs. Cope's prized woods emerge as the emblem of her earthly holdings, her pride in her own self-sufficiency and success. She is as solicitous of them as of a treasure, constantly fretting that they might catch fire and be destroyed. Indeed, such a loss seems everywhere imminent: the winds and the hot season threaten her; even the grotesque setting sun appears "swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods. . . . The sun burned so fast that it seemed to be trying to set everything in sight on fire" (184). Naturally, this intrusion of the heavenly in the form of a wheel of fire presages the apocalypse to come. Twice the trees Mrs. Cope values beyond price are referred to as a "fortress line" (190), her material goods seeming to form a wall that keeps heaven at bay. Even Mrs. Cope's daughter, the otherwise shortsighted Sally Virginia, "thought the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall [of trees], trying to break through" (176).[16]

Sally Virginia, a juvenile copy of her mother, bullies the trees in childish make-believe, ordering them to bow to her imaginary dominion: "'Line up, LINE UP!' she said and waved one of the pistols at a cluster of long bare-trunked pines, four times her height, as she passed them" (191). The scene presents a marvelous parody of Mrs. Cope's own ordering of "her things," of everything and everyone about the farm, attempting to bully people, animals, and objects alike into obedience under her control. From a penned bull to a weed-free garden, order is crucial to Mrs. Cope,

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but O'Connor seems to suggest that we can put to the mother the same question she sneeringly asks Sally Virginia when the child straps on her toy holster and strides off to survey her pretend-empire: "When are you going to grow up?" (190)

The phlegmatic Mrs. Pritchard mirrors Mrs. Cope as well. Like their sunhats which "had once been identical" (175), the two women are made of the same stuff; their materialism has merely, like their hats, taken on different shapes over time. Mrs. Pritchard's obsession is with the body—iron lungs, reproduction, sex, mortality, abcessed teeth, physical calamity, poisons—and she ferrets out stories of the freakish and the diseased with relentless relish. As O'Connor calmly states, "She required the taste of blood from time to time to keep her equilibrium" (189). Yet Mrs. Pritchard's comic overinvolvement with decaying matter is fundamentally no different than Mrs. Cope's worship of transient things. Both women dwell on the earthly at the cost of the spiritual and eternal; both are seduced by a misguided focus on things that cannot last.

Property is the core preoccupation of Mrs. Cope, and her material greed has become an order so rigid it has turned sterile, a self-inflicted blindness and murder of the spirit. Mrs. Cope sanctimoniously announces, "We have a lot to be thankful for. . . . Every day you should say a prayer of thanksgiving" (177), yet for her, blessings are merely a synonym for material *things*, and thanks are to be given for riches and gain: "'Think of all we have, Lord,' she said and sighed, 'we have everything,' and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (177). Determinedly nonspiritual (and as such, like other O'Connor characters who are rife for Trickster, stuck on surface meanings and surface values), she seems oblivious to the ironic double-entendre of her own boast: "I do not fold my hands" (186). Indeed she does not, neither in resignation nor in prayerful contemplation of higher goods.

When moral watchfulness sleeps (like many-eyed Argos, charmed asleep by Hermes), Trickster appears and thefts occur. Even Mrs. Cope knows that "weeds and nut grass" will come into the most orderly of gardens, "as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (175). However, while Mrs. Cope seems *materially* vigilant—calling out to the Negro Culver to raise the tractor blade and go through her meadow gate rather than waste expense by going around; hyperwatchful that persons not injure themselves on her property, not out of concern for their well-being, but for fear that they would "sue her for everything she had" (180)—she is nevertheless spiritually "asleep," as blind as the

dozing Argos. The lesson she will have to learn, paradoxically, is of the immateriality of the material, as she is unmasked by the disruptive Powell Boyd (who is able "to look *through* her" [189; emphasis added], thereby illustrating her spiritual emptiness and physical transience) and by the strange boys who, mysteriously attuned to the evanescence of material things, "came toward them but as if they were going to walk on through the side of the house" (178).

