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Flannery O'Connor, The Holocaust, and the Evolution of Catholicism

KATHLEEN LIPOVSKI-HELAL

Holocaust imagery haunts many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories and both of her novels. In climactic moments when characters imagine their death scenes, as Marshall Bruce Gentry has shown, they conjure images of boxcars, dead bodies, and incinerators.¹ Since Gentry's observations, however, critics have yet to explore fully O'Connor's preoccupation with the Holocaust, an event that profoundly influenced the way the Catholic Church would come to understand its relation to Judaism.

O'Connor contemplates the Holocaust most extensively, though indirectly, in a story written less than a decade after it took place. "The Displaced Person," which imagines what happens when a family of European refugees from converted concentration camps is hired to work on a farm in the South, began as a sketch of O'Connor's personal experience. In 1953, her mother Regina hired the Matysiaks, a family of Polish refugees, to work on Andalusia. Mr. Matysiak had been a prisoner in a German labor camp during the war and had lived with his family in Displaced Persons (DPs) camps for six years before moving to America. Though O'Connor rarely interacted with the Matysiaks, she used her experience with them to create the Guizacs, the fictional displaced family of "The Displaced Person" that comes to live on the McIntyre farm. Recent biographer Brad Gooch declares that "she started her story, with bold simplicity, almost as an eye-witness account of daily life on Andalusia" (242–3).²

Though the story might have begun simply, it would lead O'Connor to consider much more complex issues. The final version of the story, a 42-page narrative in three parts, contrasts worldly and transcendent perspectives, examines anxieties about racial miscegenation, and explores the dangers of repressing social progress in a the rapidly evolving American society of the mid-twentieth century. Overall, the story critiques several American cultural issues, from attitudes about foreigners in general and displaced persons

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in particular, to the suggestion that American society can avoid its own destruction by accommodating them.

The story depicts the plight of DPs so realistically that for some, it is as good as history. Polish historian Anna Jaroszynska-Kirchmann, for example, asserts that Guizac represents the millions of DPs who escaped the squalid and dangerous DP camps, some of which were only distinct from concentration camps in that their primary goal was not extermination.³ After having suffered severely in camps, fearing for their own lives, and at times hearing of the deaths of family members or worse, not knowing where they were or what happened to them, DPs who did make it to America found only isolation and disillusionment.⁴ O'Connor portrays their difficulty not by concentrating in depth on the DP and his family, but by creating detestable American characters who want to exploit or destroy him. In this way, the story "contains her most complete critique of post-World War II American culture" according to Karl Martin (137).

"The Displaced Person" is much more complex, however, than has yet been recognized. Analyzing the final version of the story, as most critics do, Martin argues that "by examining the story in light of what O'Connor believed concerning the prophetic intent of her fiction, we can uncover a cultural critique of considerable power" (137). Though the story is prophetic in many ways, any reading of it is complicated because it was written at a transitional time in secular and religious history when people struggled to comprehend how such an event as the Holocaust could have occurred within a "civilized" society. At such a time, and in several communities, conclusiveness itself is being questioned.

In taking up the issue of the Holocaust and its victims in 1954, less than a decade after millions of Jews and others were killed or displaced by a government that sought to create a pure race, O'Connor calls attention to the transitional period in at least three communities: a Jewish community that is just beginning to understand how to process the horror of almost being exterminated, an American community that is just beginning to renegotiate its understanding of racial difference in general, and review its policies toward DPs in particular, and a Catholic community that is just beginning to reconsider its relation to the modern world. First, for Jews during the first decade after the State of Israel was established, as Dalia Ofer notes, the current explosion of films, plays and books on the Holocaust "would have been considered inconceivable" because "the Holocaust was ignored and there was a lack of public interest in the processing of this difficult memory" (25). Academic intellectuals and historians thought that any attempt to understand it would suffer because the "correct perspective was missing and the emotional involvement too strong" (27). Ofer suggests that though Yad Vashem, the Jewish organization devoted to preserving the histories of Holocaust victims, was established as early as 1947, it did not begin to work effectively until 1953, just a year before "The Displaced Person" was

published. Second, as O'Connor was keenly aware, the American South was just beginning to renegotiate its definition of African Americans, and to recognize racial prejudice. For some, the groundbreaking ruling in May 1954 that public schools could no longer segregate black students initiated the end of institutional racism. In tandem with the reconsideration of race in America, negotiations about how DPs were admitted entrance to the country, even after President Truman's Displaced Persons act of 1948, were ongoing and heated. Third, and most importantly for O'Connor, the Catholic community was simultaneously reexamining its relationship to a modern world where genocide was possible, a reexamination that would culminate in documents promulgated during the revolutionary Second Vatican Council (1962–65).

