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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 66, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 279-302 (Article)

Mississippi Quarterly
The Journal
Of Southern Cultures

Essays on Dargan, Warren, Welty, Morrison, O'Connor, Gay, Ransom, Faulkner, and J. McHenry Jones
Vol. 66, No. 2 Spring 2013

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2013.0028

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The "Less Fashionable" Influence of Max Beerbohm on Flannery O'Connor

IN A 2008 ISSUE OF *MODERN LANGUAGE QUARTERLY* DEVOTED TO LITERARY influence, Andrew Elfenbein comments, "Writing about influence turns out to be harder than it looks" ("Defining Influence" 436). I would say that writing about influence is also much more difficult than feeling with certainty that one has recognized influence. Happening upon a passage in an earlier author's work that might have been echoed, however subtly, in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, for instance, is exhilarating. There is a sense of being in the presence of a written voice that O'Connor knew well. The question of influence on such a stylistically striking writer as Flannery O'Connor has, naturally, occupied many readers and scholars. Melvin J. Friedman, for example, finds motivation for O'Connor's "Dickensian devotion to oddity" of characters in François Mauriac's call for a "*transposition* of reality and not a *reproduction* of it" (10) in fiction; Friedman also notes that others, including O'Connor herself, have discussed her connection to Mauriac (10-11). Further influence studies include analyses of O'Connor focused on the impact of the content, style, or thought of the following: Aquinas (Rath), Conrad (Burkman and Meloy), Dostoevsky (McMillan; Hooten), Eliot (Sally Fitzgerald), Gogol (Maus), Hawthorne (Emerick), James (Desmond), Poe (Evans), and West (Sally Fitzgerald). This small sample includes only some of the more widely recognized writers who have attracted the attention of O'Connor scholars. Yet, proving influence or even distinguishing influence from the effects of two authors simply and accidentally using similar images, for example, is sometimes dangerous ground, as Elfenbein implies ("Discrimination" 483) and as some of O'Connor's comments on her readers' suggestions of influence warn them and us. Kathleen Feeley's remarks in her book on the influence of O'Connor's theological readings on her fiction are especially apt, both specifically and generally, for my explorations in this essay: "Because many of the books [in O'Connor's library] are not dated, it is difficult to discern whether other writers inspired ideas in her, or whether their

ideas confirmed her own thought" (10-11). Knowing what O'Connor read and when she read it are only two of the many problems with proving influence.

In 1964, very shortly before she died, O'Connor wrote a letter to Marcus Smith in response to his suggestion that Nathanael West figured heavily in her literary development.[1] She admits, "West may have had some influence on me stylistically." But she concludes, "Thanks for your interest. I wish I could be of more help but I doubt if most writers have much idea of where their greatest influence came from. For me, I wouldn't say West" (*Collected* 1215-16). O'Connor was very ill at this time; it is remarkable that she had the energy to respond to the inquiry at all. In one of the best essays yet published on O'Connor's influences, Sally Fitzgerald traces the heavy significance of T. S. Eliot on the composition of *Wise Blood*, with some treatment of Nathanael West's more widely recognized impact; Fitzgerald notes her own indebtedness to James O. Tate's discussion of Eliot's influence in his unpublished dissertation ("The Owl" 52). In that essay, Fitzgerald argues that O'Connor denied West's influence on her for the same reason she rejected Kafka's influence: "If at any point she rejected—or found that she was greatly at variance with—the essential vision of a writer, she was likely to reject, as well, the idea that she had been influenced or affected by him" ("The Owl" 51). Characterizing O'Connor's view of these writers and their works, Fitzgerald points out in particular that Kafka's writing was "too deeply pessimistic" and that West's "Christ-figure" was "sentimental" in *Miss Lonelyhearts* ("The Owl" 47, 50). As for O'Connor's fiction itself, it is far from being taken as either pessimistic or sentimental, except perhaps by those few who grossly misunderstand her deeply spiritual yet clear-eyed view of human nature.

In a 1953 letter to her good friend Ashley Brown, written much earlier than the 1964 letter referred to above, O'Connor provides more detailed information on "influence." First, she denies that she is a "Georgia Kafka" and later says that she hasn't read Raymond Chandler. The 1953 letter was written only one year after the appearance of *Wise Blood*. Tellingly she writes, "I think . . . that I have been influenced by less fashionable people that nobody mentions—Max Beerbohm and Richard Hughs [sic] and maybe, since this is all in the family below the MDixon line, by some of the walled-in monsters of Mr. Poe" (*Collected*

[1]For a description of Smith's letter, see Scott and Nye (31).

911). James Tate reports that he had regular contact with O'Connor as a friend from 1957 through 1960 and that during that time, they discussed many authors. Tate adds that O'Connor "considered Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson* the funniest novel she ever read" ("O'Connor Remembrance" 67), a potentially revealing statement from O'Connor, one of the best comic writers in the English language. Josephine Hendin provides us a very insightful passage on one of Beerbohm's stylistic devices—comic literalization—being used in O'Connor's fiction. This essay will analyze in detail this and other stylistic and thematic affinities between O'Connor's works and the Beerbohm works that we know or suspect O'Connor read.

