Modern American Grotesque

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In many statements on the craft of fiction Flannery O’Connor made explicit the place of the grotesque in her imagination and its role in her writing. For O’Connor, as a Catholic author living within a largely irreligious culture, exaggerated and overdetermined methods seemed necessary in order to convey matters of faith: “You have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (Mystery, 34). In turn, the dominance of the secular and the material in modern life has meant the distortion, often to a point of exclusion, of genuine spiritual considerations. To her mind, advertising agencies answer most conscious needs in American society since “everybody wants the good things of life, like supermarkets and cellophane.” As to media culture O’Connor, in observing the new public frenzy over Elvis Presley, anticipated that her challenge was to find subject matter and perspectives that are not superficially grotesque. O’Connor was aware that she shared such jaundiced reactions to popular culture with Nathanael West but, finding Miss Lonelyhearts to be “a sentimental Christ figure, which is a contradiction in terms,” she felt no meaningful connection to the earlier writer. Mindful of a humorous tradition of the grotesque, of the kind Constance Rourke delineated, O’Connor traces the modern grotesque to intractable “prophetic vision” instead: “In nineteenth-century American writing, there was a good deal of grotesque literature which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny; but our present grotesque characters,
comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity” (Mystery, 44).

If in one sense the social grotesque is embodied in the mindless, material norms of everyday experience, the grotesque O’Connor creates in fiction is a homeopathic countermeasure designed to re-embody the mystery of spiritual life. Where religious faith itself is concerned, the general public is impaired by great blind spots. Given this situation, the literary grotesque becomes necessary in order to disclose intrinsic truths that would otherwise remain unnoticed: “It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially” (Mystery, 113). The writer centered in Christian concerns resorts to the grotesque as a means to rejoin the material and the spiritual, which for most contemporaries are separated by great distances: “He’s looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees” (Mystery, 42).

A unifying grotesque mode is achieved through what O’Connor terms prophetic vision, which is a matter of “seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (Mystery, 44). She offers a more theological explication of the term in a letter from 1959: “According to St. Thomas, prophetic vision is not a matter of seeing clearly, but of seeing what is distant, hidden. The Church’s vision is a prophetic vision; it is always widening the view. The ordinary person does not have prophetic vision but he can accept it on faith. St. Thomas also says that prophetic vision is a quality of the imagination, that it does not have anything to do with the moral life of the prophet. It is the imaginative vision itself that endorses the morality.” This capacity makes her unlikely prophet figures the sole “realist of distances” in the stories, irrespective of how out of touch with reality these figures may seem (Mystery, 44). These prophets’ discrepant perspectives are the source of many profane and violent effects in her fiction.

For O’Connor the Christian presupposition of fallen humanity is not a cause for sentiment or even for compassion but rather it is a call for the close scrutiny of our necessarily mortal status. In her hierarchy of values, moral judgment is always superior to intellectual discriminations and emotional reactions. Prophetic focus directs attention toward the “fierce and instructive” mystery of life on earth as the phase of human existence that is “Christ-haunted” (Mystery, 44–45). With an ingenious eye and ear for mundane detail her fictions present many tokens of the concrete and the here and now in the process of conveying a more essential immateri-
ality and spiritual displacement. O'Connor assessed her own imagination to be other-directed in a religious sense, well outside positivist purviews like behaviorism and toward instead the unknowns of faith. In a letter written in 1955, she comments sardonically that college had prepared her to be “the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw” and she offers thanks to Providence: “The only thing that kept me from being a social-scientist was the grace of God and the fact that I couldn’t remember the stuff but a few days after reading it” (Letters, 97–98). Having renounced the seeming certainties offered by various schools of determinist thought, which she deems to be a kind of creature comfort for contemporary humanity, O'Connor is drawn instead toward the disruptive uncertainty of eternal matters.


O’Connor associates her own writing generally with the American literary tradition of romance rather than with realism or naturalism. She aligns it with the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James on the basis of a shared predisposition to render “dark and divisive” forces at work within a pragmatic and optimistic American scene (Mystery, 46). In her judgment realism and naturalism, even at their most powerful, are limited to ephemeral perceptions, while a specifically Christian romance can convey a firm potential for the action of divine grace. In matters of literary technique, O’Connor acknowledges Joseph Conrad as the strongest influence and states that she aspires to Conrad’s famous purpose toward the reader “before all, to make you see” (quoted in Mystery, 80).

Comments O’Connor made about her youth identify two early literary sources for her sense of the grotesque. In a letter of 1955 the author recalls that the only reading of quality she did in childhood was about Greek
and Roman myth in a juvenile encyclopedia, and that the rest was “Slop with a capital S” (\textit{Letters}, 98). Surely one appeal classical mythology held for her is its repertory of metamorphoses and the unpredictable ways of divine power toward humanity. The next memorable literary encounter for O’Connor was fiction by Edgar Allan Poe. Gathered in a collection labeled “Humorous Tales,” it was favorite reading “before the age of reason” in her development and it started a fascination with Poe that lasted for years. Intrigued by their “walled-in monsters” and other oddities, she recognized that these tales were “anything but funny” (\textit{Works}, 911).