The original version of "The Displaced Person" anticipates the profound historical shift occurring at the time in the Catholic community. While the second version of "The Displaced Person"—the story most critics analyze, published in *A Good Man is Hard To Find* (1955)—offers a polished and powerful critique of American disavowal, the original version, which was published in a very different form in *The Sewanee Review* in 1954, is more provocative. As most of her readers would perceive, the original, which begins with the arrival of the Guizacs's and ends with the departure of the Shortleys's, contains all of the elements of a classic O'Connor short story. Critics have also recognized the original as structurally whole, only to dismiss it as inferior.⁵

The original version yields fresh insight into O'Connor's unfiltered artistic intuition at a time when her ideas flowed quickly into her fiction.⁶ She would later describe this extremely productive phase as one during which she oscillated between conscious control and the mysterious workings of the spiritual subconscious. In describing her productivity, she refers to philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose idea of the "habit of art" involves the complex intertwining of conscious intent and mysterious, mystical, spiritual inspiration. Because O'Connor writes the story from a transitional moment in history, moreover, and because she is so far removed from the experience of the Holocaust, her representation of it in the original story is as imperfect, incomplete and inconclusive as it is daring. And yet, the ambiguities she creates—especially in the original version of the story—suggest valuable insight for any society that considers itself too civilized for genocide.

RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY: THE POLE

One of the least obvious but most significant differences between the original version of the story and its longer version is the ambiguity of the Guizacs's religion. Mrs. Shortley assumes the Guizacs are Catholic. But nothing in the original story establishes their religious identity. In fact, instead of presenting the Guizacs from the point of view of an objective narrator, O'Connor

mocks Mrs. Shortley's physical and intellectual denseness at the end of the introductory paragraph where she likens her to an enormous mountain with "the kind of stomach that the faces of Washington, Jefferson, and Lee might have been carved on, or a sign splashed that said, DAMNATION TO THE EVIL-DOER. YOU WILL BE UNCOVERED" (634). Mrs. Shortley's conversations with her husband comically reflect the erroneous and judgmental logic they share. In a rare moment, she must correct her husband from the conclusion he draws about the priest's motives for bringing DPs to America:

"She says it's ten million more like them, Displaced Persons, she says that there priest can get her all she wants."

"She better quit messin with that there priest," Mr. Shortley said.

"He don't look harmful," Mrs. Shortley said. "Only kind of foolish."

"I ain't going to have the Pope of Rome tell me how to run no dairy," Mr. Shortley snarled.

"They ain't Eye-talians, they're Poles," she said. "From Poland where all them bodies were stacked up at. You remember all them bodies?"

"I give them three weeks here," Mr. Shortley said. (641)

Though Mrs. Shortley fails to perceive the irony of her distinction between religious and national identity, through her O'Connor reminds readers of the unthinkable number of Holocaust victims, depersonalized in the American psyche as piles of bodies. In the original version, then, Guizac represents not only the Polish population of DPs but also the victims at the core of the Nazi campaign: the Jewish population in Europe. Mr. Shortley's lack of reaction to the image of stacked bodies reflects the inability or unwillingness to empathize with the victims of an event that has itself been displaced from consciousness in the American south less than a decade after it occurred. Mrs. Shortley's haphazard attempt to get Mr. Shortley to "remember" fails, as Mr. Shortley predicts the Guizacs' departure and rapid eradication from consciousness.

Even in the second longer version of the story, Guizac is still more strongly associated with his nationality as a European than with his religious affiliation. The exchange between the Shortleys appears almost identical to that of the original version, so that Guizac's European otherness is highlighted.⁷ O'Connor presents the two minor references to Guizac's Catholicism, moreover, specifically through the sacrament of Communion. In Part 2, Guizac shows a picture of his cousin, presumably in First Communion dress, and then in Part 3, Mrs. McIntyre sees him eat a wafer the priest feeds him just before he dies. Since the interpretation of what communion means divides Catholics, who believe it to be the actual presence of Christ, and Protestants, who believe it is only symbolic, even in the second version, O'Connor foregrounds Guizac's otherness in the predominantly Protestant South in particular, and in an increasingly secular America in general.

O'Connor was frustrated with misunderstandings about Catholic communion. At a dinner party in New York, where O'Connor compared herself to a dog "who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them," she expressed her frustration. Gooch relates her telling of the story: "Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, he being the 'most potable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it'" (174). In America at the time, then, being Catholic is similar to being Jewish in the sense that both affiliations constituted an otherness that is marginalized.

Guizac's Catholicism in the second version also intensifies the extent of other characters' Christian hypocrisy. When Guizac appeals to Mrs. McIntyre to help his cousin escape the diseased Displaced Persons camps by marrying one of her black servants, she refuses on the grounds of racial purity: "Monster! she said to herself and looked at him as if she were seeing him for the first time . . . His eyes were like two bright nails behind his gold-rimmed spectacles that had been mended over the nose with haywire. His whole face looked as if it might have been patched together out of several others" (313). Her inability to see Guizac as human mirrors the psychological process of objectification used by the Nazis against Jews. Here, with his face resembling a patchwork of "several others," Guizac represents to her a grotesque figure of otherness, but to readers he represents all Holocaust victims. Mrs. Shortley's anxiety about his face as patchwork, moreover, mimics the Nazi anxiety about racial mixing. The Holocaust, as Rachel Carroll has argued, "exposes a persistent racial anxiety compounded by historical denial" (102). As the war and the Holocaust were a distant reality for the majority of her American readers, as well as for O'Connor herself, in the story she explored the process by which Americans distanced from its horrific violence. Guizac's religious affiliation, then, is ambiguous in the original because it concentrates on the ways American culture, marked by Christian righteousness, claims to superiority, and consumerism, threatens to destroy human empathy at best, and at worst, the hope for avoiding a future holocaust based on a philosophy of racial, ethnic, or religious purity.

