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FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "REVELATION"

"Some vast construction work"[1]

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In O'Connor's stories, vision and its correlative, illumination, are often tied to some violent assault. In "Revelation", the perversely named Mary Grace becomes the agent of a bizarre and brutal intrusion of grace as she hits Mrs. Turpin in the eye with a book ironically entitled *Human Development*. The whole story actually seems to be encoded as a satirical and metaphorical text at once discounting a Southern country woman's smug system of belief and chronicling the heroine's process of growth through prophecy.

From the outset, bigoted and complacent Ruby Turpin's story is filled with intimations of the reversal of her pride. Her familiar world is about to undergo some radical upheaval under the formidable and absurd thrust of a fiercely ugly teenager. The narrative structure hinges on this sudden change of perspectives. Once Ruby has caught the hint of some urgent message she first refuses to decipher in the girl's hypnotic eyes, she becomes obsessed with it and literally unmoored. Her perception of herself and the world ironically starts "moiling and roiling around in her head" ["Revelation"[2] 492] like the dead bodies in the concentration camps she visualizes, subjecting her to some intense sense of displacement. The readers' delight actually springs from this essential movement of estrangement. The dynamic process of decentring at work in the text reflects the powerful interplay between the narrator, the readers and the protagonists. In between damnation and grace, after her first vision, Ruby can no longer keep on categorizing mortals as righteous and unrighteous, beautiful and ugly. And "We, the readers" can no longer feel safely on the side of the "community." We too are profoundly displaced by Mary Grace's outrageous figure of speech: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" [*R* 500]. Reaching beyond the scope of a mere simile, her wounding metaphor initiates a process of self-evaluation leaving Ruby–and us–desperately fighting with the inadequacy of referential language and searching for some reconstruction of meaning.

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[1] "Wise Blood" 18.
[2] "Revelation" will hereafter be referred to as *R*.

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Fierce hubris

"Revelation" happens to be one of O'Connor's last stories, one she actually completed just before leaving for the hospital to begin her final bout with lupus. It's also an ironical and unsettling rendering of the intrusion of violence in the prosaic quotidian world. As she explains in "On Her Own Work," this mechanism is central to her short story writing technique:

> [I]n my own stories, I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.[3]

But if the content of Mrs. Turpin's revelation is eventually and exceptionally fully externalized and made available to the fictional recipient and to the reader, its meaning isn't.

The early section of the short story, which could be viciously renamed "The Fiction Creator & Her Country," sarcastically exposes Ruby Turpin's self-satisfaction and complacent sense of superiority. As she enters the doctor's waiting room, she's also given some sort of mock-heroic grandeur preparing us for her encounter with the incredible mystery that she bears some resemblance to a wart hog. Signals of something ironically majestic in her contaminate the text from the opening down to the moment when she strikes a hieratic pose, looking "like a monumental statue coming to life" [*R* 508], toward the end:

> The doctor's waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence. […] Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation. [*R* 488]

At once establishing the basis for her grossly restrictive vision of the world and her capacity to gaze "through the very heart of mystery" [*R* 508], O'Connor also paves the way for the displacement of her own fiction. How to represent the emergence and blossoming of a personal epiphany while circumventing *aporia* and the prosaic dimension of language?

It seems that some highly ironic viewpoint unites the narrator with the reader from the very beginning. At least, in the first part of the narrative, Ruby Turpin can truly and extensively articulate her materialistic experience. The freely-voiced dimension of her sin of pride and racism seems to function in inverse proportion to the intensity of her subsequent vision. Some form of hubris, almost in the Aristotelian sense of Greek tragedy, stems from this unimpeached articulation. Her repetitive and pharisaic praise of God's goodness to her as well as her comical Southern speech patterns illustrate the extremity of her pride. The following address directly derives from a previous rendering of her subjective consciousness in an ambiguous free indirect style mimicking the structure of direct discourse without any quotation marks and that of indirect discourse deprived of any

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[3] *Mystery and Manners*, 112.

framing verb of cognition ("He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! She said" [*R* 497])[4]:

> If it's one thing I am, […] it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, "Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!" It could have been different! [*R* 499]

What the book-throwing episode disrupts is then the uninterrupted cycle of this illusory view of life. It actually triggers a long and hazardous movement inward, into the implications of her racism and ill-founded self-esteem, initiating an introspection that language precisely cannot fully capture. It thus also literally and ironically becomes the Book of Revelation. The only traces of Mrs. Turpin's former eloquence and fluidity seem to lie with the rhetorical questions boldly addressed to God. And what looms ahead has little to do with her previously hilarious but vapid daydreaming about bargaining with and being "displaced" by God:

> "There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash," […] she would have said, "just let me wait until there's another place available," and he would have said, "No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mind." […] "All right, make me a nigger then—but that don't mean a trashy one." And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black. [*R* 491]