In the same 1955 letter she recalls three stories in particular from this time, and notably they are not among the best known by Poe nor are they tales of terror in any essential way. Rather, they revolve around distortions and transformations in visual perspective that in the end thoroughly, and thankfully, reconstitute the meaning of appearances in the storyteller’s world. She remembers the three by plot situation rather than by specific title and their plots merit some consideration here. One (“The Spectacles”) involves a mistaken identity and the romantic deception that entangles a young man too vain to wear glasses in public. In the end he manages nonetheless to marry well. Another (“The Man That Was Used Up”), which I mentioned in connection with West, reveals that a formidable public figure, a man of great outward physical and social endowments with a reputation as a fierce Indian-killer, is in truth a nondescript weakling once all his artificial devices (including false teeth, a wig, and two wooden limbs) are removed. The third (“The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether”) follows a visitor into a mental institution where he observes increasingly odd behaviors among the director and his staff. He struggles to explain these as normal human eccentricities only at last to discover that lunatics have taken over the asylum, and with this discovery he gains his freedom. These are tales of elucidation rather than of gothic horror. While there is some passing anxiety, each protagonist at the end welcomes with grateful wonderment the conversion of confused appearances into a clear picture of the underlying truth.

To a defining degree, O’Connor’s practices of the grotesque in fiction are graphic in nature and they proceed from a descriptive level of expression.\(^1\) Her interests in drawing and caricature became evident early, and she contributed cartoons to high school publications and then regularly to campus publications when she attended Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville. The undergraduate cartoons often include a stylized self-portrait of O’Connor as an outsider and gadfly reacting against the narrow uniformity of college life. While studying in the graduate writers’
program at the University of Iowa she did some course work in advanced drawing and political caricature. In her early twenties O’Connor made efforts to place her cartoons commercially, including submissions to The New Yorker, but these proved unsuccessful and she concluded that her abilities in the medium would develop no further. Of her experience in creating line figures, O’Connor has written: “I enjoyed that greatly, there is something immediate about it, it either is successful or it isn’t, there are never any doubts, such as you feel over a piece of fiction, that you can’t see all at once” (Works, 1112). Later in life she recommended to apprentice writers the practice of drawing as a means of developing their powers of observation and description.

To regard the world solely on a basis of obvious appearances, however, is to see only “in the fashion of a camera,” whereas in her fictional world Christian “beliefs will be the light by which you see” (Mystery, 181, 91). In the late 1950s O’Connor read Erich Auerbach’s important study on the representation of reality in Western literature, Mimesis, and she was especially struck by connections between its ideas on figural interpretation of the Bible and her own beliefs ingrained through Catholic liturgy. Auerbach traces the evolution in meaning of figura. The term evolves from original denotations of outward appearance and plastic form into, during the Roman period of Cicero, a primary idea about rhetorical form. The concept of figura was adapted in early Christianity “to show that the persons and events of the Old Testament were prefigurations of the New Testament and its history of salvation.” In such cases of figural prophecy “the figure had just as much historical reality as what it prophesied.” Thus, the dynamic of prophetic realism shadows forth Christ as a carnal and historical truth, but one attendant consequence is “antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning” (Mimesis 49). For O’Connor outsized deformation and profound misapprehension are the collateral effects of just such a process.

Within a figural context of meaning, Auerbach elaborates, “the horizontal, that is the temporal and casual, connection of occurrences is dissolved; the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and which will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal” (Mimesis, 74). Thereby the figural is “an intrinsically irrational interpretation” (Mimesis, 75). Which is to say, it cannot be rationalized through positivist explanation or a narrative logic. By standards of the two axes of language that Roman Jakobson has presented, the figural is aligned with the paradigmatic and the synchronic (the domain to which description belongs) as opposed to the syntagmatic
and the diachronic (the domain of narration). In terms of O’Connor’s storylines, her strange prophet and pilgrim figures in the end do not arrive at a spiritual state unprecedented or unforeseen, rather they finally answer and return to promptings of the spirit eternal to humankind and personally suppressed or denied for a time.

Though clear, total delineation is not the final effect O’Connor sought through fiction, description serves her as the means to sustain a literal, apprehensible level in an ultimately mystical, anagogical structure of meaning that “has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it” (Mystery, 111). In elaborating this idea, she turns to a mundane act of graphic representation: “A good story is literal in the same sense that a child’s drawing is literal. When a child draws, he doesn’t intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion” (Mystery, 113). O’Connor’s fiction cannot be said to be limited by its nature to description, as is often true in the cases of Anderson and West. Her work is oriented toward matters of eschatology, and it thus entails a figuration of the potential for transformation. On this matter O’Connor has reflected: “The hardest thing for the writer to indicate is the presence of the anagogical which to my mind is the only thing that can cause the personality to change. . . . We are not our own light” (Letters, 503).

Because human existence is inseparable from mortality in O’Connor’s judgment, it is as well inescapably marked by deformity and moral failings. Only the dead, once saved, are whole. In life, the secular world establishes pliable standards of evil with which most people become dispassionately familiar. Her fiction often aims to defy such complacency: “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (Mystery, 112). It is with the axioms of evil and violence and the absolutes of joy and innocence, whose intersection can produce the grotesque, that O’Connor unexpectedly shares views with Baudelaire. As explained by Baudelaire, grotesque laughter “is satanic; it is therefore profoundly human. . . . It is at one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness, infinite wretchedness in relation to the absolute being, of whom man has an inkling, infinite greatness in relation to the beasts” (Art and Artists, 148). O’Connor describes one aspect of such a spiritual legacy in this manner: “Good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction” (Mystery, 226).

During her life O’Connor maintained an interest in graphic art and she especially admired prints by Daumier, over which she once exclaimed:
“They kill me—but it isn’t the form, the motion or anything, just the expressions on their faces” (Letters, 494). Here one recalls Baudelaire’s appreciative reaction to the “trivial and terrible” power of the appearances Daumier depicted. For her part, O’Connor finds that where “the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace [and] the nature of the violences which precede and follow them” are concerned the French poet understood one cogent truth: “The devil’s greatest wile, Baudelaire has said, is to convince us that he does not exist” (Mystery, 112). In the face of this situation, her fiction has developed an eye for the sinister and for humanity’s deformed spiritual condition. O’Connor has said that “to disconnect faith from vision is to do violence to the whole personality,” a consequence for many characters that is explored in excruciating detail (Mystery, 181).