VISUAL AMBIGUITY: THE NEWSREEL

The ambiguity of Guizac's religion in the original version, moreover, complicates conclusions drawn or not drawn from visual productions of the Holocaust in America, where anti-Semitism had not yet been perceived as dangerous. In a region as dominated by rigid ideas of identity as O'Connor's South was, one would think that the new acceptance of Jews would have emerged more slowly than in other areas of the country. Anti-semitism in

America peaked at the end of the war, according to Leonard Dinnerstein and others. Although it rapidly subsided after 1947, it did not disappear.⁸ If the Holocaust is the unnamed, unnamable, and forgotten event that drives the narrative, catapulting the displaced family into the lives of those living on Mrs. McIntyre's farm and disrupting their comfortably defined roles, its ambiguous imagery in the form of American media permeates the story. Just as Guizac appears almost exclusively through Mrs. Shortley's eyes, the American newsreel of the Holocaust appears indirectly in the story, filtered through Mrs. Shortley's memory of the image of stacked bodies she references in her conversation with her husband. The image is the repressed trauma that drives the narrative:

Mrs. Shortley recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing. (287)

Through Mrs. Shortley's memory of the newsreel, O'Connor presents the concrete physical manifestation of the Holocaust as a series of barely recognizable body parts in the wrong places, in the form of a memory, presented as an edited film.⁹ Instead of trying to comprehend the image, Mrs. Shortley glosses over it mentally, an incomprehension O'Connor suggests is caused by the way the Holocaust has been represented and immediately repressed in American media: "Before you could realize that it was real and take it into your head, the picture changed and a hollow-sounding voice was saying 'Time marches on!'"

While identifying the source of this image, *The March of Time* documentary series, O'Connor suggests that the way events are reassembled for a distant public is as fragmented as the bodies left in the wake of the genocide.¹⁰ But this documentary series, which ran in theatres during the thirties and forties, would have been considered "outdated," as Brad Gooch indicates (244).¹¹ The antiquated image simultaneously incorporates the incomprehensible murder of innocent people and an exaggerated distance of the event from the present place and time. The end result is a sense of anonymity and futility, represented in the final image of a "hand raised clutching nothing," far removed from both the characters' and readers' experiences. Because the war represented an American victory, images of the Holocaust were contained and presented among messages of progress, while the identities of the dead remained anonymous. The newsreel in the story, then, emphasizes the irrationality of associating genocide with American triumph, and the anonymity of the Holocaust victims in the years following the war, several years before victims' personal accounts and memoirs began to circulate in print.

The newsreel is so far removed from Mrs. Shortley's experience that instead of interpreting it correctly, and empathizing with the Guizacs as victims of the Nazi crusade to create a pure race, she imagines them as the new enemy. After calling attention to the form of the newsreel, O'Connor oscillates between the narrow nature of Mrs. Shortley's perspective and more perplexing questions that bring her to the brink of understanding, only to have her transfigure them in a sinister way:

watching them from her vantage point, Mrs. Shortley had a sudden peculiar feeling that there was something very unknown hanging in the air. If they had come from where this kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others? The width and breadth of this question nearly shook her. (636)

Several vague phrases are used here: "a sudden peculiar feeling" of "something very unknown [hangs] in the air," the Holocaust is "this kind of thing," and the "width and breadth" of the question about their possible retaliation "nearly shook her," but not enough for her to understand them further. Rather than making the experience of the Holocaust concrete, the newsreel practices what it preaches, causing viewers to "march on" without reflection. The nonsensical splicing of the fragmented bodies with the message of progress results in a visual ambiguity that encourages viewers' distance from the incomprehensible event and the dehumanization of its victims.¹² The phenomenon of arriving DPs has the potential to awaken Mrs. Shortley's consciousness: "With the coming of these DPs, she was being forced to give thought to a lot of things she had not given it to before" (642). But her thought process takes her further away from understanding rather than toward it. As Yehuda Bauer writes, the Holocaust "is of such a tremendous magnitude that an ordinary person's mind is incapable of absorbing it. There will therefore be a natural tendency to run away from it, deny it, and, mainly, try to reduce it to shapes and sizes that we can cope with, reaching back into our own experience" (30). If, for O'Connor, violence is a tool in fiction that reveals true human nature, the violence of the Holocaust, only tangentially represented in this story, reveals a level of depravity so horrifying that it is almost impossible to process. While Mrs. Shortley easily transforms the Guizacs from victims to perpetrators, O'Connor suggests that they are simply manifestations of the static Southern mentality which, left unchecked, might produce another Holocaust.¹³