Into the self-contained complacency of Mrs. Cope's farm, Powell Boyd and his two accomplices show up in classic drifter form, "walking up the pink dirt road" (178) seemingly from nowhere. Critics see these three as a grim, inverse parody of the Holy Trinity; at the very least, Powell shares characteristics of typical Lucifer-figures in O'Connor—the "silver-rimmed spectacles" very much like The Misfit's that nonetheless seem smeared in their vision; and the sense of familiarity Mrs. Cope feels upon their meeting, which echoes the dim "where-have-I-seen-you-before?" uneasiness that victims in other stories feel upon coming face-to-face with the devil. Like Janus, god of doorways and thresholds, or Lucifer poised at the juncture between worlds, Powell too seems to be looking two ways, the cast in his eye creating the impression "that his gaze seemed to be coming from two directions at once as if it had them surrounded" (178–179). Most tellingly, when asked his identity, he reveals himself to be not "J.C." (Jesus Christ) but "the secont one" (Lucifer) (179). Even his father's name, Boyd, seems to stand as a comic, dialectic distortion of Bird, the Holy Ghost.[17] It is the broken "destroyer" printed on his sweatshirt that seems most clearly to announce Powell Boyd as the folkloric trickster, agent of chaos and transformation, come from the liminal space of the "open road" to disrupt and demolish.

From the start Powell is evasive in his answers, indeterminate in his intent—a prototypical trickster. He and his henchmen immediately begin their reign of misrule—they are outlaws, rule breakers, "shady" figures who inject disorder into Mrs. Cope's carefully structured universe, subverting arbitrary laws of conduct and in particular sabotaging *her* sense of control. Their transgressions seem relatively mild at first—smoking, littering, swearing, sporting tattoos, engaging in rudeness and ingratitude: "'Not no thank you, not no nothing,' Mrs. Pritchard remarked" (183). Mrs. Cope comments repeatedly on their apparent "hunger," yet they denigrate and eventually refuse her gifts of food.

Here is not only a displacement or suspension of appetite (as "predators," they seem able to forfeit immediate appetites in order to have what they really want—not crackers and Coke but the farm itself, the woods,

and the eventual prize of Mrs. Cope's composure). But in addition, their refusal of gifts challenges the very core of Mrs. Cope's sense of property, ownership, and power. When one boy rudely announces, "I don't like them kind of crackers" (182) and places the sampled food back on the plate, he is making a gesture which at once violates unspoken rules of hospitality and radically subverts the distinction between "one's and another's." Insulting and declining or returning a gift directly undermines the power of the giver. Moreover, the taboo of placing handled food back on a communal plate is only nominally a hygienic one; more centrally it represents a symbolic blurring of apportionment, a forced and unsettling erasure of "whose is whose."

The refusal of gift is not only a challenge to ownership; it can also be seen as a creative liberating of property. Recall that tricksters are thieves, and unlike something given or earned, a thing stolen (like the milk the boys subsequently steal from Mrs. Cope's dairy or the pilfered food in their suitcases) is "free" not only in cost but also because it comes without "strings attached." It is no longer an object "owned" and "bestowed," but one freed from the rights of property. It thereby challenges the very concept of ownership. These boys turn Mrs. Cope's conventional securities of what is "hers" topsy-turvy: "We don't want nothing *of yours*" (185; emphasis added) they say riddlingly, and yet paradoxically they will have it all.

As the boys' vandalism and puckish tricks grow wilder and more severe —destroying her mailbox with rocks, riding her horses bareback, drinking milk out of her dairy cans, releasing her bull, and letting the oil out of three tractors—Mrs. Cope begins indeed to "lose her bearings." She is entering a realm where her conventional certainties no longer function to order the world. Utterly disoriented, she and Mrs. Pritchard engage in a cat-and-mouse hunt for these elusive pranksters, who dodge and evade her search as if her farm had become a circus funhouse:

> [Mrs. Cope] crossed the road toward the calf barn. The three faces immediately disappeared from the opening, and in a second the large boy dashed across the lot, followed an instant later by the other two. Mrs. Pritchard came out and the two women started for the grove of trees the boys had vanished into. Presently the two sunhats disappeared in the woods and the three boys came out at the left side of it and ambled across the field and into another patch of woods. By the time Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard reached the field it was empty and there was nothing for them to do but come home again. (187–188)

Even the boys' language serves to unsettle. Their raucous teasing, verbal horseplay, and double-entendres multiply meanings in ways Mrs. Cope cannot follow. They hoot and yell at her innocent queries, "pushing each other's shoulders and doubling up with laughter as if the questions had meanings she didn't know about" (184).