This staging of her obsession with place and propriety proves to be a comical version of transformation and mockingly heralds her final vision of a motley crew of "honourable" sinners making their way toward God. In a similar way, her holocaust reverie exposes the twisted view of social hierarchy on which she has structured her identity and lays the foundations for her later move toward some other, totally unexpected, apocalyptic vision:

> Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven. [*R* 492]

Experiment perilous

Once *hit*, Ruby is therefore abruptly severed from her fantasy world and returned to reality. She's also dispatched to some alternate dimension, partly pictured by the yet indeterminate form of inner questioning she's subjected to. Part of the narrative voice's irony stems from the shift from the literal to the metaphorical sense of the verb forms "to hit" or "to strike". The

[4] As Donald Hardy indicates in his analysis of O'Connor's fiction, "[…] FID is referred to as free indirect discourse because it is indirect discourse free of the framing attributive clause of thought or speech" [Hardy, 59] . This odd mixture of thoughts establishing Mrs. Turpin's narrow system of pre-existing "truths" deepens the narrator's irony before the depth of Ruby's spiritual and social hubris.

variations on their figurative meaning actually draw the contours of a slow "ratiocination" process turning Mrs. Turpin into a grotesquely displaced figure:

> The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. [*R*, 502]

The Christian parable of the Elect is here ironically uprooted as she starts feeling "chosen" to be "the butt of a cosmic joke."[5] The whole episode of the Blacks' minstrel show—covertly making fun of her by resorting to the mocking function of dialect—comically underlines the reversibility of language and position. To her black field hands, Ruby Turpin in turn becomes what critic Anthony Di Renzo calls "a white-faced clown"[6]:

> "Ain't nothing bad happen to you!" the old woman said. She said it as if they all knew that Mrs. Turpin was protected in some special way by Divine Providence. "You just had you a little fall." […]
> Mrs. Turpin knew exactly how much Negro flattery was worth and it added to her rage. "She said," she began again […] "that I was an old wart hog from hell."
> There was an astounded silence.
> "Where she at?" the youngest woman cried in a piercing voice. "Lemme see her. I'll kill her!"
> "I'll kill her with you!" the other one cried." [*R* 504-505]

This sarcastic sample of the Afro-American ritual of Signifying, a distinctive black form of irony and coded meaning, best testifies to the vast unforeseen reformatting of Mrs. Turpin's personal world. As a method of coding a loaded critical message, it ironically reflects on her sudden hermeneutic crisis, which in turn comically redoubles the reader's own deciphering impulse. Both set to work, "as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete."[7]

A more appropriate metaphor would be "some vast *re*construction work" here, as the breach opened in the texture of reality is so wide that the actual meaning of the prophecy may never be found. The way may be lost for Ruby Turpin as the use of spatial, almost topographical metaphors in O'Connor's fiction suggests. And precisely, the odd exchange between the "prophet-freak"[8] and Ruby is mostly staged in spatial terms. Reshaping the classical conceit of the eyes as the window of the soul, the narrator focalizes on the uncanny metamorphosis of the girl's face:

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[5] Anthony Di Renzo, 212.

[6] Anthony Di Renzo, 213. As he also specifies, "[i]t is a small Saturnalia in her own backyard. Because of this reversal, some of Ruby's earlier lines become ironically funny in retrospect. 'We got […] a few hogs and chickens and just enough white-face that Claud could look after them himself' [493]. O'Connor reduces the myth of white supremacy to a backyard joke." [*Ibid.*]

[7] Flannery O'Connor, "Wise Blood", *Three by Flannery O'Connor*, 18.

[8] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 118.

> The girl's eyes stopped rolling and focused on her. They seemed a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air. [*R* 500]

At this precise moment, what comes out penetrates and violates Mrs. Turpin. She is in turn judged, and hence victimized, as well as made to appear as an absurd entity of the flesh still paradoxically allowed to experience its moment of mystery. Just like Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," Ruby is metaphorically raped, transfixed by some unknown knowledge, or more exactly thrown *out of place* while remaining in some undeniably ordinary, rural framework.

In this sense, "Revelation" retraces and enhances the detailed journey toward illumination most of her narratives chronicle. But the circle of the quest is much wider as the reader also embarks on a similar journey closer than ever to the "true" content of epiphany and "a fuller significance to what everyone experiences."[9] Hence, a simple life-story suddenly highlighted by an unexpected extension of meaning becomes the recurring pattern at the root of both the fictional impulse and the prophetic function.

