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## Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be: Paul Elie's Lament, Faith, and Fiction

Richard A. Rosengarten

To begin, a *reductio: per* Borges' sedulous Pierre Menard, Paul Elie surely does not mean that today's novelists should (as if they could) write like Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy or Reynolds Price, since time transforms even the most exact imitation.<sup>2</sup> Yet Elie's claim is at least in part historical: the interrogative of his title isn't waiting for an answer. Acknowledging the essay's chosen mode of lament, readers might assume that in a less despairing moment Elie would accept an amended formulation: faith has altogether *dropped out of* contemporary fiction. Close reading of the essay suggests, however, that Elie would resist the passive voice: it is a question of authorial agency, and writers today are not writing the way writers used to write—and still should.<sup>3</sup> It is a sadness, and unmistakably a loss to fiction. If it is not the world of Borges' Pierre Menard that informs Elie's lament, we have a puzzle.

Joining us in puzzlement would almost surely be Elie's most cherished exemplar, Mary Flannery O'Connor. No twentieth-century American writer—certainly none in Elie's canon—more regularly and resolutely insisted on the independent meaning of her fiction. In O'Connor's signature formulation, the work of fiction introduces the reader to mystery and then deepens it. It does so via the close inspection of manners. Misconstrual and misunderstanding was for O'Connor a ubiquitous, and vexing, fact of life. Axiomatic to misunderstanding was the tendency of readers to fit her stories into some cherished system—usually, to her narrowing eyes, psychoanalytic, or symbolic, or religious. O'Connor understood her artistic *habitus* to be a gift from God, but her antennae were finely tuned to the discrepancy between her self-understanding and the work of fiction in the world. The “moment of grace” in her stories did not on her understanding readily yield to commentary. The occasional *cognoscento* (Betty Hester most

famously, but also Cecil Dawkins and the occasional random correspondent) delighted her, but far more common was a rising fury and, in turn, an even firmer purpose of amendment when so many did not “get it” (as in the case of her cherished editor, Catherine Carver, regarding a rewrite of the late story “Revelation”).<sup>4</sup>

It must be said in defense of the well-meaning that precisely what O'Connor's stories mean specifically “for” faith is a puzzle. Holding pride of place in this regard is her signature work, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in which the inveterately intrusive and randomly loquacious grandmother literally leads her son, daughter-in-law, three grandchildren, and herself to their deaths. After they have been shot by a gang they encounter on an isolated country road, their leader, “the Misfit,” famously remarks: “She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (*Complete Stories* 133). The story has no truer words. Readers may be excused for feeling a certain wicked (if surreptitious) delight in a pronouncement so exact and economical. It serves as a superb epitaph precisely because it would never be etched on the grandmother's tombstone, the more compelling because it emerges from the mouth of a man whose life has made him feel acutely the disjunction between crime and punishment. All this pays tribute to O'Connor's superb artistry; but just that stellar crafting ensures that its interpretation as theological invariably and necessarily will draw on extra-textual considerations. This drove O'Connor to distraction precisely because it distracted readers from the real scope of the story's action (“To a Professor of English,” *HB* 437).

If “Good Man” is signature O'Connor it is also early O'Connor, but later work avails no more particular clarity on the status of faith in her fiction. In “Greenleaf,” Mrs. May's struggles to manage her farm crystallize in her inability to have her hired help remove a bull from her property; thinking to take matters into her own long-suffering hands, she leads Mr. Greenleaf, her chief farmhand, into a field to shoot the bull. Before that happens the bull emerges from the forest and gores Mrs. May to death, pinning her to the front of a car where she is last seen “bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear” (*Complete Stories* 334). The underrated novella “The Displaced Person” introduces a similar heroine, Mrs. McIntyre, who is also trying to manage a farm. The story resolves not in her death but in a creeping paralysis that elicits pastoral visits from the parish priest whose actions have inadvertently destroyed her farm. The priest—who has acted with charity and also shows some preternatural appreciation for the

peacocks on the property—visits weekly “with a big bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church” (CS 235). As with Mrs. May’s whispering, no words are provided. We do note that O’Connor leavens the irony with the fact that the priest brings the Eucharist to the peacocks and dogma for the dying woman, an inversion of distributive justice in mystery and manners and a worthy theatrical counterpart to the Misfit’s epigrammatic capacity.

As “The Displaced Person” moves away from a denouement that is fatal, so the late story “Revelation” closes by endowing its heroine with a degree of agency unique to O’Connor’s stories. Ruby Turpin’s person and voice literally dwarfs everything and everyone in the doctor’s office where the story’s main action takes place: the room, the patients, certainly the conversation. Yet when one of those patients, the Wellesley undergraduate Mary Grace, strikes the expostulating Ruby with a book titled *Human Behavior*, the act literally turns Ruby’s world upside down. O’Connor then endows Mary Grace with Misfit-like oracularity: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (CS 646). The (non-lethal) effect on Mrs. Turpin is abrupt and decisive: disregarding social niceties, she no longer ponders the disjunctions of social class and authentic accomplishment. Instead she is obsessed with Mary Grace’s own categorization of her place in the created order. Truly out of sorts, Ruby eventually visits the pig parlor she had earlier compared favorably to the homes of some of the doctor’s patients. There she finds a sow and seven piglets (whose number equals the number of souls in the doctor’s office). She proceeds to wield the fabled cleansing hose as Mary Grace deployed her book, torturing the now squealing sow.