In spite of Mrs. Shortley's attempt to displace the newsreel with a justification of Holocaust violence that replicates Nazi hatred, the images in the newsreel return relentlessly in other forms. In fact, when Mrs. Shortley becomes anxious that more Displaced Persons will join them on the farm,

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just

words, gabble babble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until they were all equally dirty. 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. (648)

Far from being displaced in the narrative, the newsreel generates an almost comically cartoonish episode in Mrs. Shortley's mind, and O'Connor calls attention to the role language plays in constructing hierarchies, defining identities, and even fighting wars. Indeed, propaganda through language is one of the most indispensable tools for perpetrators of genocide, and it was used relentlessly by the Nazis to justify the extermination of Jews. As Bauer notes, during the Holocaust "language itself was corrupted and changed to fit Nazi aims" (10). By separating the episode of the newsreel and the war of words, not only in the space of the narrative but also in terms of the newsreel as incomprehensible image and the war as fighting words, O'Connor also illustrates the extent to which the Holocaust has disrupted the traditional relationship between signifier and signified. If rationality is the first casualty, suggested by the nonsensical phrase "Time marches on" accompanying the newsreel image, here words are the secondary casualty, lying powerless among the carnage of the brutally murdered corpses. O'Connor hints that one effect of the Holocaust, then, will be that language as we knew it will cease, and new forms of expression must arise.

The newsreel becomes an ambiguous signifier as a kind of theme with variations, reappearing in twisted versions. Just after this imaginary war of words, the images of the newsreel return to combine with language to form the almost indecipherable prophecy Mrs. Shortley pronounces after studying both the Old Testament and the New Testament intently and "quot[ing] from the prophets" (648). Focusing on a figure "of no definite shape" she imagines appearing between parted clouds with "fiery wheels all around it, spinning rapidly," she hears "a voice, very resonant" say "Prophecy!"

She stood there, tottering slightly, but still upright, her eyes shut tight and her fists clenched. "The children of wicked nations will be butchered," she said in a loud voice. "Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?" (649–50)

O'Connor's description of the prophecy inverts the traditional relationship between image and word so that the image of the newsreel becomes the words of a new prophecy that displaces old ones. If during the Holocaust the children of innocent nations were slaughtered, here by going back to the original texts of the Bible, Mrs. Shortley receives the message that in its aftermath, justice will prevail. What was visual earlier in the narrative has

now become a verbal precursor to the philosophical question "Who will remain whole?" in the wake of the Holocaust.

As Mrs. Shortley comes closer to her final epiphany, however, it becomes more impossible to articulate what she has begun to realize. In the end, she has lost both vision and the ability to speak, and is reduced to limited movement in the cramped box of the square car in which they depart, slowly and steadily, in motion that recalls the boxcars that traveled to concentration camps in the midst of global indifference:

The square black automobile moved off with more than its customary grinding noises as if it were protesting the load...like some over-freighted leaking ark, away from their shack and past the white house where Mrs. McIntyre was sleeping soundly...and past the Pole's shack on top of the hill and on down the road to the gate where the two Negroes were walking, one behind the other, on their way to help with the milking. They looked straight at the car and its occupants but even as the dim yellow headlights lit up their faces, they politely did not seem to see anything, or anyhow, to attach significance to what was there. (653)

In describing their departure, O'Connor reverts to Old Testament imagery so that their car becomes a damaged inversion of Noah's Ark, escaping just before the impending disaster of their termination. Reversing imagery from one of the essential parts of the Jewish story of salvation, O'Connor highlights the justice the Guizacs finally achieve in having their enemies displaced. In this scene, she provocatively links the Guizacs' salvation to the passive role played by Astor and Sulk, fellow survivors who will not go down with the Shortleys. She also illustrates how history may repeat itself relentlessly until real social progress can be made, until prejudice and narrow vision give way to empathy and the recognition of human dignity.

In her final moments, unable to articulate her realization of the horror of her memory of the newsreel, Mrs. Shortley reenacts it:

She thrashed forward and backward, clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself, Mr. Shortley's head, Sarah Mae's leg, the cat, a wad of white bedding, her own big moon-like knee; then all at once her fierce expression faded into a look of astonishment and her grip on what she had loosened. (654)

This description of Mrs. Shortley's final act of expression, a primitive, non-verbal, series of movements, visually re-presents the newsreel image, without a voice-over narrative, without accompanying titles, indeed without intelligible interpretation. Her daughters "thought she was playing a joke" and can only repeat the question "Where we goin?" By extension, O'Connor raises questions about social progress in light of Mrs. Shortley's realization of change. They repeat the question "while their mother, her huge body rolled

back still against the seat and her eyes like blue-painted glass, seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country” (654). Mrs. Shortley dies without having the opportunity to articulate what she has finally realized, as her daughters’ question “Where we goin?” lingers in the air.