In "On the Discrimination of Influences," Elfenbein provides a descriptive and theoretical framework for literary influence that is much more appropriate in the case of Beerbohm's influence on O'Connor than is the anxious kind theorized by Harold Bloom. That theory of influence can lead to creative misreading and, as Elfenbein says, has too often prompted literary critics to restrict the discussion of persuasive influence in literary study simply to "Bloomian anxiety" (495). Bloom's anxiety of influence is not concerned with "the transmission of ideas and images from earlier to later poets," or novelists (Bloom 71). In contrast, Elfenbein's well-articulated theory of influence includes, among other elements, persuasive response to earlier authors. I don't make use of Elfenbein's theory of persuasive influence in this essay, primarily because I doubt very much that O'Connor thought her audience was sufficiently familiar with Beerbohm for her to engage with his writing in order to "argue" intertextually with him. Elfenbein's analysis of persuasive influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* concentrates on Oscar Wilde's reaction to Mary Ward's *Robert Elsmere*, about which Elfenbein argues Wilde had deep misgivings ("Discrimination" 496-97). Persuasive influence, in Elfenbein's sense, is more likely to be found in O'Connor's reaction to writers whose influence she denied for the reasons that Fitzgerald mentions. So one might argue that O'Connor's decidedly unsentimental conception of Christ and his message (e.g., Parker's Byzantine Christ or the Misfit's obsessive concern with whether Christ raised the dead) is in part a persuasive reaction to West's sentimental Christ figure in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Interest in Elfenbein's theory of influence is restricted in this essay to two types of allusion. The first type, whether conscious or unconscious, results from "stored units" of language, stored in memory because of "various reasons (frequent

repetition, personal relevance, long-term familiarity)" ("Discrimination" 486). A second type, according to Elfenbein, involves "large-scale gestures of plot, characterization, and theme" ("Discrimination" 492).

There were three books by Max Beerbohm in O'Connor's library, as cataloged by Arthur F. Kinney: *Max's Nineties: Drawings 1892-1899* (1958); *Seven Men and Two Others* (1950; first published as *Seven Men* in 1919 [Hall 155n]); and *Zuleika Dobson* (1911). Kinney points out that O'Connor's library, in which many book passages are underlined with marginalia, is a good resource for understanding O'Connor's mind and writing. He says of his own book and her books, "surely the joy of leafing through . . . her books . . . is encountering (with shocks of recognition) passages that call up resonances from O'Connor's memorable fiction" (8). As revealing as O'Connor's library is, Kinney points out, "What is problematic are those books *not* in the collection," up to forty books that she reviewed and many books that she mentions in her letters. Kinney also notes that O'Connor both borrowed many books and loaned others (4-5). Most important for the purpose at hand are *Max's Nineties*, published in 1958, and O'Connor's copies of *Seven Men and Two Others* and *Zuleika Dobson*, published in 1959 and 1926, respectively. None of these books is signed or dated for time of acquisition by O'Connor; neither do they contain any annotations (according to Kinney's entries). Feeley writes that although O'Connor's "library also included a wide range of fiction . . . , few of these works are annotated" (10). Although O'Connor might have seen Beerbohm's caricatures before 1958, or read *Seven Men and Two Others* before 1959 in library copies, for example, there is no evidence that I am aware of that she did either. I believe that Tate's comment that O'Connor thought *Zuleika Dobson* was "the funniest novel she ever read" and the 1953 letter to Ashley Brown (which was itself at least partially about *Wise Blood*) mentioning Beerbohm as an influence are indications of O'Connor's reading *Zuleika Dobson* sometime during or prior to her composition of *Wise Blood*. If we assume that O'Connor did read *Seven Men and Two Others* but not until 1959, the fiction that could have been influenced by it includes *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), "The Comforts of Home" (1960), "The Partridge Festival" (1961), "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961), "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962), "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" (1963), "Revelation" (1964), "Judgment Day" (1965), and "Parker's

Back" (1965).[2] As we will see, there is clearer evidence for the influence of *Zuleika Dobson* than for *Seven Men and Two Others* on O'Connor's writing.

In this essay, I will hardly do more than mention the potentially interesting appeal for O'Connor of Beerbohm's caricaturist drawings in *Max's Nineties*, given O'Connor's interest in cartooning and her frequently caricaturist narrative descriptions—e.g., the description in "The River" of photographs in the Connin household: "There were two round photographs of an old man and woman with collapsed mouths and another picture of a man whose eyebrows dashed out of two bushes of hair and clashed in a heap on the bridge of his nose; the rest of his face stuck out like a bare cliff to fall from" (*Collected* 157).[3] "The River," first published in 1953, predates *Max's Nineties*, although Beerbohm's *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen*, containing the Beardsley caricature I describe below, was published in 1896. Part of O'Connor's style—early to late—was the ability to describe her characters sharply and shortly (Gerald "Habit" 124)—as in the late story "The Lame Shall Enter First," where Norton's appearance is cartoonish: "He had very large round ears that leaned away from this head and seemed to pull his eyes slightly too far apart" (*Collected* 595). O'Connor would have found Beerbohm's drawings appealing, given that they frequently relied on grotesque comic exaggeration. Beerbohm's drawing in *Max's Nineties* represents Aubrey Beardsley with a large nose, large elfin ears, and elongated hands drooping from the wrists, one hand limply holding a leash attached to a toy poodle (plate 15). Apparently some of the contemporary responses to Beerbohm's caricatures were similar to the lack of understanding of the grotesque that plagued O'Connor. John Gilbert Bohun Lynch writes of a kind of response to Beerbohm's caricatures,

> There is a type of mind utterly unable to grasp the notion that though a drawing may be quite anatomically wrong, and not in the least "like a man" it may yet be well worth doing—and admiring—because it is so like, or so vigorous a comment upon—say—Lord Palmerston. You try and explain the thing . . . and they say: "Ah—a grotesque—a caricature!" (159)

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[2]See "Note on the Texts" (1257-64), including dates of first publication, in *Collected Works*.

[3]See similar analysis in Gerald ("Habit" 124).