And like Baudelaire, O’Connor’s sense of comedy is absolute rather than significative. On the subject of “the Comic and the Terrible, which two things may be opposite sides of the same coin,” she wrote to a close literary friend: “In my own experience, everything funny I have written is more terrible because it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny” (Letters, 105). This attitude does not allow for tragicomedy because O’Connor does not accept a tragic vision: “Naw, I don’t think life is a tragedy. Tragedy is something that can be explained by the professors. Life is the will of God and this cannot be defined by the professors; for which all thanksgiving. . . . Altogether it is better to pray than to grieve; and it is greater to be joyful than to grieve. But it takes more grace to be joyful than any but the greatest have” (Works, 928–29). Her ideas on the matter are remarkably similar to Baudelaire’s concept of grotesque laughter. The elements of prayer and grace are for O’Connor, however, first principles.

Over the years O’Connor did oil painting and in 1953 she finished a freely representative self-portrait, accompanied by a pheasant cock, that she far preferred over any photograph taken of her. With friends and literary people she elaborated a humorous yet half-serious phobia over the camera. Of one photo portrait she said that it “looked as if I had just bitten my grandmother and that this was one of my few pleasures” (Letters, 31). She had a particular dislike for the author’s picture on the dust jacket to her first novel, Wise Blood, published in 1952, which she thought made her look “like a refugee from deep thought” (Letters, 33). She became no more accustomed to such publicity over time. A decade later she protested that a magazine photograph portrayed her as “one of the Okies with the burden of world peace on my shoulders” (Letters, 525). Writer Katherine Anne Porter thought that none of Flannery O’Connor’s
physical appeal and personal charm was captured in photographs of her: “I am always astonished at Flannery’s pictures which show nothing of her grace. . . . She had a fine, clear, rosy skin and beautiful eyes. I could wish I had some record of her as she appeared to me” (Letters, xi). Two pronouncements O’Connor made in the 1960s sum up a lifelong opinion on the subject: “I think it would be great if the camera had not been invented” and “Photographers are the lowest breed of men” (Letters, 401, 534).

In some respects, however, O’Connor offered the public an image made in a vein of American backwoods grotesque, as with the childhood anecdote she often retold about a prized chicken that could walk backwards and that drew reporters’ attention far and wide, including a motion picture news crew from the Pathé company. Since then, she told an interviewer on the occasion of the publication of Wise Blood, “my life has been an anti-climax” (Conversations, 4). At a conference on fiction held at Vanderbilt University in 1959 she appeared before faculty and students in the company of Robert Penn Warren. While Warren’s statements were discursive and broadly allusive, hers were limited and tersely pointed. Warren allowed himself academic notions of “the muse,” “feeling envis-aged and pre-felt,” and “a dramatic need of fiction, a need of pace” (Conversations, 21, 23). Wanting not to “intellectualize it too much,” O’Connor avoided speaking at any length and for some remarks she assumed a down-home idiom. To a question on plot construction, for example, she explained “I just kind of feel it out like a hound-dog. I follow the scent” (Conversations, 20, 19).

Though O’Connor cultivated the grotesque both as a serious means to understand her fiction and as part of a self-styled public image, once her writing entered the common sphere it became subject to forms of simplification and exaggeration well beyond her intended purposes. The response to Wise Blood included letters that struck her as “from people I might have created myself.” Among them was “a message from two theological students at Alexandria who said . . . that I was their pin-up girl—the grimmest distinction to date” (Letters, 82). Her second novel, The Violent Bear It Away (1960), was reviewed in Time magazine as the story of “God-Intoxicated Hillbillies.” The unsigned piece treats the book as an “ironic jape” and portrays its author as a “retiring, bookish spinster who dabbles in the variants of sin and salvation like some self-tutored backwoods theologian.”

Intrinsic to Wise Blood are tropes of dark/light that figure the inevitably grotesque reckoning of flesh with the spiritual. From the outset Hazel Motes, the book’s inverse pilgrim and evangelist, seeks utter blackness.
Traveling overnight in a Pullman berth he draws the curtains tightly together: “He wanted it all dark, he didn’t want it diluted” (Works, 9). This compulsion is explained as an outward sign of “a deep black wordless conviction in him . . . to avoid Jesus” (Works, 11). By the end of the novel, as the leader and only parishioner of the “Church without Christ,” he professes one doctrine: “it was not right to believe anything you couldn’t see” (Works, 116). This conviction brings a desired blankness: “His face seemed to reflect the entire distance . . . that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space” (Works, 118). But even blankness proves insufficient for his mission. O’Connor, who considered Motes “such an admirable nihilist,” has after all drawn his name from Christ’s parable (Luke 6: 39–42) of the blind leading the blind (Letters, 70). In a final perverse testament to his beliefs, Motes blinds himself, yet the act oddly endows his face with “the look of seeing something” (Works, 120). The ultimate scene offers a contorted version of Christ’s healing of the man born blind and the teaching “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). Through death the face of Motes gains composure and an unearthly “point of light” can now be seen at the depths of his eye sockets (Works, 131). In an author’s note for the second edition of Wise Blood O’Connor terms Hazel Motes “a Christian malgré lui” and explains his “belief in Christ” as hereditary. With an antic retort to Darwinian explanations, the novelist compares this belief to a “ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (Works, 1265 n.1).