This act itself does not afford Ruby surcease. It does, however, prompt her to apostrophize the deity, not as she did earlier in her reflexive prayers of gratitude, but to challenge the wisdom of the divine. How, Ruby asks, is she both a wart-hog and herself? What would God really have her be? Defiant rather than imploring, discarding interior monologue for confrontational public declaration, Ruby Turpin finally discovers a space in proportion to her being in the world. O’Connor honors her achievement with a vision:

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands

from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah. (CS 653-54)

The scene is all the more striking because throughout "Revelation" O'Connor steadfastly confuses the reader's usually straightforward perception of the natural world. The functional equivalent of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, Nature's responsive witness to the action here could be what Ruby Turpin alone can see (the force of the "but" that conjoins the clauses of the final sentence). What Ruby hears, and what the reader hears (as opposed to being told Ruby hears) proves muddled. The ambiguity is not unanticipated because, from the moment she is struck by the book, and with increasing regularity as her subsequent thoughts lead her inexorably to the pig-parlor, Ruby Turpin's sensory interaction has been compromised. By turns she cannot make a sound, she does not see what is in front of her eyes, she does not hear the sounds that are reported to us. At the same time, she wills a response from the sky (foreshadowed earlier in her bedroom by her staring bouts with the ceiling as her husband Claud sleeps) and is ultimately rewarded with a vision that makes simple the previously overwhelming complexity of the world. In that vision top and bottom are reversed. Social virtues are burnt away. The heavenly procession settles the questions of class

and race that had been the bulwark of Mrs. Turpin's internal musings and social niceties with a finality that bespeaks the idiotic but undeniable order of the pig-parlor. Her sweeping gesture, "hieratic and profound," suggests that Ruby Turpin here assumes sacerdotal dimensions.

"Revelation," then, affords O'Connor's most literal rendering in the short story form of a sense of transcendence. Crickets are hallelujah choruses, and hogs stand with humans as vehicles of creaturely humanity. Yet the text ambiguates our reception of its proclaimed transcendence: while there is no question in O'Connor's mind (though, as noted above, there was in those of her readers!) that Ruby Turpin "gets the vision," how the reader shares it—and in turn construes it—remains open and, finally, undecided. To extend Francis Bacon's characterization of Pontius Pilate: readers of "Revelation" who stay for an answer will not find it, because the story ends.

As these examples attest, closure in an O'Connor story is never full disclosure, at least if this is the moment, per Elie's phrase, when fiction effectively "finds" its faith. The paradox is the more pronounced because the endings are invariably superbly crafted: apposite, utterly summary, decisive. (They were also not incidentally the material of which she was most keenly protective.) Given this, we are forced to the recognition that if the reader seeks more, she of necessity esteems the story less.

This clarion artistic effect raises a serious question about whether we can speak of at least Flannery O'Connor's fiction as "losing," or correspondingly "having," faith. In this case at least, the attribution of such agency, whether to the story or its reader, seems at best to beg the question, and at worst to obscure the art, of her fiction. (We might recall here that the closest person to a writing mentor in O'Connor's adult life, Caroline Gordon, was herself an advocate of Percy Lubbock's dictum that fiction should show, not tell.)<sup>5</sup> Given Elie's decision to speak in such terms, and out of such manifest knowledge of O'Connor's life and work,<sup>6</sup> we might return at this point to his decision to juxtapose these terms and inquire what, given the above strictures, they might mean.

Much hinges on Elie's juxtaposition of "faith" or "belief" with his composition of the essay as a lament. The question it raises has long been a provenance of scholars of Religion and Literature, where in recent years thought about the status of "belief" as a category for criticism, particularly of modern fiction,<sup>7</sup> has directly engaged the "lived religion" thesis.<sup>8</sup> These discussions contrast with Elie's essay in ways that help to clarify the terms of his lament. Their question concerns the place of belief in fiction generally,

and engages a canon that references, variously, Roth, Proust, and Henry James; by contrast, Elie's specific datum is Christian and, at least arguably, Catholic, rather than "religion." For Elie the problem is in the writing itself, not its appreciation of, and recognition by critics. This underscores an unspecified but by no means negligible informing assumption: the informing tradition is Catholicism, and it is *Catholic* fiction that has lost its *Catholic* faith. So the lament's focus is a Catholic sensibility that has been lost. Such generalizations are justified, even necessary, acts of criticism; and they have been and often are made in terms informed by implicit theological commitment. The now aging caveat applies: we must ask, per Albert Schweitzer in 1906 and Kenneth Warren in 2011, whether the claim says more about the claimant or the alleged subject.