The genesis of Mrs. Turpin's "work" seems precisely to be found in her relentless commitment to giving some clarity to the appearances she eventually sees through and beyond. She cannot fashion any more of her own visions as they literally force themselves upon her. The cycle of violent illuminations Mary Grace has contributed to generate translates in geographical terms and some kind of half-imaginary topography becomes apparent:

> There was an instant when she was certain that she was to be in an earthquake. All at once her vision narrowed and she saw everything as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of the telescope […] [T]he girl fell with a thud and Mrs. Turpin's vision suddenly reversed itself and she saw everything large instead of small. [*R* 499]

Mrs. Turpin's *vision* is first to be understood in a strictly organic and functional sense, but the topographical and the visionary share the same ground in this evocation and the reverse movement back to the macrocosm actually marks the beginning of some decisive apocalyptic enlightenment she prepares herself to face.

Hers then is a hazardous trajectory through a world suddenly changing configurations or—to borrow from film director Jacques Tourneur who, among other genres, specialized in the fantastic—literally and figuratively an "experiment perilous." Curiously, former images of strife and contention are now transferred to the new territory the demoniacal "ugly girl" [*R* 490] just uncovered. Somehow, Ruby's skull metaphorically cracks open, releasing visions of some radically other country. What O'Connor consistently calls "the mystery of our position on earth"[10]

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[9] Sister Bernetta Quinn in "Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances," Friedman, 158.

[10] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners,* 68. In 1957, Flannery O'Connor also described it as something "which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" [quoted by her friend Robert Fitzgerald in *Bloom*, 31].

drastically remodels the place Mrs. Turpin used to claim as her own perfectly well-charted domain. This violent intrusion into her world unfolds as another forceful variation on *the mystery of place* at once preserved, distilled, and deferred ever since O'Connor's first short story "The Geranium." In an unpublished address to Georgia State College for Women, the author insists that

> [t]he one quality which all the best fiction writers have in common is that they are able to use their particular country in such a way that it suggests an ultimate reality. […] The serious fiction writer has only one country but this one country suggests so much that when the serious reader travels in it, he may say—"This is a country I never thought could exist but I feel at home here." Or if the reader does not recognize this "country," he will appreciate its philosophical profundity in a way he previously had not. He may say, "This is a place I've always known but there is something mysterious about it now."[11]

As Ruby's sense of place and belonging becomes unhinged and her widening perception now encompasses both heaven and earth, the term "vision" progressively acquires a new theological dimension. What is precisely intriguing in such a process is that the character's "brilliance"—as James Joyce would say—even though springing from the commonplace, should eventually be described as *sacred* in the truly theological sense of the term, that is to say *deriving from divine grace*.

Because she literally exhibits the stigmata of her former encounter with the enemy and has possibly been *selected* for such an introspective journey, Ruby Turpin has also been exiled from the human confederacy. The mark on her brow testifies to the message about to be delivered. As in Christian symbology, the word was finally made flesh and as she rises to the challenge of understanding "why the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" [*R* 500], Mrs. Turpin is also represented as a lone fighter of formidable strength and courage. Turning into the author's fictional double, she similarly tries to make "a reasonable use of the unreasonable."[12] The deciphering machinery has been set going for some ultimate and dubious battle:

> The dark protuberance over her eye looked like a miniature tornado cloud which might any moment sweep across the horizon of her brow. […] She had the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle. […] she braced herself for a final assault. [*R* 505-507]

Amazing grace

The greatest achievement of "Revelation" may lie in its iconic ending. It truly becomes a figuration of what critic Harold Bloom calls O'Connor's "mixed realm." It ironically actualizes the echoes of hell and paradise which haunt her protagonist and her entire fiction:

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[11] Quoted in Edmundson, 13.
[12] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners,* 109.

> In O'Connor's mixed realm, which is neither nature nor grace, Southern reality nor private phantasmagoria, all are necessarily damned, not by an aesthetic of violence but by a Gnostic aesthetic in which there is no knowing unless the knower becomes one with the known.[13]

For indeed, Ruby Turpin's is ambiguous ground just like her final epiphany is a hazardous emotional one. The course which has been set for her leads her to tread a literally and metaphorically delicate path. The mystical connection she feels with the divine world is mainly conveyed through fiery images of bridges and pathways. But the vision's aesthetic decorum is broken as the fire of revelation consumes everything and as Ruby's "true" community is being eerily redefined with a "radical indeterminacy"[14] reuniting the saved and the damned and hence redefining her place in society and point of view:

> A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven [along with] battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. […] [S]he recognized at once […] those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. […] Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. [*R* 508]

Ironically then, Ruby Turpin may still fall, tottering on the verge of some ambivalently illuminated territory. She's still a bigot; human beings are compared to swine, and frogs and angels to crickets wrecking our conventional understanding of the Christian notion of grace. The essence of her catastrophic realization lies in the image of the self-righteous shocked faces. The pivotal notion of some shock-treatment conducive to enlightenment of both the character and reader is being relayed at the intradiegetic level by this "respectable" white crowd when they discover they don't fit in the Elect category. The grotesque vision reads as a satirical representation of the medieval ship of fools discussed by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* and derived from the actual madhouses that inspired it and meant to insure the marginality of the insane. Somehow though, Mrs. Turpin has become *one of them*, as she actually came in harmful contact with "a lunatic" "b'long[ing] in the sylum" [*R* 501 & 505]. Through this improper contiguity with the mentally deranged and metaphorically misplaced, Ruby is then in danger of becoming *permanently* displaced. Hers is a potentially disastrous discovery of a "territory held largely by the devil,"[15] even though this very territory conditions the emergence of the action of grace in O'Connor's fiction.