Applying O’Connor’s repeated assertion that her characters often achieve salvation during their moments of death, many read Mrs. Shortley’s prophecy as an epiphany that represents her salvation. For example, William Burke argues that like most of O’Connor’s stories, the original version of this story “ends in a wrenching epiphany” (224). He links this ending to others, such as “The Lame Shall Enter First,” “Greenleaf,” and “A View of the Woods,” which end with “a scene of revelation, the epiphany rounding off and completing the narrative” (221). Betsy Bolton reads this epiphany as a sign of incompleteness. She argues that this moment signifies a “narrative transgression” by which O’Connor speaks directly through her character. Noting that O’Connor links the trope of country to the “notion of the writer and his or her vision,” she argues that because this ending comes too close to O’Connor’s voice, “the story cannot stop here, but must return to the more distant and measured description of Mrs. McIntyre’s ending.” But in the original—a version O’Connor herself authorizes—the story does stop here, effectively communicating a different message than that of the second version.

If Mrs. Shortley experiences an epiphanic identification with Holocaust victims, in the original shorter version, O’Connor emphasizes her failure to communicate this epiphany. If we consider the ways in which the newsreel’s appearance in the original version seems to regress from a clear and disturbing image of body parts in Mrs. Shortley’s memory to a dramatized imaginary clash between words stripped of meaning, to a silent irrational tableau of her fragmented body onto other body parts and random objects in the departing car, Mrs. Shortley’s attempt to repress her knowledge of the Holocaust—however remote it is from her experience—has failed. Her attempt to communicate what she has experienced has failed as well. The image, and the final insight she receives from remembering the Holocaust, dies with her. In this way, the ending of the original warns that a failure to remember the Holocaust properly may cause a breakdown of communication. A failure to understand its impact in rearranging old definitions of identity into a “true country” that is divine rather than localized may result in a repetition of the Holocaust. The kind of irrational violence practiced by the Nazis began as a campaign to wipe out the population of Jews, but the desire to dominate taken to the extreme of genocide has the potential to infect anyone anywhere, and ultimately to destroy civilization itself.

Noting that O’Connor’s original ending punctuates the question “Who will remain whole?” by representing the demise of old categories, Frederick Asals reads Mrs. Shortley’s stroke as a “moment of death” during which “all worldly distinctions—between American and European, Protestant and

Catholic, woman and man—collapse” (8). If in the original version Mr. Guizac is as likely to be Jewish as Catholic, O'Connor suggests that in light of the Holocaust, another collapsed distinction occurs between Jews and Christians, in spite of their mutually exclusive views of Christ. Like genocidal events that preceded it, the Holocaust has displaced all of its direct and indirect victims and has left them in a state of denial and stasis, just as the visual and prophetic ambiguity of the newsreel is repeated silently to an audience that has no ability to interpret it.

In the original version, then, if the displaced person represents one of the many victims of the Nazi genocide of Jews, Christians, and others, and the recurrent image of the newsreel highlights the irrationality of the way the Holocaust is presented to an American public, the final epiphany is that Nazi genocide has obliterated old notions of wholeness, and challenges the very claim to possess land; there is no “true country” distinct from another. The very notion of a “true country” in geographical terms drove the Nazis to attempt to erase the Jews from culture, just as it drove Americans to displace Native Americans, as Ralph Wood observes: “Ours is the Age of Ashes—of the Nazi ovens, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Dresden, of al-Qaeda’s crumbled World Trade Center towers...[about] 180 million souls were taken by violent means, most of them by their own governments” (189). The contemporary world, where secular thought replaces religious commitment, moreover, “is the world of history unredeemed,” according to Asals, “where although time marches on, it also circles the monument to the dead...a world where circles are vicious rather than healing, images of futility, not completeness” (13). Indeed, O'Connor predicted future horrors in an increasingly secular society in *Mystery and Manners*: “If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber” (227). Without faith, or the “blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance,” there is no hope of avoiding future catastrophes where the human will to power claims victory over moral or ethical obligations.

THE PRIEST: FROM AMBIGUITY TO EVOLUTION

With such confusion and ambiguity, it would be easy to conclude that if the devout Catholic O'Connor created a priest character, at the very least he would hint at answers to the problems the story raises. On the one hand, he exhibits an unquestioning faith that resembles O'Connor's, attempting to evangelize everyone in his path. In the original version, Mrs. Shortley

perceives a mysterious wisdom in “the face that had the look of some secret, opened out and still hidden, as if he were saying: I can tell you something that you won’t believe” (648–9). The unreliably biased Mrs. Shortley judges him for his attempts to convert others. Observing the priests’ visits to Mrs. McIntyre, she “could not imagine what she could have to say to him nor he to her unless he was trying to turn her to his church” (648). She vilifies the priest for “leading foreigners over here in hoards to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot niggers, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous!” (649). Many critics read Father Flynn as an extension of Flannery O’Connor herself, assuming she meant to convert readers. For example, Jill Peláez Baumgartner observes that both Father Flynn and Father Finn, the elderly priest in “The Enduring Chill,” “recognize a truth they have difficulty communicating in a winning, pastoral manner” (105). Baumgartner argues that in this way, they share the difficult task in which O’Connor herself engages as a writer: “how to communicate the truths of the Church to a deaf and blind generation” (106).