Many parallel passages in O'Connor's letters and essays come to mind but none so strongly as the following from "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction": "I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs" (*Collected* 814). Although Beerbohm and O'Connor suffered as a result of the literal-mindedness of some in their public, other influences on O'Connor's drawing are most likely stronger than that of Beerbohm. In his biography of O'Connor, Brad Gooch quotes Robert Fitzgerald ("Introduction") both on the resemblance of her cartoons to those of New Yorker cartoonist George Price and on how much O'Connor liked Price's work (110-11). Gooch also quotes an email he received from Bee McCormack, an editor at the newspaper for Georgia College for Women, who said that she thought O'Connor "might become the new James Thurber" (110). Kelly Gerald's essay, in her recent *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*, convincingly argues the influence not only of Thurber but also of another popular cartoonist and illustrator of the 1920s through the 1940s—John Held, Jr. (114). Continued interest in O'Connor's visual art is likely given that Gerald's 2012 edition is in fact the second book publication devoted to O'Connor's cartoons, the first being that edited by Marshall Bruce Gentry in 2010.

Beerbohm's writing life spanned the last years of the Victorian literary period through the Edwardian period and into the Modernist period. He was influenced by and influenced writers in all these periods, although his influence on others is unfortunately and surprisingly not heavily researched, given his popularity among writers and artists of his time. Sarah Davison points out in her brief examination of Beerbohm and Virginia Woolf that "A critical revaluation of Beerbohm's influence on the modernist movement is overdue" (355). On first consideration, one can hardly imagine a more unlikely influence on the American Catholic and Southerner O'Connor than Beerbohm, who both parodied and embraced the pose of an art-for-art's sake British dandy. For at least two reasons, O'Connor had no cause to publicly reject Beerbohm's influence. First, he was, and still is, less widely read than the writers she was, and still is, more commonly linked with, and second, she shared fundamental style and substance with Beerbohm through a rejection of, or at least a comic approach to, the excesses of narcissism, in part as a result of a relentless contrast between romanticism and realism.

There is in both Beerbohm and O'Connor a fight between romanticism and realism, but this common trope takes many different specifically humorous realizations in each author's work, among them arguably the ego-deflating techniques of camp, comic literalization, irony, and subtle critiques of narcissism embedded in shared images and stylistic technique. As Lawrence Danson points out, the following passage from *Zuleika Dobson* is a perfect example of the struggle, a "hesitance between the modes of romance and realism" (134):

> The moon, like a gardenia in the night's buttonhole—but no! why should a writer never be able to mention the moon without likening her to something else—usually something to which she bears not the faintest resemblance? . . . The moon, looking like nothing whatsoever but herself, was engaged in her old and futile endeavour to mark the hours correctly on the sun-dial at the centre of the lawn. (101)

Here, the narrator starts down the path of hackneyed romantic images only to stop himself in mid image and show the moon as a tired image of herself. In O'Connor, the struggle is not exactly between romanticism and realism, but instead between romanticism and the incarnational. The romantic sees the beautiful in the banal. The incarnationalist sees the bloody reality of the spirit in the flesh, but the reality is no more romantic than Beerbohm's moon that looks "like nothing whatsoever but herself." In O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger," "The sun shed a dull dry light on the narrow street; everything looked like exactly what it was" (*Collected* 225). Even when O'Connor invests the mysterious in nature, as in "Greenleaf," there is the eventual deflation of that mystery and perhaps romanticism, sometimes by the ugly reality of racism or economic self interest:

> Mrs. May's bedroom window was low and faced on the east and the bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room. . . .
>
> For almost a minute there was no sound from inside, then as he raised his crowned head again, a woman's voice, guttural as if addressed to a dog, said, "Get away from here, Sir!" and in a second muttered, "Some nigger's scrub bull." (*Collected* 501)

O'Connor's attraction to Beerbohm was probably based on a number of traits of his writing: humor, style, interest in deflating narcissistic pride, all of which are encompassed by Elfenbein's two allusive types and all of which were shared traits between *Zuleika Dobson* and *Seven Men and*

Two Others. I believe that the demonstration of the significant influence—fashionable or not—of Beerbohm on O'Connor shows yet again the depth of O'Connor's artistic sensibilities, and her ability to be influenced by many different and highly varied writers and yet emerge with a voice that is widely recognized as unique in American literature.

One of the best insights into Beerbohm's style—as camp—provides an initial insight into O'Connor's appreciation of his work. Robert F. Kiernan writes of this stylistic approach by Beerbohm and other writers, "Such instances of camp proliferate in all forms of art and behavior that offer the opportunity for a contrast between negligible content and elaborate form" (12). That is, camp can reveal a grotesque mismatch between pretentiously self-important form and comically inadequate meaning. Kiernan argues that camp "shades only at its edges into the oppositional stances of satire and parody" and differs from these two in its "celebration" and lack of moralizing (16). As he argues, "camp applauds the human patchedness" evident in *Zuleika Dobson*, for example (44). Consider, in particular, Zuleika's cheap and poorly executed magic tricks:

> It is not too late to tell my readers that the climax of Zuleika's entertainment was only that dismal affair, the Magic Canister. . . .
>
> The MacQuern placed the Magic Canister before her on the table. She pressed the outer sheath down on it. Then she inverted it so that the contents fell into the false lid; then she opened it, looked into it, and, exclaiming "Well, this is rather queer!" held it up so that the audience whose intelligence she was insulting might see there was nothing in it. (110-11)