Often in O’Connor’s fiction the visible world is filtered through the perspective of a character’s untested confidence, easygoing adages, or mundane self-interest. Seen as such, the world is cast in simplified, black and white terms, unilluminated by eternal truths of the spirit. For their part, eternal truths can appear suddenly in splendid, vivid hues. The farm owner Mrs. Cope of “A Circle in the Fire” (1955), for example, is land proud, and she regards her property with “black eyes that seemed to be enlarging all the time behind her glasses” (Works, 232). Her pastures are bordered by a “fortress line of trees” but she lives in holy fear of a fire danger to these woods (Works, 247). When in the end the woods are set ablaze by a group of vagrant boys the story’s narrator likens the spectacle to the biblical scene of prophets “dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them” (Works, 251). To a fatalist like Asbury in “The Enduring Chill” (1958) there is a monochrome tonality to the world, but against this stands juxtaposed a secret craving for signs of a promised “majestic transformation”: “The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods” (Works, 547).
The hired help Mrs. Shortley of “The Displaced Person” (1955) falls into an anxious reverie, cast fully in black and white, when she fears losing her position to a Polish refugee family. Her reverie starts with a battle of words and ends with movie news images of the death camps. Mrs. Shortley began “to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words. . . . She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. God save me! she cried silently, from the stinking power of Satan!” (Works, 300). She has amplified her peevish worries into a personal apocalypse. At the same time the old priest, a visitor oblivious to the worldly concerns of the farm’s various occupants, marvels at the peacock on the place. Its tail, “full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next,” might be taken for “a map of the universe” (Works, 290–91). With an eye toward Apocalypse, the priest utters joyfully at the splendor of this sight: “’Christ will come like that!’” (Works, 317).

A pathway toward spiritual awareness is often traced in O’Connor’s stories by means of colorless, contrasted lights and darks. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1955) the drifter Mr. Shiftlet utters the startling claim that he is possessed of “a moral intelligence” at a point when his devious schemes are already well underway. As Mr. Shiftlet makes this perversely apt declaration “his face pierced out of the darkness into a shaft of doorlight and he stared . . . as if he were astonished himself at this impossible truth” (Works, 176). In O’Connor’s rendering, such intelligence is usually more wicked than righteous in its conscious purposes. At the moment when this confidence man outwits the old countrywoman O’Connor provides this depiction: “in the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet’s smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire” (Works, 179). For O’Connor there is unimpeachable authority for rendering evil as a sign that stands along the direction toward good: “In the gospels it was the devils who first recognized Christ and the evangelists didn’t censor this information” (Letters, 517). On other occasions O’Connor explained this circumstance through the exemplum, devised by St. Cyril of Jerusalem, of the dragon by the roadside. Good in the instance of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” is glimpsed in the form of the deaf and mute Lucynell, portrayed at the outset in terms of her “long pink-gold hair and eyes as blue as a peacock’s neck” (Works, 173). An innocent virgin still at nearly thirty years of age, she is already among the saved and by story’s end she is recognized as “an angel of Gawd” (Works, 181).

“Greenleaf” (1956) reverses the relationship of figure (color, grace) to
ground (light and dark, utter worldliness) in the stories considered thus far. Against a backdrop of insistent, often vivid colors, spiritual mystery in “Greenleaf” transpires in forms of black and white. Its establishing descriptions extend from the “even piercing blue” of the sky in spring to the name Greenleaf itself, which belongs to a tenant family whose matriarch has small eyes “the color of two field peas” (Works, 506, 520). Mrs. May, the proud owner of the acreage on which the Greenleafs work, judges the family to be the worst of white trash, especially the wife and particularly on account of that woman’s fervent practice of prayer healing, always accompanied by cries of “Jesus!” Mrs. May finds this last habit particularly objectionable: “She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom” (Works, 506). Yet, the true nemesis to Mrs. May, and the agent of spirituality in the story, is a dark, rogue bull who has invaded her garden. The animal is first glimpsed in moonlight, while at intervals night “clouds crossing the moon blackened him” (Works, 501). The next night Mrs. May watches the invader angrily “until the iron shadow moved away in the darkness” (Works, 519). Their final confrontation takes place in an open pasture under a bright sun that bathes the scene in “white light” (Works, 522). All coloration vanishes from the story at this point. When she sights the bull approaching Mrs. May remains stock-still “not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief” and the “violent black streak” gores her (Works, 523). The fatal encounter opens “a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (Works, 523).

Sometimes human vanity in O’Connor’s fiction assumes the form of intellectual superiority, as with Joy-Hulga of “Good Country People” (1955) who takes cardinal pride in her academic training in existentialism: “I don’t have illusions. I’m one of those people who see through to nothing” (Works, 280). Joy’s confidence in the complete transparency of the world to her mind is undone by the traveling Bible salesman bearing a large black sample case that seems to have a momentum of its own: “It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it” (Works, 269). Her experience of revealed truth begins when the salesman meets with Joy in private and opens the suitcase to show its contents: one actual Bible and a fake one hollowed out to make room for a whiskey flask, a pornographic deck of cards, and a pack of condoms. The revelation comes as a shock to Joy mainly because she had believed in earnest that he was just a naive Christian boy. At least the salesman has the integrity to be a genuine atheist. Upon departure, he announces triumphantly “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!”
(Works, 283). The vision of the nonbeliever, which enables him or her to see through to nothing, is unobstructed by light/dark differentials and figure-ground meanings such as grace/evil or eternity/mortality. At the same time, this nonbeliever does spread the word of God through his Bible sales.