On the other hand, Father Flynn seems to be more of a clown than an intelligent figure. Beyond Mrs. Shortley’s characterization of him, the priest’s dialogue makes him appear foolish. The ridiculousness of his speech brings him closer to caricature than any of the other characters. He marvels at the birds Mrs. McIntyre collects with a ridiculous dialect that hardly suggests intelligence: “Arrr . . . Arrrn’t they lovely? Arrrrn’t they lovely now?” When Mrs. McIntyre asks if he thinks the Guizacs will leave, he replies “Why should they want to leave a beautiful place like this now? All these birds and fowlsss and things! Arrr, chicky, chicky chicky” (651).

The priest is an even stronger caricature in the second longer version of the story, where his speech remains as ridiculous, and his attempts to convert others are ineffectual. The third section of the longer version of the story opens with the priest “with his long bland face supported on one finger . . . talking for ten minutes about Purgatory while Mrs. McIntyre squinted furiously at him from an opposite chair” (315–16). Watching the priest carefully, Mrs. McIntyre concludes that “After he had got her the Pole, he had used the business introduction to try to convert her—just as she supposed he would” (316). When he visits, he repeatedly instructs her against her will. Here the narrator interjects: “She had not asked to be instructed but he instructed anyway, forcing a little definition of one of the sacraments or of some dogma into each conversation he had, no matter with whom” (320). Far from being a wise figure, then, even in the second version, Father Flynn relentlessly repeats ineffective dogma. After failing to convert Mrs. McIntyre and save the Guizacs, he turns into a caricature in the final sentence: “He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church” (327). If, as we know from O’Connor’s letters and fiction, she dedicated her life not to write the “doctrines of the Church,”

but rather to connect with readers hostile to the Christian message, this final attempt to convert coming from a priest character who can barely speak intelligibly seems ridiculous.¹⁴

Of course, O'Connor did feel she conveyed her faith inadequately at times. But she also was deeply concerned about those who were lost spiritually, and critical of Catholics who were self-righteous about their faith. In a letter to Sister Mariella Gable, she comments on her own writing as "embedded in mystery," "not answerable to any of our formulas," rather than decided, absolute, and conclusive. The mysteriousness of the writing process clashes with the "Catholic mentality," she asserts, which is "great on paraphrase, logic, formula, instant and correct answers. We judge before we experience and never trust our faith to be subjected to reality, because it is not strong enough. And maybe in this we are wise. I think this spirit is changing on account of the council but the changes will take a long time to soak through" (*HB* 516–17). The ineffectual role the priest plays in the shorter version, and the ridiculousness of the ending of the second version suggest not only her frustration with a readership resistant to Catholic Christianity, but also a sense that Catholicism that has not yet renewed its relation to the modern world in the wake of the Holocaust. The priest's one-way speeches to a deaf audience, representative of old ways of thinking in the Church, suggest that the Church's philosophies cannot yet communicate with a world that has seen the horror of the Holocaust. Specifically, the Church can no longer continue to communicate with a blind and deaf generation until it recognizes the Jews as equal in their pursuit of salvation. Father Flynn cannot stop the death of the displaced person, but he cannot articulate doctrines that have not yet been written to reflect new attitudes about the Jews in a post-Holocaust world.

The original version of "The Displaced Person," with its Displaced Person as an "other" representative of Polish victims who were primarily Jewish, becomes a revolutionary act in favor of the progress the Church would not make for another ten years yet. O'Connor's caricature of the priest, especially in the original version, where the peacock does not play its transcendent role, highlights the inability of the pre-Vatican II Church to deal adequately with the atrocities of the Holocaust. In these ways, then, the original story anticipates the profound change called for in one of the sixteen documents promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (1965).¹⁵ Though O'Connor would not live to see this document promulgated, she supported its message, as it highlights the Jewish roots of Christianity, rejects the charge of deicide to the Jews and anti-Semitism, and has begun to transform the relation between Catholics and Jews from one of hope for conversion to one of respect and acknowledgment. In a letter to Janet McKane during the first session of the council, O'Connor expresses a longing for this new relationship: "I'll be interested in the

symposium on 'The Jew in American Culture.' The declaration on the Jews and on religious liberty seems to have got sidetracked at the [Vatican] council. I hope they manage to get it going again" (*HB* 550–1). Though O'Connor practiced Catholicism rigorously, then, to some extent she remained intellectually independent throughout her life. Her comments on the Second Vatican Council illustrate her desire for the Catholic Church to evolve and recognize the legitimacy of the Judaic religion as a path to salvation. Until the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church issued prayers for the conversion of Jews during Holy Week, and defined itself as the one true church. Though since the Council of Trent (1545–63) Catholics viewed themselves as symbolically responsible for crucifying Christ, the prayer for Jewish conversion and the belief that the only path to salvation is through the Roman Catholic Church did nothing to combat the anti-Semitism that enabled the Nazi campaign.¹⁶