Hence, to quote again from her seminal essay "On Her Own Work," the concluding vision proves to deal "an added blow"[*ibid*.] to an essentially flawed being who, just like the reader, may not clearly identify the moment of grace and take advantage of its offering. Such a theoretical moment seems

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[13] Harold Bloom,*Op. cit.*, 7.
[14] Di Renzo, *Op. cit*., 216.
[15] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 118.

to be the dramatic necessity structuring most O'Connor narratives. As she says,

> There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment. [*ibid*.]

It seems to consistently designate the critical point in the story when the character faces potential disintegration of the self, as he has just been confronted with the absence of grounding behind his entire belief system, or else with the uncertainty of his previously firm ground of meaning. In this respect, Mrs. Turpin happens to be ironically struck dumb in the short story's finale:

> She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it. […] In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah. [*R* 508-509]

As some truth which may remain ungraspable actively reveals itself, she's brutally made to realize how much of a mere convention language really is. Consistently guilty of projecting her mental constructions onto the outside world in some sort of endless pathetic fallacy, Ruby is suddenly faced with a natural world whose laws mock her own interpretations. To a certain extent, her major discovery at the end is that of the artificiality of language as she is brought to the brink of some strange country. As theoretician Paul de Man underlines:

> Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness. Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the inherent violence of relationships among human beings. Once this mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily on the verge of madness.[16]

Grace is then, in the literal sense, amazing, to borrow from 18th century English hymn writer John Newton. But before common language eventually fails Ruby Turpin, epiphany turns into an active principle of storytelling. The most unexpected place of all, the squalid and familiar pig parlor, becomes an arena of illumination where, by actively questioning God, Ruby subverts the concept of some external force impinging on the subject, to eventually wilfully face her own limitations.

Meanwhile, the process at work is clearly twofold as the final intrusion of sight reads like an acknowledgment that she doesn't have words for the reality of something beyond language. In the same way as Mr. head in "The Artificial Nigger" then, she's both actively involved in seeking an "abysmal life-giving knowledge" [*R* 508] and passively receiving, immobile, these intimations of the abysmal, as if sight had somehow violated and silenced the onlooker. So that the art of fiction, which is by essence an art of revelation, conveys in the end the complex and dual nature

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[16] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in Singleton, 195-96.

of a potentially religious experience in decidedly non-religious circumstances. As the omniscient narrator comments in *The Artificial Nigger*,

> Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. [269]

In both endings, language somehow fails to provide a definite meaning, or rather to literally *make sense*, as in some ongoing demonstration that the epiphanic art is forever to be recognized. In "Revelation," the closure's unmediated vision artfully plays with the principle of indeterminacy, providing us with a new understanding of the workings of the grotesque, grace and apocalypse. In some prophetic and ambiguous blaze, man's artificial standards of classification are destroyed.[17] But this finale also reveals the limits of O'Connor's language resources as it paradoxically undermines its own ability to conclude. Its progression belies the very logic of narration which is to free the text of its ambiguities and to extract some sense from the very contents of the protagonist's illuminated consciousness.

In between ironic detachment and the ambiguous hints at the existence of some superior power induced by metaphor, the reader is then perversely left "a-rooting" (a sarcastic touch by O'Connor on page 506) for meaning, for lack of actually rooting it out in "Revelation." He too, then, has to operate on the mode of displacement, permanently hovering between the carnivalesque and the terrifying, sometimes approaching "as if through the very heart of mystery" [*R* 506] the character's powerful sense of a world under reconstruction alternately creating and un-creating itself. We may not be "all damned" the way Hulga believes in "Good Country People," but should there be anything to see including for the ugly and the damned, the storyteller may simply doubt that he can chronicle the full "Nature and Aim"[18] of any "kind of salvation."[19] The only echoes of paradise he can display may precisely be troubling and fleeting, despite the fire of revelation this time.

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[17] Di Renzo makes this insightful comment: "O'Connor's story is a prophetic satire against the external trappings of class and property. It is a judgment against judgment, against all forms of separation" [*Op. cit.*, 216].

[18] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 63.

[19] Flannery O'Connor in "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories,* 288.

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