For all the contrastive and contrarian formulations in her fiction, O’Connor’s sense of reality is unrelated to dualism. She considers ancient Manicheanism to have a detrimental counterpart in contemporary thought through the categorical separation of spirit from matter. Also Manichean, in her opinion, is the materialist premise that evil is essentially a social problem answerable through enlightened public policies. For her, the central spiritual mystery of life is instead “that all creation is good and that evil is the wrong use of good and that without Grace we use it wrong most of the time” (Letters, 144). Since worthwhile fiction to O’Connor is an “incarnational art,” she considers it impossible to write about matters of the spirit, good or evil, without the mediation of the flesh and dull reality (Mystery, 68). The tropes of dark and light prominent in her work are in no sense Manichean. Rather, they can function as figure-ground gestalts useful in rendering evil and in evoking intimations of the divine.

In O’Connor’s assessment, the presence of spiritual concerns is experienced by readers “when the writer puts us in the middle of some human action and shows it as it is illuminated and outlined by mystery” (Conversations, 17). Such a presence can “cast strange shadows, very fierce shadows” in the story (Conversations, 72). The light/dark differentials and their correlations to either spirituality or godless materiality are treated here as variable rather than absolute. On another occasion, she recast these formulations: “The writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view. . . . The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees” (Mystery, 26n). The fictional world rendered through such tonal contrasts has strong affinities “for the perverse and for the unacceptable” (Mystery, 33).

With elaborate play upon differences in visual perspective and upon the differential bright/dark, the late story “The Lame Shall Enter First” (1962) examines matters of good and evil, of faith and denial. In a letter years earlier O’Connor had irreverently conjectured that the phrase, which refers to the miracle of the lame man healed at the gate of the temple in Acts 3, may well be true “because the lame will be able to knock everybody else aside with their crutches” (Letters, 117). Though dedicated to the betterment of young people, the widowed father Sheppard proves altogether ill-equipped to guide his ten-year-old son Norton let alone the
juvenile delinquent Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old afflicted with a club foot who is sheltered in the household for a time. A complete set of the encyclopedia holds pride of place in Sheppard’s sizable library, but no Bible is to be found in the home. When Rufus brings a copy of scripture and reads together with Norton from it, Sheppard condemns the Bible: “It’s for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves” (Works, 627). Since Sheppard dismisses religious belief the only assurances he can offer Norton, who remains grief-stricken over the loss of his mother, is that there is neither a hell nor a heaven and that after death nonexistence awaits. Sheppard is a nearly tireless do-gooder, conceited in his pragmatism and humanitarianism. He draws inspiration from science, technology, and social reform, and he has brought into the home a microscope and a telescope for the education of the boys. But his own vision is blind to the plain sight of evil in the person of Rufus.

After all, during their first encounter when Sheppard visited the reformatory one Saturday as a volunteer counselor, Rufus declared that he was under the power of Satan. As he said so there was a “a black sheen” to Rufus’s eyes and an expression on his face “set with pride” plain as can be (Works, 600). Nonetheless, Sheppard holds to a ready-made explanation that the boy’s misdeeds are a form of compensation for the psychological damage he suffers over his club foot. The unfolding irony of “The Lame Shall Enter First” lies in Sheppard’s failure to grasp the obvious truth established for the reader in the story’s visual depictions and comparisons, which in places evoke terrible beasts from Revelation. Rufus’s “monstrous” foot is encased in “a heavy black battered shoe,” its leather split open to show “the end of an empty sock [that] protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head” (Works, 599–600). The would-be benefactor Sheppard is blinded by his inability to believe in evil, while the devil in Rufus is “clear-eyed” (Works, 632). None of his Enlightenment principles have enabled Sheppard to detect the resemblance of Rufus to a “black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse” (Works, 628).

O’Connor’s second novel, The Violent Bear It Away, contests the very terms through which its characters perceive and interpret the world. At their core, one set of terms approaches life as a question of eternal existence, another treats it as simply a matter of individual self-determination. The outcome is decided in the fate of the fourteen-year-old Tarwater, who is ensnared in a struggle of wills between his great-uncle Mason Tarwater, a countryman in his eighties when he dies, and his uncle Rayber, a teacher who lives in the city. The great-uncle is a religious fanatic guided by the conviction that he is an agent of the Lord chosen to awaken the
world to the coming Judgment. He once believed that his calling was to take the message to the city and proclaim “from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire” (Works, 332). Failing this apocalypse, the old man took the infant boy from his uncle’s care in the city and out to the backwoods in order to prepare him for the life of a prophet. The fundamental legacy which he intends to impart to the boy is the “rage of vision” by means of which the righteous make their way through a wicked world (Works, 332). For much of his young life the boy has rebelled against inheriting this burden of spirituality.

While the Raybers are equally the boy’s direct relations, through the course of the story he bears the family name Tarwater exclusively. This name, through its evocative juxtaposition of an impenetrable blackness and translucence, marks a mystical possibility in the midst of a largely nonbelieving world. And the Tarwaters, great-uncle and nephew, are tar babies of sorts in that they have become a mystery and a fixation for Rayber. The Tarwaters draw the schoolteacher, despite his best efforts to normalize and rationalize everything, into questions of the spirit unanswerable by his secular standards. The prophecies spoken by the old man and that reverberate in young Tarwater’s imagination are infused with the searing intensity of sun, blood, and fire. Nonbelief, on the other hand, is colorless. It strives to prevail through conventionalities that schematize the world into black-and-white terms that seem to hold primacy and finality. Here, as in many O’Connor stories, the rationales of nonbelief rely on modern psychology, the social sciences, pragmatism, and a utilitarian concept of benevolence.