The ambiguities in the first version of "The Displaced Person," as well as the figure of the priest in the second version illustrate that O'Connor's Catholicism is not simple and absolute, as some have argued, but a complex product of the revolutionary atmosphere of the Church in the years leading up to Vatican II. For O'Connor, as for many Catholics especially in the years leading up to Vatican II, the central truths of the faith remained unchanged, but individual thoughts and ideas varied with lived experience. As Robert Donahoo observes:

critics assume that the Catholicism O'Connor knew and practiced at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Milledgeville, Georgia, is the Catholicism pronounced from the papal throne in Rome. Such a complete, direct, and unmitigated chain must strike anyone who has ever been involved at a local level with a national or international organization difficult to accept. For even if the Roman Catholic Church speaks in a unified voice in its dogma, at the local level where individuals such as O'Connor had to live and work, that voice is likely to become fragmented and multi-vocal—particularly in a nation as diverse as the United States. (84)

Though Joanne McMullen characterizes pre-Vatican II Catholicism as a unilateral, "conservative" and "static" religion, she does acknowledge that "[O'Connor's] fiction does not observe the same religious rigidity imposed upon her and Catholics of the time" (174).

In a letter to Alfred Corn, the college student who wrote to her about losing his faith, O'Connor acknowledges "At one time, the clash of the different world religions was a difficulty for me" but asserts that "the reason this clash doesn't bother me any longer is because I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to the God of heaven and earth. You can't fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories" (*HB* 477). "The Displaced Person" is one of many revolutionary

explorations of the boundaries of intellectual categories O'Connor would compose. Rather than taking reactionary stances towards O'Connor's faith, future scholars would benefit from more nuanced readings of her work in terms of a Catholicism that was evolving profoundly during her lifetime.

NOTES

1. In his dissertation, Gentry writes that his title, *Tracks to the Oven: Grotesque Religious Experience in the Works of Flannery O'Connor*, "refers to a shared fantasy and a pattern of imagery that suggest a different explanation for characters' climactic experiences, an explanation that involves new attitudes toward narration and toward the grotesque in O'Connor's works. In several stories, and in both novels, characters imagine themselves transported toward the site of their death. In the most suggestive versions of this fantasy, the character imagines traveling in a boxcar to join a pile of dead bodies or to be burned in an oven" (3). In his revision of this dissertation, he acknowledges that "theology is relevant to O'Connor's fiction," but argues that "most critics who discuss theology have underestimated her reinterpretation of dogma" (4).

2. In *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*, Gooch offers a useful account of the biographical source material for the story, quoting comments from Al Matysiak, the inspiration for Rudolph, and making other connections to O'Connor's experiences at Andalusia while she was writing it.

3. Catheren Schneider describes the conditions in the DP camps just after the war: "At the camps, the displaced persons were housed in buildings formerly used by the Germans as military barracks. Conditions were far from ideal as approximately one hundred people were crowded in rooms built to accommodate twelve soldiers comfortably. Families were kept intact whenever possible. These were the remnants of sturdy races enforced into labor by the Germans, and it was truly a survival of the fittest. Some families sought out the stables and bedded down on the straw. Others favored the luxury of sleeping on the wooden bunk beds in the barracks" (690).

4. Jaroszynska-Kirchmann also recommends Danuta Mostwin's *Amerýko! Ameriko!* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1961) and *Asteroidy* (London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1965), Florence Hayes' *Joe-Pole, New American* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1952), and Doug Wead's biography *Tears of Triumph: The Story of Alicia Gilewicz* (Springfield: Restoration Fellowship, 1981) as descriptions of Polish DPs' adjustments to life in America. Among the more dramatic accounts is that of Jan Lechon, editor of the Polish periodical *Tygodnik Polski*, who was so disillusioned with the inability to adjust to American life that he committed suicide by jumping from a skyscraper in New York in 1956. Jaroszynska-Kirchmann observes that while some Polish DPs "continued their literary work and published both in Polish and English, some never fully recovered from the traumatic experiences of displacement and gave up writing altogether" (158).

5. For example, William Burke asserts that in the first version of the story, "the standard O'Connor short story is complete" in that "a character with an exaggerated sense of her importance and value is brought through the agency of an outsider to the destruction of her comfortable world in a moment of enlightenment" (221). He ventures a conclusion: "It might be reasonable to view the longer version as the full and mature development of the shorter" (222). Similarly, Roy Male observes that "strangely enough, no one seems to have noticed that the [original] version . . . differs radically from the first version," only to argue that a comparison yields insight into how O'Connor improves through revision. The first version "is really a fragment" (451) while in the second version, the "focus has sharpened" (453). Perhaps these conjectures are accurate to some extent, but even O'Connor did not consider one version superior to the other. In fact, when she submitted titles for her first story collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955), she told editor Robert Giroux he could use either version. In her letter to Giroux on November 15, 1954, she writes: "I have included only the long version of 'The Displaced Person' but if you don't like it, we can substitute the short one, which I can send you" (HB 72). Gooch asserts that when O'Connor read the first draft to an audience at Brainard Cheney's home, she "considered the story complete at the time" (246).