I believe that the palmist Madam Zoleeda's name in O'Connor's "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is a clever nod to Zuleika Dobson's name and profession as an indifferently talented magician. Sally Fitzgerald points out that in drafts of *Wise Blood* where the character appears the palmist's name is Sosistra. Fitzgerald concludes that "Madame Zoleeda was a spin-off from Madame Sosostris" ("The Owl" 53). "Zoleeda" is more likely an echo of "Zuleika" (the penultimate syllable has the same vowel in pronunciation) while the discarded "Sosistra" was indeed an echo of Eliot's "Sosostris."[4] The name of the palmist appears as "Madam Zoleeda" in the earliest version of the story, in 1949 titled "Woman on the Stairs,"

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[4]See Driggers and Dunn (24-25) for yet third and fourth variants, "Rilba" and "Sotistra."

published in *Tomorrow*, and in the 1953 version titled "A Stroke of Good Fortune," published in *Shenandoah*. O'Connor clearly had a delight in camp, evident in much of her fiction: Madam Zoleeda herself; the potato peeler in *Wise Blood*; all of Parker's tattoos before the Byzantine Christ; Manley Pointer's near-empty suitcase of Bibles; the grandmother's manners in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"; and even Mrs. Carmody's costume in *The Violent Bear It Away*: "She had on a long dramatic cape, one side of which was turned backward over her shoulder to reveal a red lining. . . . Here she lifted the end of her cape and holding it out as a magician would made a low bow" (*Collected* 410-11). The camp in O'Connor's fiction is frequently almost identical to the vulgar and humorous self-importance of the camp in Beerbohm, as in Zuleika's bow to the Oxford undergraduates before her spontaneous magic performance outdoors. The Duke introduces her: "As the Duke ceased, there came from his hearers a sound like the rustling of leaves. In return for it, Zuleika performed that graceful act of subsidence to the verge of collapse which is usually kept for the delectation of some royal person" (*Zuleika* 107). In her letters, O'Connor often reveled in a "vulgar" version of "camp":

> I would like to go to California for about two minutes to further these researches ["into the ways of the vulgar"], though at times I feel that a feeling for the vulgar is my natural talent and don't need any particular encouragement. Did you see the picture of Roy Roger's horse attending a church service in Pasadena? I forget whether his name was Tex or Trigger but he was dressed fit to kill and looked like he was having a good time. He doubled the usual attendance. (*Collected* 905)

If camp is the inflation of form beyond its capacity for commensurate meaning, then a method F. W. Dupee terms "comic literalization" is the opposite in the deflation of abstract meaning to literal action, with comic effect that is at times horrific. Referring to Dupee's essay on *Zuleika Dobson*, which attributes to Beerbohm's novel "the process of comic literalization," Josephine Hendin argues that O'Connor also uses the technique. Hendin says that Dupee "describes it as the power of words to become things, to materialize in specific action" (28). Dupee's examples include the stunningly self-centered Zuleika as a literal *femme fatale* whose visit leads to the death of the entire undergraduate population at Oxford (all but one drown themselves for their frustrated love of Zuleika). Dupee also mentions the frequently expressed wish of the Oxford dons to be rid of the undergraduates in *Zuleika Dobson* and

the taking of the Diabolist Soames's soul and body by the Devil himself in "Enoch Soames" from *Seven Men and Two Others*. Alongside the literalizing plot developments mentioned by Dupee, absurdly literalizing logic is common to many of Beerbohm's characters, particularly the Duke in *Zuleika Dobson*. The pride and isolation of the Duke lead him to make the Junta so literally exclusive that for a period he is the only member. Because a vote is necessary, he takes a vote on every candidate, each of whom he eventually rejects himself: "and, in every case, when he drew out the drawer of the ballot-box, [the Duke] found it was a black-ball that he had dropped into the urn" (*Zuleika* 78). Beerbohm's Duke drowns himself, ultimately not because he has promised Zuleika to do so for his frustrated love for her but because he has received a telegram informing him that two black owls had come to his estate at Tankerton, hooted all night, and left at dawn, the traditional signal that a Duke of Dorset is to die (*Zuleika* 40, 144-45). In *Seven Men and Two Others*, A. V. Laider claims to have been unable to stop a fatal train accident in part because it was foreordained in the life lines of his fellow passengers (111). While perhaps not comic, except in the darkest of senses, the deaths are a literalization of what is at best a fashionable parlor trick.

Hendin contends that in O'Connor's hands comic literalization "is a way of destroying the significance of symbols, of making them specific and concrete or, in other words, of making the spiritual physical or the abstract literal" (28). Hendin says that this "literalizing principle controls the organization of many of O'Connor's stories" (28), analyzing as evidence the scene in "The River" where Bevel drowns/baptizes himself to reach the kingdom of God. Comic literalization pervades O'Connor's fiction, as in Enoch Emery's absurdly literal logic in *Wise Blood* for deflating the superior looking picture of a moose in his room:

> he realized with a sudden intuition that taking the frame off him would be equal to taking the clothes off him (although he didn't have on any) and he was right because when he had done it, the animal looked so reduced that Enoch could only snicker and look at him out the corner of his eye. (*Collected* 75)

Hazel Motes's confusion over Sabbath's claim to be a "bastard" even though her father blinded himself for Jesus is of the same type of comic literalizing logic (*Collected* 66).