The city uncle Rayber is a man of facts and rational explanations determined to ward off any promptings from the spirit by dint of what amounts to a rigid ascetic denial that includes the discipline of not looking at any mystery in the world too long or too deeply. For vision Rayber is dependent upon heavy, black-rimmed spectacles. Their rims and lenses, not his eyes themselves, are what characterize his face. These eyeglasses are a sign of the narrow instrumentality of his view of the world: “Every living thing that passed through [Rayber’s] eyes into his head was turned by his brain into a book or a paper or a chart” (Works, 341). Rayber confronts the Tarwaters as a challenge to his own enlightened atheism and exults “‘I can read you like a book!’” (Works, 438). When old Tarwater discovers that he has become the subject of a case study that Rayber published in a professional journal he decries the betrayal of being “laid out in parts and numbers,” of transformation entirely into information (Works, 341). The teacher’s home, though sparsely furnished, seems to overflow with an accumulation of
printed matter of all kinds. To the old man and to young Tarwater it is an appalling place of “dead words” (Works, 341). Once the old man reads the case study in print he senses himself captive in a “mysterious prison” that traps the spirit, as the whale trapped Jonah, the lion den Daniel (Works, 342).

The novel entails an intricate, uneasy conjunction of visual-verbal properties. Young Tarwater’s fate hinges in effect on choices between competing claims over sight and the word. The word, like the world, once put into print and scanned for mundane purposes yields an impaired, dispirited meaning. While print is the medium upon which an irreligious world relies, speech is a faculty of greater truth in *The Violent Bear It Away*. The Word and its infinite expanse belong primarily to the voice rather than the page and they promise human transcendence. To convey the note of prophecy within the old man, the novel explains that “his voice would run away from him as if it were the freest part of his free self and were straining ahead of his heavy body to be off” (Works, 342). By general rule, the world’s words operate as positivist tools designed to compress human possibility down into black-and-white truisms. But for eventualities of the spirit inflamed and visionary speech is required. By the end young Tarwater possesses the rage of vision that foresees final destruction and salvation: “His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again” (Works, 473). The allusion is to the biblical prophet Isaiah, who is purged of sin in just such a manner and then is instructed to spread the warning “Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not” (Isaiah 6:9). O’Connor’s image incorporates speech into sight.

In addition to the eyeglasses for sight, Rayber is dependent upon a bulky mechanical aid for his hearing. It became necessary after Rayber was wounded on the ear by a shotgun blast fired by old Tarwater to thwart Rayber’s efforts to return the boy to the city. With the old man’s death years later young Tarwater returns to the city on his own, drawn, despite his conscious efforts, by the great-uncle’s obsession with the matter of baptizing Rayber’s retarded boy Bishop. At night from a distance the city is noticed by the young man through its garish but shallow light, too cold and “too far away to ignite anything” (Works, 347). By day, the city is a place of “dried light,” its appearances are pale and tin-colored or gray in tone (Works, 349).

Yet, spiritual intensity can be experienced within the city, most powerfully inside a storefront Pentecostal tabernacle where a crippled girl...
preaches. In following young Tarwater one night Rayber comes upon the tabernacle. Despite his intention to dismiss the scene and move on, Rayber remains listening by the window, transfixed by the child preacher as she elaborates the evening’s text (“The Word of God is a burning Word to burn you clean!”) in high, clear tones (Works, 414). While the episode offers the reader some details of what Rayber sees, it is conveyed mainly through the girl’s sermon, which is punctuated by the refrain “‘Listen you people . . . Listen world’” (Works, 412, 414). After listening to most of her message Rayber reasserts his reason and switches off the hearing aid to protect himself, an action that consigns the Word to oblivion and brings “silent dark relief” (Works, 415).

By the end of The Violent Bear It Away young Tarwater has perversely baptized the boy Bishop in the process of drowning him. To answer for the negative logic of the world in her fiction O’Connor declared: “If you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it’s the gas you breathe” (Letters, 97). In explanation of the prevalence of violence in her fiction over any benevolent spiritual promise she said that “the times do seem a bit apocalyptic for anything so sane” as “Christian humanism” (Letters, 360). Caritas is not essential in her understanding of Christianity, though she acknowledged its place as a Catholic duty: “I share [a] lack of love for the race of man, but then this is only a sentiment and a sentiment falls before a command” (Letters, 335). On matters of Christian fellowship O’Connor indulged in much frank humor, reflecting for instance that there is a “great natural grace is finding the good in people. It’s a real gift. I never been bothered with it myself” (Letters, 587). In defense of her literary sensibilities, she responded to criticism “about the vacuum my writing seems to create as to (I suppose) a love of people” thusly: “Fiction writing is not an exercise in charity, except of course as one is expected to give the devil his due—something I have at least been scrupulous about” (Letters, 103).

When praising her work, novelist John Hawkes placed O’Connor in the select company of Nathanael West for “their employment of the devil’s voice as a vehicle” to advance a “reductive or diabolical value judgment” of the world they inherited. Though an admirer of Hawkes’s fiction, O’Connor vigorously refused any such characterization of her own work. In making a defense she cites Thomas Mann’s understanding of the grotesque in contradistinction to the merely perverse, in which the secular sensibility can find gratification. Instead the grotesque is an alternative, necessary perspective in a time when dominant values stunt and deform the spiritual capacity of human life. Innocents too are to be counted among creation’s grotesques.
In 1960 O’Connor received a request from the Sisters with Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta to write an account of the life of a cancer casualty who died at age twelve after spending nine years at the Home. Notwithstanding tributes by the Sisters to the girl’s courage and joyous spirit and their claims for her saintliness, O’Connor responded chiefly to the fact of her physical suffering: “What interests me in it is simply the mystery, the agony that is given in strange ways to children” (Letters 394). A tumor on one side of her face had caused the loss of an eye and disfigurement to many features. In her introduction to the published A Memoir of Mary Ann (1961) O’Connor does not hesitate to focus on her deformity: “The defect on Mary Ann’s cheek . . . was plainly grotesque. She belonged to fact and not to fancy” (Mystery, 216). And the facts of her appearance and fatal condition confirm for O’Connor an active belief that goodness, like evil, can be manifest in malformed, unfinished states.