That said, it seems to me dubious that, at least as formulated in his essay, even on Elie's own terms we can discover belief in fiction. The use and value of lamentation as a critical genre remain to be considered, and Elie's essay offers both a promise and a potential pitfall. The promise is his halcyon recognition, never to be underestimated, that we readers turn to literature to address felt human need. Criticism ought to be intensely attentive to the fact, and to its potential. Indeed it should honor it. In this respect Elie laudably writes in a long and noble tradition of critics who understood their work to be discernment, in the service of naming what most fully and usefully addresses humanity. By no means the only work of criticism, it is perhaps its most undervalued dimension today. Consider the present lack of felt affinity for such predecessors as Samuel Johnson or Matthew Arnold in this regard. To take Johnson as an example: "The Preface to Shakespeare" dares to place the Bard in the pantheon of the classics, but even this noble purpose did not lead Johnson to stint the (fairly severe and detailed) delineation of the poet's flaws and faults. That Johnson did so was a function of the same impulse that led him to praise Milton's *Paradise Lost* while remarking that no reader wished it longer. Elie shares with Johnson a sense of the critic's obligation to put the works of the imagination to the test of engagement with life (as the critic herself best construes it!).

That last phrase keynotes the potential pitfall: the critic brings to this task her own view of the world, and given the sovereignty criticism must claim, she must be wary to avoid the possibility of misconstruing her chosen exemplars to fit what is not general but idiosyncratic. We might here adapt Johnson's famous phrase for Shakespeare's excellences—"the just representation of general nature"—to speak, in the context of faith and

fiction, or more generally religion and literature, of “the just representation of general religion.” To the degree that Elie’s “belief” is *Catholic* belief, and, in turn, that his lament for fiction’s “loss” of faith is an axiomatic index of its failure, his reader may worry that he has seen reality through a very particular lens rather than face-to-face. Lament then risks becoming censure, the more worrying because its justice takes its bearings not from the literary work itself but from the mind of the censor.

We might remark the worry of this with Gospel verse, appropriated by O’Connor, that “the violent bear it away,” but I propose to conclude with a second, humorous, *reductio*. This is Henry Fielding’s redoubtable Parson Thwackum, arguing the case for theology against deism to his antagonist, the comparatively mild philosopher Square, in *Tom Jones*:

Thwackum replied, This was arguing with all the usual Malice of all the Enemies to the true Church. ... When I mention Religion, I mean the Christian Religion; and not only the Christian Religion, but the Protestant Religion; and not only the Protestant Religion, but the Church of England. And when I mention Honour, I mean that Mode of divine Grace which is not only consistent with, but dependent upon, this Religion; and is consistent with, and dependent upon, no other. (127)

Elie’s virtue absolves him from any Thwackum-like attribution. It is worth noting however that Fielding’s contemporary, the aforementioned Samuel Johnson, himself judged Fielding’s novels to be immoral in subject and thus inappropriate bulwarks to an endangered faith. Johnson preferred Samuel Richardson’s epistolary mode of virtue rewarded or vanquished. If criticism is at least in some modes the animation of voices that can only partly speak for themselves, one might say that, for Fielding, a virtue of fiction was its capacity not only to show, but to tell: to depict not just the reader’s faith, but forms of what we might call—precisely because they are familiar to our experience—reductive religiosity. This is closer to Flannery O’Connor’s imaginative art than the equation of faith with fiction will allow. To think otherwise risks transforming lament into nostalgia.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>With gratitude to Simone Signoret, whose memoir first signaled the coinage to me.

<sup>2</sup>"Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Borges: A Reader*, ed. Monegal, E.R. and Reid, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>The charge of authorial agency was clearly felt by at least one novelist; see the letter of Oscar Hijuelos in response to Elie's article (*The New York Times Book Review*, January 13, 2013) 6.

<sup>4</sup>Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), to date the definitive collection of the letters, does the great service of complicating the claims made by O'Connor in her more formalized essays. On Carver's reaction to "Revelation," see O'Connor's letter to "A." ("Yes ma'am I heard from C. Carver ... Found Ruby evil. Found end vision to confirm same. Thought suggested I leave it out. [new paragraph] I am not going to leave it out. I am going to deepen it so that there'll be no mistaking Ruby is not just an evil Glad Annie"), 554.

<sup>5</sup>Gordon's influence is invoked serially by O'Connor throughout her correspondence to this effect. See also Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1957; originally published 1921).

<sup>6</sup>See Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010) and, especially, Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010). For a more detailed discussion of Hungerford's work, see R. Rosengarten, "Hunger for Religion," at the Religion and Culture webforum of the Martin Marty Center: <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/religion-and-culture-web-forum-archive>. Scholars of Religion and Literature will recognize here the latest valorization of a longer debate about belief in fiction: see, e.g., Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination*, and the review of Gunn by J. Hillis Miller, "Interpretation of Otherness," *Journal of Religion* 62.3 (July 1982), 299-304.

<sup>8</sup>See David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007). For a useful companion that complicates the theme by referencing "style," see Catherine Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin, eds., *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011).

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