I believe that what we might call Beerbohm's aesthetics of irony are most clearly stated in the story "Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton" when Beerbohm writes of irony and love:

> Aristocrats, when they are presented solely through a novelist's sense of beauty, do not satisfy us. They may be as beautiful as all that, but, for fear of thinking ourselves snobbish, we won't believe it. We do believe it, however, and revel in it, when the novelist saves his face and ours by a pervading irony in the treatment of what he loves. The irony must, mark you, be pervading and obvious. (*Seven* 42)

O'Connor is known for the grotesque, an aesthetics far from the conventionally or aristocratically beautiful. Although O'Connor read the statement in *Seven Men and Two Others* probably far too late for it to influence her aesthetics directly, an aesthetics of irony was already on full narrative display in *Zuleika Dobson* with Beerbohm's ironic approach not just to the narcissism of the gentry but also to that of academics, both the dons and the undergraduates. An aesthetics of irony is crucial to O'Connor's fiction and to her intent not least because O'Connor consistently suggested that her characters were both deeply flawed (normally, with some flavor of narcissism—religious, academic, or simply vacuous, as in the case of most of the adults who surround Bevel in "The River"), yet worthy of love. In December 1963, O'Connor wrote to Betty Hester that Catherine Carver had told her that "Revelation" in draft was "one of my most powerful stories and probably my *blackest*. Found Ruby evil. Found end vision to confirm same. Though suggested I leave it out." Then O'Connor says that she is going to "deepen" the ending "so that there'll be no mistaking Ruby is not just an evil Glad Annie" (*Habit* 554). There is plenty of evidence that O'Connor admired the self-satisfied Ruby Turpin, as she admired many, if not all, of her flawed characters. In May 1964, she wrote to her friend Maryat Lee, "I like Mrs. Turpin as well as Mary Grace. You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hog pen." She also writes of the final scene in "Revelation" "that vision is purgatorial." O'Connor's comments in themselves provide readers who don't have what O'Connor calls a sense of the "middling planes of glory" (*Collected* 1207) a powerful hint of multilayered ironic intention (Ruby Turpin has received a revelation; although she remains a racist and classist, she is on her way to heaven, through purgatory). Just as O'Connor herself at once admired and thoroughly excoriated the pride and shame of the Ruby Turpins and Asbury Foxes of her fiction, Beerbohm wrote with the same

love of the foolishness of all at Oxford as well as the foolishness of his seven men and two others (one of those being himself).

Pride and isolation, both potential manifestations of narcissism, are the most obvious two preoccupations of the aesthetics of irony that O'Connor shared with the Beerbohm of both *Zuleika Dobson* and *Seven Men and Two Others*. Beerbohm claims in *Zuleika Dobson* that "there was nothing Narcissine in [Zuleika's] spirit." His denial serves to put such a fine point on the meaning of narcissism as to highlight the presence of the classical elements of the narcissist in the Duke. Whereas Beerbohm claims that Zuleika "valued [her] image not for its own sake, but for the sake of the glory it always won for her" (12), he claims that before meeting Zuleika, the Duke "was too much concerned with his own perfection ever to think of admiring any one else" (21). Danson points out that *Zuleika Dobson* is "a story of heterosexual desire thwarted by the more powerful appeal of narcissism" (118). Zuleika loves the Duke of Dorset only while he spurns her. When he declares his love, Zuleika promptly falls out of love with him. He declares his intention to commit suicide, and thus fall the remaining undergraduates of Oxford, unable to think for themselves. In *Seven Men and Two Others*, Beerbohm has his satiric sights set most intensely on various failed writers. The best and most popular of the sketches is that of Enoch Soames, who trades his soul and body to the devil in order to go one hundred years into the future, to examine his literary reputation (he has none). Enoch is self-importantly literary in his pronouncements: "The lower one's vitality, the more sensitive one is to great art." He is also a "Catholic Diabolist" (*Seven* 11). Unless O'Connor read an earlier edition of her 1959 copy of *Seven Men and Two Others*, the connection of the name "Enoch" used by Beerbohm in his sketch and by O'Connor in her 1952 *Wise Blood* is coincidental.

The danger of inflated self-importance, spiritual or intellectual or otherwise, is a theme that O'Connor explored throughout her career in multiple characters: Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*; Rayber in the thesis story "The Barber" and later of *The Violent Bear It Away*; Hulga Hopewell of "Good Country People"; Asbury of "The Enduring Chill"; Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge"; Thomas of "The Comforts of Home"; Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First"; and Ruby Turpin of "Revelation." In *Wise Blood*, Hazel's narcissism includes a self-absorption so strong that it blinds him to Sabbath's attempt to seduce him, a seduction unsuccessful in spite of his own intention to seduce her.

Hazel's self-absorption manifests itself in many other ways throughout the novel, e.g., his preoccupation with his Church Without Christ and his murder of his double, Solace Layfield. The theme of inflated self-importance, or narcissism, has been well documented in O'Connor's fiction (Srigley; Nisly; Lake; Monroe; Hardy 119-20). Susan Srigley argues that O'Connor's "ethic of responsibility" (in part, human to human) is driven by "a sacramental orientation that sees human beings as inherently worthy of love and thus morally interconnected" (7).

The isolated character in O'Connor is so common that it is difficult to choose even a small representative sample. Among the many are Joy Hulga Hopewell of "Good Country People," both Raybers, Wesley and Scofield of "Greenleaf," and Thomas of "The Comforts of Home." That isolation is represented, for example, in the ineffectual artists Mrs. Willerton of "The Crop" and Asbury of "The Enduring Chill," both failed writers because of their lack of talent and alienation from their subject matter. Miss Willerton wants to write about a "social problem" such as sharecroppers. But there is a problem: "Miss Willerton had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers" other than through a very bad novel she once read (*Collected* 733). Asbury tries desperately to connect to the African American workers on his mother's farm because "he had been writing a play about the Negro and he had wanted to be around them for a while to see how they really felt about their condition" (*Collected* 558).