But it is her hubristic sense of ownership that they are most bent on unmasking and overturning. "Her woods," they mutter derisively when forbidden to camp there (183). And when Mrs. Cope attempts to impose her litany of thankfulness, the boys grow "as silent as thieves hiding," disconcerting her with their ominous, noncompliant silence. Enjoining them to be "gentlemen," she states her proprietary position with unexpected results:

> "After all," she said in a suddenly high voice, "this is my place."
>
> The big boy made some ambiguous noise and they turned and walked off toward the barn, leaving her there with a shocked look as if she had had a searchlight thrown on her in the middle of the night. (186)

Later, when Mr. Pritchard cautions the boys, they reply with a sarcasm that renders Mrs. Cope's possessiveness absurd. Mrs. Pritchard reports:

> Hollis said . . . that you didn't want no boys dropping cigarette butts in your woods and he said "She don't own them woods," and Hollis said "She does too," and that there little one he said "Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too," and that there one with the glasses said, "I reckon she owns the sky over this place too," and that there littlest one says, "Owns the sky and can't no airplane go over here without she says so." (186)

Finally, in an act of conspiratorial transfer astonishing in its simplicity, the deed is done, the theft accomplished: "'Listen,' the big boy said . . . 'it don't belong to nobody.' 'It's ours,' the little boy said" (192).

The subsequent fiery destruction of the woods appears to be a savage, pagan act. The boys "whoop and holler and beat their hands over their mouths" like Indians in a war-dance; their "wild high shrieks of joy" echo a *Walpurgisnacht*, a mad, apocalyptic overthrow of order (193). But if it is a debacle, it is also divine and revelatory: the "column of smoke rising and widening unchecked" is at last an emblem of God who has "broken through," and the wild boys themselves become mysterious, enigmatically sacred "prophets . . . dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" (193).

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Marion Montgomery, in an article dealing with the problem of evil in O'Connor, summarizes Teilhard de Chardin's position in metaphors which are strikingly relevant to this story. In his theory of the world's evolution towards salvation, put forward in *The Divine Milieu*, evil performs the function of "*a burning up of the world* through which and from which spirit is engendered toward a final oneness that ultimately consumes all multiplicity" (Montgomery 36; emphasis added). Montgomery goes on to elaborate, "Teilhard means this final evolutionary stage [in the process toward salvation] to be God's occupation of the void which results *from the world's burning*. . ." (37; emphasis added). The "Circle in the Fire" becomes an emblem of teleological completion, the "omega point" of synthesis and redemption, the perfect realization of unity through transformation. This is Teilhard's unity of the collective human soul, as well as the divine union of the world with God. In such a sublime alterity (the individual subsumed into the whole, the world into the divine), loss itself becomes radically redefined: "It is a supreme conception in which nothing is lost because every *thing* is lost . . . all things are lost so that one Thing be realized" (39). Perhaps we can insert Powell Boyd's homespun version of this theological mystery: "If this place was not here anymore . . . you would never have to think of it again" (*Stories* 192).

As "erasing angels" the boys have stripped Mrs. Cope of everything. Yet her awareness is potentially a transformative one—a moment in which, through suffering and loss, she appears to unite with all humanity, become one with all those she had once considered materially beneath her, African Americans, Europeans, and even her nemesis, the strange boy Powell. Indeed, in this final vision we see that convergence erases all bounds of property and propriety. The look of misery Sally Virginia sees mirrored on her mother's face "might have belonged to anybody" (193). It is an instant of profound reorientation, the impact of which we are not fully given to see in Mrs. Cope, but which we sense in the child, who has become "weighted down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before" (193). Ironically, the girl—having happened upon the boys bathing like parodic Dianas—is transformed not into Actaeon's fleet stag but into a lead-footed, loping emissary of doom.

O'Connor warned readers against a "misunderstanding of what the operation of grace *can* look like in fiction." In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," she writes:

> There is something in us as story-tellers, and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance of restoration. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but he has forgotten the cost of it. His sense of evil is deluded or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the *price* of restoration. He has forgotten the cost of truth, even in fiction. (*Collected Works* 863)

O'Connor recognized the necessity of disruption, the difficult "*price* of restoration" in suffering, upheaval and loss (863). "The reader wants his grace warm and binding, not dark and disruptive" (862), yet at times "grace cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring" (864). In a relentlessly apocalyptic tale like "A Circle in the Fire"—one which draws as much on the trickster-figure as it does on Biblical prophecy and modern theology to advance its radical lesson about property and eternity, about sacrifice and transformation—O'Connor demonstrates how "you can deepen your own orthodoxy by reading if you are not afraid of strange visions" (*Collected Works* 863).

Flannery O'Connor's South was a culture poised at the juncture of changing identity, a world at a crossroads. "The present state of the South," she wrote, "is one wherein nothing can be taken for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt" (*Collected Works* 846). Not just politically and historically, but ethically as well, a generation was faced with moral issues of good and evil—unprecedented events like the Holocaust and battles for civil rights demanded the spiritual attention of the twentieth-century mind as never before. In the midst of such turmoil, O'Connor believed that the writer's job was to challenge readers in a way that helped vivify the bloodless abstractions into which religion seemed to have fallen—to incarnate the spiritual world. Like Hermes of the Ways, "the writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" (*Collected Works* 848).