On the matter of one’s personal response to such affliction, O’Connor finds modern, ordinary pity to be a wholly inadequate substitute for an orthodox religious response: “If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetical, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith” (Mystery, 227). Even in the face of the hereditary, debilitating disease lupus erythematosus that caused her father’s death at age forty-five, and that would cause her own at thirty-nine, O’Connor questioned the motives of any purely emotional reaction to suffering: “I think it is impossible to live and not to grieve but I am always suspicious of my own grief lest it be self-pity in sheeps [sic] clothing. And the worst thing is to grieve for the wrong reason, for the wrong loss” (Works, 928). For O’Connor genuine compassion is a profound and “forbidding” response with potentially grotesque consequences that puts us “in travail with” the immediate world “in its subjection to vanity” and that forces upon us both “a recognition of sin [and] a suffering-with” (Mystery, 165–66).

Having declared a “lack of love” for humanity in general, O’Connor’s sympathies were rarely stirred by issues of race relations or civil rights, and in some respects she remained an unreconstructed white Southerner. Too devout to be an out-and-out misanthrope, O’Connor nonetheless defended her right to create in fiction “colored idiots” to go along with the many white ones (Letters, 547). Critical assessment of O’Connor’s views on race ranges widely. To one side Ralph C. Wood concludes that in her stories “the way to real fellowship” between blacks and whites is achieved through “their common imprisonment in the bonds of sin and mortality.” Robert Coles finds that O’Connor “has no interest in sparing blacks the burdens (but to her theological mind, the dignity) that go with
being a sinful human being.”12 While noting stereotypes in early stories, novelist Alice Walker asserts that the “essential O’Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a racial culture.”13 On the other hand, Frederick Crews finds in her life and work “complacency about social injustice” and “twisted feelings about segregation.”14

On the subject of segregation, privately in the 1950s O’Connor made a frank admission: “I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it’s only fair” (Letters, 329). In the fiction she freely used racial stereotypes of blacks in characterizing the thoughts and perceptions of white characters. An atypical vision of racial equality comes in the 1958 story “The Enduring Chill” at the point where Asbury imagines “moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing,” but the passage serves only to portray Asbury’s narrow vindictiveness toward his mother, with her sense of white superiority, and as another indication of his own nihilism (Works, 558).

O’Connor’s fiction has its share of caricatures of shuffling, malingering, or grinning blacks, as with the hired dairymen Randall and Morgan of “The Enduring Chill.” On several private occasions she deployed racial stereotypes as a basis for satiric provocations, as in letters to her friend Maryat Lee, a longtime advocate of civil rights born in Kentucky. It should be acknowledged that under O’Connor’s caustic scrutiny no person, group, or organization was exempt from her sharp commentary, not even Catholicism or its clergy. She held the Church responsible, for example, for the accumulation in prose of a “large body of pious trash,” at the top of which she placed Cardinal Francis Spellman’s 1951 bestseller The Foundling (Mystery, 180). For all that, there is a significant difference between prejudicial opinions and informed, specific assessments. In truth, racial tolerance was a matter of minor concern through much of her life, while the social facts of an American racial grotesque and the segregated South often served the purposes of metaphor for her fiction through which to render matters of spiritual mystery.

When asked which was her favorite story O’Connor often named “The Artificial Nigger,” which was first published in Kenyon Review in 1955. Upon accepting the story the journal’s editor John Crowe Ransom urged that she change the title in order to avoid offending some readers or stirring racial tensions, but O’Connor steadfastly refused to make any such modification. On the semantics of this term William Styron has observed that “‘nigger’ remains our most powerful secular blasphemy.”15 Yet O’Connor seemed to sense no complication in putting the word in the mouths of Southern whites who become recipients of divine grace. In
explanation of the origin of her story’s title, O’Connor indicated that she had first heard the term a few years earlier, in reference to the distinctive decorative feature of a home located in the white section of town.

As in many O’Connor stories of spiritual mystery, depictions in “The Artificial Nigger” of both outward appearances and characters’ states of being are conducted largely through an iconography of darks and lights. In this story such depictions are often strictly maintained in intense tones of black and white to illustrate proverbial insights that pride leads to destruction and a haughty spirit to a fall. They also bring to light the mystery of divine mercy. The story’s two proud white individualists, one a man of sixty the other a boy of ten, are evenly matched. In his own estimation, Mr. Head is a wise man who has been “awakened by a blast of God’s light,” while his grandson Nelson appears to Mr. Head in the opening scene to amount to no more than “a dark spot” obscured “underneath the shadow of the window” (Works, 210). When they venture into town and become lost in the Negro section, “black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction” (Works, 221). There, in the presence of a large black woman, Nelson experiences an intimation of humility and mortality that makes him feel as though he were “reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel” (Works, 223). Later Mr. Head and Nelson become lost in an elegant white suburb where “the big white houses were like partially submerged icebergs in the distance” (Works, 228). Mr. Head’s mortification occurs in this locale and it is marked with his desperate outburst “‘Oh Gawd I’m lost! O hep me Gawd I’m lost!’” (Works, 228).