The most common types of isolated characters in *Zuleika Dobson* and *Seven Men and Two Others* are the socially awkward gentleman and the dandy. Hilary Maltby in "Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton" is a good example of the first type, his isolation resulting not only from his inherent awkwardness but also from his haunting by Stephen Braxton, his literary rival. Maltby's social ineptness drives the humor of the entire story, but his self-fulfilling dual fears of social isolation and Braxton's haunting are well illustrated by his early arrival at breakfast during his stay at Keeb Hall among the other guests of the Duchess of Hertfordshire: "I dreaded to be found eating, alone in that vast room, by the first downcomer. I sat dallying with dry toast and watching the door. It occurred to me that Braxton might occur at any moment. Should I be able to ignore him?" (*Seven* 63). Beerbohm's gentlemen are hypersensitive to social place and protection of their privacy. Beerbohm himself is snubbed on the street by the Devil at the end of "Enoch Soames": "To be cut—deliberately cut—by *him!* I was, I still am, furious

at having had that happen to me" (*Seven* 36). The Duke in *Zuleika Dobson* is Beerbohm's most well-developed example of narcissistic isolation. When Noaks, also in love with Zuleika, tells the Duke that he is in love, the narrator comments that the Duke's "need of sympathy was too new to have taught him sympathy with others" (29).

O'Connor presents several characters who are mirror ego images of the Duke's isolated "perfection" (prior to his involvement with Zuleika). All tend to believe or want to believe that they are incorruptible. In *Wise Blood*, when Hazel "was eighteen and the army called him, he saw the war as a trick to lead him into temptation, and he would have shot his foot except that he trusted himself to get back in a few months, uncorrupted" (*Collected* 11). In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Francis Tarwater has Manichean fantasies of spiritual purity: "When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath" (*Collected* 343). In the same novel, Rayber has a crippling version of the Duke's ascetic affectation: "He had kept [love] from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline. He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions" (*Collected* 402).

There is an obvious difference in the isolation of the dandy and the isolation of O'Connor's Manichean characters. The effect of one is almost purely comic. The other is a spiritual disease. The ascetic is a mere pose for the Duke: "He must not dilute his own soul's essence. He must not surrender to any passion his dandihood. The dandy must be celibate, cloistral; is, indeed, but a monk with a mirror for beads and breviary—an anchorite, mortifying his soul that his body may be perfect" (*Zuleika* 23). Contrast the seriousness of Hazel Motes's self-blinding and death with the comic fantasy of the undergraduate population of Oxford drowning themselves for Zuleika. Compare the brief, frivolous intention of Zuleika at the end of the novel to enter a nunnery with Francis Tarwater's fate at the end of *The Violent Bear It Away*: "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (*Collected* 479).

* * * * *

For further consideration of Beerbohm's influence on O'Connor, Elfenbein's "stored units" of language or simply images is useful. These stylistic elements, of course, have thematic significance because boundaries within Elfenbein's typology are by nature not absolute. There are a number of striking parallels between O'Connor's texts and the Beerbohm texts we are considering, including an interest in peacocks as symbols of pride and beauty. Although Beerbohm refers to the peacock as "a fool even among birds," "At Eton [the Duke] had been called 'Peacock,' and this nick-name had followed him up to Oxford" (*Zuleika* 21). Given her lifelong interest in birds and her collection of peacocks, begun in 1952 after she "had been reading through the Florida *Market Bulletin*" and "came across a listing for three-year-old 'peafowl'" (Gooch 218), O'Connor could not but have admired the Duke's description of his Tankerton estate: "There are always two or three peacocks trailing their sheathed feathers along the balustrade, and stepping how stiffly! as though they had just been unharnessed from Juno's chariot" (*Zuleika* 39). O'Connor's "Displaced Person" contains a similar passage describing a peacock having descended from god-like heights: "The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all" (*Collected* 289). The image here, while not grotesque, is representative of the difference in use of imagery by O'Connor and Beerbohm. Beerbohm loves the surface of the world, as do his characters, for the surface itself. O'Connor's surface is incarnational, as is well recognized in the critical literature. Thus, the image of the peacock, as of "a vision," might remind readers of the larger context in which the sacrifice of the displaced person is to take place. For the Duke, the peacocks are simply classical images representing his vast wealth and privilege, both of which he is stunned to discover do not impress Zuleika sufficiently to win her love or even practical devotion.

O'Connor frequently uses the double as a device to dramatize internal conflict, e.g., Mr. Fortune and Mary Fortune Pitts, Hazel and his mother, Hazel and Solace Layfield, Enoch and Gonga the Gorilla, Mr. Head and Nelson (Paulson). Similarly, as Danson says, "one of the central relationships of late Victorian literature," the double is at the center of many of the narcissistic portraits in *Seven Men and Two Others* (155, 181-85). Perhaps the best example of doubling in *Seven Men* involves James Pethel, the gambler and risk-taking adventurer who endangers not only Max but also his own family in a harrowing motor outing. If O'Connor did not read *Seven Men and Two Others* before acquiring her

1959 copy, the similarity between the narcissistic doubling in "James Pethel" and in O'Connor's "A View of the Woods" is simply an example of stylistic like-mindedness, since O'Connor's story was published in 1957. In Beerbohm's "James Pethel," the eponymous character's double is his daughter: "Whenever he was looking at her (and it was seldom that he looked away from her) the effect, if you cared to be fantastic, was that of a very vain man before a mirror" (*Seven* 86). In O'Connor's "View of the Woods," the narcissistic doubling is between Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts:

> Her pale eyes behind her spectacles followed the repeated motion of [the bulldozer] again and again and her face—a small replica of the old man's—never lost its look of complete absorption.
>
> No one was particularly glad that Mary Fortune looked like her grandfather except the old man himself. He thought it added greatly to her attractiveness. (*Collected* 525)