For O'Connor, such writing amounted to no less than prophecy; in her view, characters of fiction and writers themselves "are prophetic figures." For the storyteller, "prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances" (*Collected Works* 860). Yet it is a different

kind of "realism" O'Connor had in mind, one that leads instead "towards mystery and the unexpected," one "interested in possibility rather than probability," always "pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery" (815–816). Such writing is of necessity a writing of disjunction and disruption, "violent and comic," disorienting, unsettling, at times even "wild" (816). To the writer falls the riddling, tricky job of waking up and shaking up those who "are too dead to the world to make any discoveries at all" (860), of disorienting and taking down a notch—with prose at once disturbing and comic, shocking and revelatory—those whose smugness and self-certainty have blinded them to the true state of things. "There are ages when it is possible to woo the reader," O'Connor wrote; "there are others when something more drastic is necessary" (820).

It is not too hard to hear in O'Connor's words themselves evidence of the trickster impulse—the writer as disruptor and dislocator, working the shadowland between truth and lie. "Art," wrote Picasso, "is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand" (qtd in Hyde 79). According to Hyde, "trickster narratives *themselves* do the double task of marking and violating the boundaries of the cultures where they are told. The trickster in the narrative *is* the narrative itself" (267). And indeed it is easy to see a writer like O'Connor inhabiting that liminal space which seeks to disrupt sterile orders in order to make room for revelation. As with Trickster, the outcome of disruption can be redemption; the shattering of old orders can incarnate new ways of thought, new affirmations. The artist at the juncture of such worlds, exploring boundaries and thresholds, embodies the principle of transformative disorder, one who, like Flannery O'Connor, "enchants and disenchants" in her ongoing search for vision.

NOTES

1. See Hynes and Doty, particularly pp. 33–45.

2. Johansen 94, 63–64, 95, 108.

3. Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Sally Fitzgerald, 26 December 1954 (*Collected Works* 927).

4. Trickster is often associated with the Hermetic Greek *emporikos*, a term derived from *emporos* meaning "merchant" or "traveler," and in West African folklore as the bearer of God's word (Doty 64).

5. Gates's interesting analysis of the Signifying Monkey of African American folklore as a classic trickster-figure with connections to West African tales of Esu-Elegbara and Legba offers numerous potential connections with O'Connor's use of monkey imagery.

6. Johansen perceptively identifies both Hulga's sophistries and her mother's vacuous optimism as "illusions held in place by fixed categories and glib labels, structures built in the air" (46).

7. Hyde's reference is to the sacred thief Krishna, whose "disruptions offer insight into the fullness of the divine" (287).

8. Carl Jung remarks on "the unpredictable behaviour of the trickster, his senseless orgies of destruction and his self-imposed sufferings" (136) and points to "the medieval description of the devil as *simia dei* (the ape of God), and in his characterization in folklore as the 'simpleton' who is 'fooled' or 'cheated' " (135).

9. According to William Hynes, "Once initiated, a trick can exhibit an internal motion all its own. Thus, a trick can gather such momentum as to exceed any control exercised by its originator and may even turn back upon the head of the trickster, so the trick-player is also trickster-tricked" (35). Robert Pelton calls him a "crude prankster . . . a fool caught in his own lies" (6–7).

10. It is interesting to note that Lucifer is unmasked by a boy who is also "on the road," a traveler who has left his home and is located in the space "between" established orders.

11. For a fuller account of the Raven legend, see Leeming 24.

12. Carl Jung saw the trickster-figure in a developmental and social-psychological light, as an archetype representative of an "earlier rudimentary stage of consciousness," one "possessing untamed appetites not yet tempered by a social conscience" (Leeming 21).

13. For a rather different perspective on the theme of eating, see William A. Fahey, "Out of the Eater: Flannery O'Connor's Appetite for Truth." *Renascence* 20 (1967): 22–29.

14. In this, Trickster resembles the confidence man of American literature, another figure who enacts ruses through his victims' inadvertent collusion. See Wadlington, and William E. Lenz, *Fast Talk and Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention* (Columbia, U of Missouri P, 1985).

15. For a discussion of O'Connor's image of authoritative women, see Peter A. Smith, "Flannery O'Connor's Empowered Women." *Southern Literary Journal* 26.2 (Spring 1994): 35–47.

16. Compare O'Connor's use of this image in "The Enduring Chill" (*Stories* 382).

17. In mythology, tricksters are also often associated with birds and snakes as totemic animals. See T. O. Beidelman, "The Moral Imagination of the Kagaru: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translation and Comparative Analysis." In Hynes and Doty, 174–192.

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