6. O'Connor may have worked to make the Displaced Person a more sympathetic character. Before it was originally published, she sent it to Cheney, who responded on March 15, 1954 that "The King of the Birds," the working title for the next version of the story, "is very fine indeed. I think that you make rich use of the medieval symbolism of the bird and that it succeeds as a symbol beautifully. I like the story. I am

not, however, altogether sure that you get all of the dramatic impact possible out of your protagonist, the displaced man. It may be that my reading of the earlier treatment of this man (or the very similar character) in the DP story in which he was unsympathetically presented was so much in my mind that it affected my reaction to your presentation in this story. But his death did not wrench my heart, so to speak, as it should have, in the circumstances. I hesitate to suggest it, but it seems to me that he might have had just a little more build up—perhaps, just another touch or incident to reveal his charity” (13–14). In a letter written April 11, 1954, she responds: “You were certainly right about [The Displaced Person] and I have operated on it and improved it to some extent” (15). The following year she sent her first collection, including the longer version of the story, to Cheney, asking for his opinion. Another equally plausible explanation for her doubling the length of the original in revision is that when O'Connor began revising, she found that writing about the passive American attitude toward the plight of the DPs highlighted so many other problems in American indifference toward foreigners and racial, ethnic and religious “others” that it was difficult to treat fully in a shorter form.

7. In the second version, O'Connor replaces the adjective “harmful” with “smart,” and replaces “Only” with a dash.

8. Dinnerstein attributes the rise and fall of anti-Semitism in America between 1945 and 1950 to “growing fears of Communism as the Cold War developed in the late 1940s, improved economic conditions, the lessening of personal anxieties as the war ended and a depression did not come, the Jews' willingness to fight more actively than ever before for equal rights, the impact of Zionism, and perhaps the sinking in of the knowledge that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust” (578).

9. Like Male, many critics hypothesize that the newsreel image is the inspiration for the story, or what Male calls the “germ” of the story. If the personal experience of having the Matysiaks come to live with the O'Connors is the conscious part of the story's inspiration, the attempt to understand how the Holocaust could have occurred in a civilized society may have been the subconscious by-product. The form the Holocaust takes in the story suggests the filtered nature of its experience for O'Connor, as it would have been for most of her readers as well. Betsy Bolton argues that the newsreel image “penetrates O'Connor's (distracted) reader through the structure of its repetition.”

10. Jill Carroll asserts that for some Jewish scholars, this inability to comprehend is an ethical act: “the failure to assimilate experience, when consciously chosen by a witness, *could* indicate an ethical reaction: a refusal to admit any philosophical system which could accommodate such an atrocity” (101).

11. Gooch suggests that O'Connor recalled newsreels such as “What to do with Germany” (October 1944), “18 Million Orphans,” (November 1945) and “Justice Comes to Germany” (November 1945).

12. In the second version of the story, this dehumanization becomes even more prominent when O'Connor changes “a sudden peculiar feeling that there was something very unknown hanging in the air” to “the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place” (287). The message the newsreel potentially carries remains ambiguous as the verbal pronouncement of progress sweeps the images of terror aside, and allows Mrs. Shortley to manipulate its meaning to serve her interests and to confirm her prejudices.

13. Carroll argues that O'Connor suggests that this mentality is not merely a product of Southern American culture but is, disturbingly, part of human nature: “O'Connor's American characters are not actual victims, bystanders or perpetrators of the Holocaust, yet such is the impact of the visual revelation of the Holocaust that they assume fantastic identifications as if obeying an unconscious injunction. Initially victims only of an overpowering fear, O'Connor's characters are transformed into agents of an arbitrary violence as if to evade becoming its victim” (102).

14. In a letter to Betty Hester written just a few months after the longer version of the story was published in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, O'Connor writes “I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs. One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for” (HB 92).

15. Pope Paul VI promulgated *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions on October 28, 1965. It states that “other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ‘ways,’ comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts

and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of Truth which enlightens all men." *Nostra Aetate* also "reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion," and "in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."

16. In addition to supporting new views of Jews, O'Connor admired Jewish culture and literature. In a letter to Father John McCown, she recommends Bernard Malamud's first short story collection, *The Magic Barrel* (1958). She calls his stories "really spiritual and very funny" and concludes: "Somebody was telling me yesterday that the reason Jews are ahead of Catholics in every intellectual pursuit is very simple: they have more brains. I believe it" (*HB* 288). She also admired the work of Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, a protestant convert who not only argued for the intellectual freedom of the Catholic artist, but also campaigned for a stronger stance on anti-Semitism in the Church in Europe just after the war ended. Maritain's liberal view of Jews aligned with that of Pope John XIII, who actively sought dialogue with those of other faiths, and initiated the council that would revolutionize the relationship between Catholics and Jews.

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