As Beerbohm does with Pethel and his daughter, O'Connor uses the mirror to metaphorize the similarity between Mary Fortune and her grandfather: "He had frequent little verbal tilts with her but this was a sport like putting a mirror up in front of a rooster and watching him fight his reflection" (*Collected* 531). Beerbohm also uses the mirrored double to dramatize Zuleika's guilt and then her retreat to self-pity and to her normal state of stupefying self-involvement in the last chapter. Here she moves from reproach to pity: "The lady in the mirror gazed at the lady in the room, reproachfully at first, then—for were they not sisters?—relentingly, then pityingly." Zuleika then hatches her plan to go to Cambridge instead of a convent: "And now, with pent breath and fast-beating heart, she stood staring at the lady of the mirror, without seeing her" (*Zuleika* 235).

Narcissistic self-importance and a taste for the melodramatic are not reserved for magicians, the nobility, and academics in Beerbohm or for the middle class in O'Connor. In *Zuleika Dobson*, the Duke's landlady is quite overcome with her own importance in her reactions to the deaths of the Duke and the other Oxford undergraduates: "Mrs. Batch had a keen sense of the deportment owed to tragedy. . . . Her grief was perfectly sincere. And it was not the less so because with it was mingled a certain joy in the greatness of the calamity" (200). Mrs. Batch's imagination reflects her congratulatory self-importance: "Mrs. Batch had risen from her chair, the better to cope with such magnitude. She stood

with wide-spread arms, silent, gaping. She seemed, by sheer force of sympathy, to be expanding to the dimensions of a crowd" (201). O'Connor uses similar larger-than-life imagery to make concrete the illusions of grandiosity in the "very large" and "looming" Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" (*Collected* 633) and Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person." Mrs. Shortley is not quite so large-hearted as Mrs. Batch, but she does have a condescending, self-protective attitude towards the African American workers on Mrs. McIntyre's farm, workers who she is convinced will be displaced by the Polish displaced family coming to work there as well. She ignores the peacock presenting to her in its tail the mystery of the universe: "She was having an inner vision instead. She was seeing the ten million billion of [the displaced persons] pushing their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a house, telling the Negroes that they would have to find another place" (*Collected* 291).

Another shared image of self-importance that invites us to recognize narcissism is that of a focalized character set against a background of others or a scenic backdrop. In *Zuleika Dobson*, the focalizer in the train station awaiting the arrival of his granddaughter Zuleika is the Warden of Judas: "Aloft, between the wide brim of his silk hat and the white extent of his shirt-front, appeared those eyes which hawks, that nose which eagles, had often envied. . . . He alone was worthy of the background" (3). A similar focalized sense of pride is present in Ruby Turpin as she envisions herself and Claud and others like them on the ascent to heaven: "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" (*Collected* 654).

We have seen repeatedly that narcissism is a general theme in both Beerbohm and O'Connor. When that inflated pride is frustrated, the body rebels, as in the following scene, in which the Duke and Noaks discover that they both love Zuleika:

> "I can't imagine you in love," said the Duke, smiling.
> "And I can't imagine *you*. You're too pleased with yourself," growled Noaks.
> "Spur your imagination, Noaks," said his friend. "I *am* in love."
> "So am I," was an unexpected answer, and the Duke (whose need of sympathy was too new to have taught him sympathy with others) laughed aloud. "Whom do you love?" he asked, throwing himself into an arm-chair. (*Zuleika* 29)

Note the stylistic emphasis on the reflexive self when the Duke throws himself into a chair, as if he is not especially concerned with Noaks's answer. Later, the Duke mulls over the fate of Byron and how he was almost a perfect dandy: "Only in himself, at the times when he stood haughtily aloof, was he impressive" (181). Both Zuleika and the Duke dramatically fling themselves about in fits of self-important pique over the insults to their selves in their frustrated loves. First the Duke reneges on his promise to kill himself for his unrequited love of Zuleika. This insult to her importance is the last thing that Zuleika wishes to hear: "She dried her hands and flung herself into a chair, arose and went pacing the room. So this was the end of her great night! What had she done to deserve it? How had he dared?" (116). Then, in a fit, she dumps a water pitcher on his head and he catches a cold. He, too, shows his frustration by flinging himself: "At length, exhausted, he flung himself down on the window-seat and leaned out into the night, panting" (131).

As I argue in *The Body in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction*, self-reflexive actions are particularly common in O'Connor's fiction. In Beerbohm's description of Zuleika's self-involvement, we see a pronounced interest in the body, on the part of both the character and the narrator: "She would droop her head from side to side, she would bend it forward and see herself from beneath her eyelashes, then tilt it back and watch herself over her supercilious chin" (12). Compare the following passage from O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost": "Susan . . . pushed her face up close to the mirror to watch the pupils in her eyes dilate" (*Collected* 200). O'Connor's interest in the body and especially her interest in bodily actions, such as reflexive actions like pushing one's head forward or looking at oneself or watching oneself, frequently demonstrate an interest in the inflated self or the frustration of that self. Consider the following passage from "Greenleaf":

> When [Mrs. May] stopped at the second pasture gate, [Mr. Greenleaf] flung himself out of the car door and slammed it behind him. Then he opened the gate and she drove through. He closed it and flung himself back in, silently, and she drove around the rim of the pasture until she spotted the bull, almost in the center of it, grazing peacefully among the cows.
>
> "The gentleman is waiting on you," she said and gave Mr. Greenleaf's furious profile a sly look. "Run him into that next pasture and when you get him in, I'll drive in behind you and shut the gate myself."
>
> He flung himself out again, this time deliberately leaving the car door open so that she had to lean across the seat and close it. (*Collected* 520-21)

Mr. Greenleaf, angry because Mrs. May is going to force him to shoot his own sons' bull that has wandered onto her property yet again, flings himself about like both Zuleika and the Duke, in a similar display of wounded pride.