After they are given proper directions by a white stranger, the pair encounters the plaster figure of a Negro about Nelson’s size and perched precariously atop a low brick wall. Crafted originally as a mirthful “darky” in the minstrel tradition, the figure’s decayed condition has left it with “a wild look of misery” (Works, 229). The two stand rapt before the artificial Negro, “as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat” (Works, 230). In context, “another’s victory” has little to do with white supremacy or racial oppression and everything to do with the grace of “an action of mercy” upon Mr. Head and Nelson (Works, 230). Mercy is invoked here, as throughout O’Connor’s writings, in the root Church sense of divine love in its response to misery.

Newly united in humility, grandfather and grandson return home to the country. Arriving at nighttime, their familiar surroundings have been cleansed by a moon “restored to its full splendor” that irradiates the scene in “shades of silver” and “a fresh black light” and that makes all the
CHAPTER 6

more prominent “gigantic white clouds illuminated like lanterns” in the sky (Works, 230). In commenting upon the story’s iconography, O’Connor wrote to a literary friend: “What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial negro was the redemptive quality of the Negro’s suffering for us all. You may be right that Nelson’s reaction to the colored woman is too pronounced, but I meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence for him. . . . I felt that such a black mountain of maternity would give him the required shock to start those black forms moving up from his unconscious” (Letters, 78). While this is the closest to a social context that O’Connor ever gives for the image, even here the artificial Negro is not expressive of a cause for public concern or political redress, rather it and the story’s other black figures are immutable symbols of mortification and of the soul’s dark mysteries.

Asked in 1960 why black characters are not given active roles in her stories, O’Connor explained unapologetically: “I don’t understand them the way I do white people. I don’t feel capable of entering the mind of a Negro. In my stories they’re seen from the outside. The Negro in the South is quite isolated; he has to exist by himself. In the South segregation is segregation” (Conversations, 59). This is not to say, however, that blacks cannot be agents, knowingly or not, in the spiritual process that some white characters undergo, as is the case with the maternal figure in “The Artificial Nigger.” The Negro named Buford Munson in The Violent Bear It Away is a more active, conscious agent even though he only appears briefly in two scenes. He gives a half day of hard, unpaid work to bury old Tarwater’s body “in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave” (Works, 331). Buford has done so in defiance of young Tarwater’s contemptuous declaration “I don’t want no nigger-mourning” (Works, 357). At the end, Buford is witness to the transformation within young Tarwater (“he sensed it as a burning in the atmosphere”) that sends forth a new prophet with a rage of vision.

In a 1963 interview O’Connor defended blacks against a stereotype that on occasion appeared in her own fiction: “The uneducated Southern Negro is not the clown he’s made out to be. He’s a man of very elaborate manners and great formality which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy” (Conversations, 103). At the same time O’Connor exempted herself from any responsibility for taking a political stand: “The fiction writer is interested in individuals, not races; he knows that good and evil are not apportioned along racial lines” (Conversations, 109). Somewhat belatedly, O’Connor now applied spiritual values in her thinking on the matter: “It requires considerable grace for two races to live together, particularly when the population is divided about fifty-fifty
between them and when they have our particular history. It can’t be done without a code of manners based on mutual charity.” Ever skeptical of humanity, O’Connor immediately modified her statement: “When the charity fails—as it is going to do constantly—you’ve got those manners there to preserve each race” (Conversations, 103).

As far as O’Connor was concerned, then, for resolution to the problem the nation would have to rely upon Southern traditions of social manners between the races rather than upon religion, rights legislation, or equal protection under the judiciary. In views expressed privately in 1963, O’Connor thought that public debate on behalf of Negro rights never failed to “romanticize” the issue. Exasperated at one time over the national attention directed on the South, she erupted: “I say a plague on everybody’s house as far as the race business goes” (Letters, 537). With the news of riots in the ghettos of Northern cities in the summer of 1964, O’Connor expressed some satisfaction that racial unrest was not limited to her region. Writing close friends that same year, she conveyed her lack of sympathy with the public pleadings of James Baldwin for racial reconciliation and her agreement with the separatist views of Cassius Clay, who had newly adopted his Black Muslim name Muhammad Ali.

In O’Connor’s late story “Judgment Day” (1964) the difference between faith and unbelief is represented to be as categorical as separation of the races within a segregated society. This difference is rendered through a heated and ultimately physical conflict between T. C. Tanner, an old white man from the rural South, and a sophisticated black Northerner who is an actor by profession. The two have recently become neighbors in the New York City apartment building where Tanner now lives with his married daughter and her husband. To Tanner’s patronizing but not intentionally derogatory greeting “Good evening, Preacher” the black man reacts with vehemence: “I’m not a Christian. I don’t believe in that crap. There ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God.” Tanner responds instinctively to this heresy: “And you ain’t black . . . and I ain’t white!” (Works, 690). The storyline confirms Tanner’s retort as a creditable defense of Christian faith. Their dispute culminates with brutalities committed by the black actor that contribute to Tanner’s death. The story’s closing imagery suggests that Tanner dies a martyr, leaving this world as a man prepared spiritually for judgment.

For a writer concerned with spiritual mystery O’Connor might strike readers as inordinately engaged by physical appearances and fleshly matters. It is this seeming contradiction that in her imagination points precisely to the core of Christian mystery: “For my part I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and the physical really are, then I will
know what God is. We know them as we see them, not as God sees them. For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified” (Letters, 100). In formal literary respects O’Connor’s fiction, through its practices of grotesque figural realism, is as involved as Poe’s work with the possibilities for linkage among verbal and visual categories. Through its attention to prophetic word and vision O’Connor’s fiction shares with Anderson’s an ear and eye for distinct registers of meaning in spoken language as compared to written modes. In terms of the axis of description in their prose, O’Connor, Poe, Anderson, and West share a reflexive alertness to matters of figure-ground and black/white configurations in rendering scene, character, and the story’s own textuality.