Both O'Connor and Beerbohm built self-delusion into many of their characters. The "Catholic Diabolist" Enoch Soames hypocritically declares that "Baudelaire . . . was a *bourgeois malgré lui* " (*Seven* 12). As Sally Fitzgerald points out, the second edition of *Wise Blood* in 1962 contained O'Connor's comment that *Wise Blood* "is a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death" ("Notes" 1265). Beerbohm's and O'Connor's characters repeatedly find themselves behaving in ways that reveal a split mind or split sensibility, a stylistic technique of characterization that undermines their intellectual or spiritual narcissism. For example, the Duke

> found himself in the precincts of Magdalen, preaching from the little open-air pulpit there an impassioned sermon on the sacredness of human life, and referring to Zuleika in terms which John Knox would have hesitated to utter. . . . He carried his crusade into the Loder, and thence into Vincent's, and out into the street again, eager, untiring, unavailing: everywhere he found his precept checkmated by his example. (*Zuleika* 155)

Hazel's preaching the Church Without Christ parallels the Duke's mission. Hazel's repeated attempts to claim the innocence of his soul are also "checkmated." When he tells Asa Hawks, the charlatan preacher, "I'm as clean as you are," Hawks replies, "Fornication and blasphemy and what else?" (*Collected* 29). Hazel claims the same to the waitress in the Frosty Bottle: "I AM clean," to which she responds with angry indifference (*Collected* 52). He says exactly the same to the owl in the zoo (*Collected* 54). Finally, after he blinds himself, he confesses to his landlady, "I'm not clean," misunderstood yet again (*Collected* 127).

These and other shared narrative strategies, images, and echoes of language (or allusions, as Elfenbein refers to them), along with O'Connor's specific claim of being influenced by Beerbohm, invite an understanding and appreciation of O'Connor's debt to a writer who didn't share her fierce Christian moral vision but instead shared an equally profound sense of the absurd and of the perhaps not completely avoidable human tendency towards narcissism. It would be evidence of critical tone-deafness to claim that O'Connor's critique of narcissism is

of the exact same intent and effect as that of Beerbohm. Beerbohm parodies what he as an Edwardian dandy himself truly loved. O'Connor's narratives address a more deeply embedded narcissism, one not about Beerbohm's mannered surface but instead about the core of selfishness that keeps her characters socially and spiritually alone in a meaningless and ultimately tragic world of their own. The differences between O'Connor and Beerbohm in these intents and effects can be highlighted by a comparison of O'Connor's direct statement on the myth of the romantic artist with the parody of that artistic temperament in Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*. In "The Regional Writer," a 1962 address to the Georgia Writers' Association (S. Fitzgerald, "Note on the Texts" 1262), O'Connor explicitly makes clear her scorn for the "myth" of the lonely, sensitive writer, a type that she ridiculed frequently, especially in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*: this

> myth [is] that writing is a lonely occupation, involving much suffering because, supposedly, the writer exists in a state of sensitivity which cuts him off, or raises him above, or casts him below the community around him. This is a common cliché, a hangover probably from the romantic period. (*Collected* 843)

Beerbohm, on the other hand, characteristically at once vaunts and parodies the essentially romantic art-for-art's sake movement in his characterization of Zuleika's devotion to her conjuring:

> I cannot claim for her that she had a genuine passion for her art. The true conjurer finds his guerdon in the consciousness of work done perfectly and for its own sake. . . . If he were set down, with the materials of his art, on a desert island, he would yet be quite happy. He would not cease to produce the barber's-pole from his mouth. To the indifferent winds he would still speak his patter, and even in the last throes of starvation would not eat his live rabbit or his goldfish. Zuleika, on a desert island, would have spent most of her time in looking for a man's foot-print. (*Zuleika* 11)

Literary influence is indeed much harder to prove than it might seem. In spite of the difficulties, influence studies remain an important element of O'Connor scholarship, in part because of the richness, intensity, and the highly unusual nature of O'Connor's art and mind. There is thus a natural curiosity about the formative influences on her fiction, and that inspired curiosity is yet one more gift that she left the world along with her art—uniquely her own yet subtly rich enough to contain traces in language, image, and theme of the brilliance of others that inspired and/or delighted her.

Influence studies and even theory need to be reclaimed from Bloomian anxiety. I believe that Elfenbein's allusive influence goes some distance towards that reclamation. We need specifically to recognize both theoretically and practically the subtlety of influence, a subtlety that is evident in O'Connor's thematic and linguistic echoes of Beerbohm. Non-Bloomian influence is not grandiloquent, or obvious. The likelihood is strong that Beerbohm's influence on O'Connor would remain unremarked in detail if it had not been for the publication of her letter to Ashley Brown in which she claims her "less fashionable" influences. I believe that the Beerbohm influence on O'Connor in fact represents the norm for most literary influence. It is quiet and subtle and exceedingly complex, much like the ordinary influences that produce our own dialects and idiolects in "ordinary language." In fact, literary influences are frequently only more easily discoverable in their details than the influence that produces ordinary language dialect and idiolects because we are sometimes lucky enough, as in O'Connor's case, to have explicit comments on influence and/or previous relevant extant literary texts to examine for ideas and images, the working matter of all literary artists.

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