

BY THEIR NAMES YOU SHALL KNOW THEM:

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S ONOMASTIC STRATEGIES

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Flannery O'Connor should be taken at her word when she asserts that the subject of her fiction is "the ac-¹tion of grace in territory held largely by the devil," and claims that her role as artist is to penetrate "the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality,"² which for her is a very real and living God. To see her as a closet nihilist whose apparent Christianity masks a secret, perhaps even unconscious absence of faith³ is to confuse her with some of her characters; to see her as a religious and moral reactionary whose "contempt for humanity" renders her incapable of seeing "any good, any beauty or dignity or meaning, in ordinary human life on earth"⁴ is to assume that her contempt for sin implies contempt for the sinner.

Such confusion over O'Connor's fiction results, first, from an unwillingness to accept her conservative Catholicism as a valid premise for art, and second, from a failure to recognize what that premise implies about her literary strategies. Many critics read her as if

she were a literary realist, often upbraiding her for her failure to create three dimensional characters. But O'Connor did not think of herself as a literary realist. She called herself a "realist of distances,"⁵ one whose business was to perceive spiritual realities. She believed with Saint Augustine that "the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe,"⁶ and she consistently insists that the supernatural manifests itself through natural phenomena. In her own fiction, the invisible world is revealed in the most mundane, and occasionally profane, situations. At the conclusion of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," for instance, the setting sun appears as "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood."⁷ A bird-shaped water stain in "The Enduring Chill" manifests the Holy Ghost. In "The Displaced Person," a priest sees Christ's Transfiguration in the spreading of a peacock's tail. Such manifestations have little to do with literary realism.

Her characters, too, are not realistic in the sense that Jake Barnes and Flem Snopes are realistic. Rather, they are types, at times almost stereotypes, but types in the way that the Canterbury pilgrims are types. Such characters as the Misfit, Hazel Motes, and Manley Pointer are direct descendants of Chaucer's Pardoner, while Leora

Watts, Hulga Hopewell, Mrs. Shortley, and the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" bear more than passing⁸ resemblances to the Wife of Bath and the Prioress.

Let me add that I am not claiming that Chaucer had a direct influence on O'Connor. Little in her essays or letters confirms a conscious influence. Nevertheless, it is very likely that she was exposed to some of The⁹ Canterbury Tales in the course of her education, and I imagine that she would have responded sympathetically to Chaucer's view of humanity and his means of expressing it. What is certain is that O'Connor shared with Chaucer a common belief in the tenets of Christianity, specifically, that human nature, because of Original Sin, was corrupt, and that the human will could not operate freely without the grace provided by the Redemption. Grace here is to be understood as a gift from God, available to all people at all times, which gives the individual the power to perform a free and moral act even in the presence of¹⁰ contrary difficulties. For O'Connor, grace is not an abstraction but a real force which operates through natural actions, in the scratching of a hen, the gurgling of an idiot, the spreading of a peacock's tail, but most frequently in an act of violence. "I have found," says O'Connor, "that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to ac-

cept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that
 almost nothing else will work."¹¹

Since O'Connor's primary purpose is to penetrate the visible world in order to reveal the invisible world, the ultimate source of reality, it is only natural for her to use a fictional technique that is essentially allegorical, not in the way that The Faerie Queene or Pilgrim's Progress are allegorical, with characters functioning as the embodiments of virtues and vices, but in the way that Beowulf or The Canterbury Tales are allegorical, with the characters representing human types and reflecting philosophical and moral positions. Consequently, the surface meaning of any story, no matter how realistic it may seem, exists not for its own sake, but is at the service of a deeper level of meaning. Citing the three levels of meaning attributed to Scripture by medieval commentators, O'Connor argued that "Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate."¹²

The allegorical aspect of O'Connor's fiction is evident in the names she gives to some of her characters.

Indeed, it is frequently difficult to treat characters with names like Paradise, Fortune, and Pitts as anything other than allegorical figures. Names, however, are more than labels. In several letters recently published in The Habit of Being, O'Connor maintains that the moral basis of fiction is "the accurate naming of the things of God."¹³ On the other hand, she has also written: "To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion."¹⁴ The naming process thus has a twofold function: to reveal the things of God, and to reveal the concrete nature of evil.

The difficulty of naming the things of God and naming the devil is apparent in many nameless characters we meet in O'Connor's fiction. Typical are the Grandmother and the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." Initially, one is tempted to say that these characters remain nameless because they belong to neither God nor the devil. One might also maintain that their namelessness identifies them as types of humanity. But the strategy is not that simple. The Misfit calls himself "The Misfit" because "I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."¹⁵ He is a man who constant-

ly questions, who tries to make the pieces of his own life fit in with what he perceives to be the truth of existence, who keeps a list of his crimes to see if the punishments fit. By acknowledging his own crimes, he acknowledges, at least intuitively, the idea of Original Sin, replying to the Grandmother's attempt to convince him of his own goodness, "Nome, I ain't a good man."¹⁶

He has rejected Christianity partially because it does not account sufficiently for human misery and the lack of justice in human affairs. "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?"¹⁷

For him, the dilemma revolves around Christ's death and resurrection. "If he (Jesus) did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness."¹⁸ Having rejected Christianity, he rejects his Christian name in favor of the epithet "The Misfit," and adopts a nihilistic position which fits his sense of his own corruption and at least provides some pleasure. But even this alternative will not work, for the pleasure of meanness cannot be sustained. Having shot the Grandmother, he announces to

his jubilant henchmen, "It's no real pleasure in life."¹⁹

In the end he discovers that he fits in **with neither** the superficial Christianity he has rejected nor with the nihilism he has adopted.

The type of Christianity which the Misfit rejects is represented by the Grandmother. She is a clearly recognizable type like the grandmothers or great aunts we all have at home who, as O'Connor has observed,²⁰ may lack comprehension but are basically good-hearted. That she is known as "The Grandmother" rather than by her proper name stresses the maternal side of her character. As mother, she has generated one son and two obnoxious grandchildren. It is possible to associate her figuratively with the Grand Mother Eve who, on the one hand, was responsible for bringing sin into the world, and whose seed, on the other hand, is destined to crush the head of the serpent. Most importantly, hers is a spiritual motherhood which embraces even the Misfit himself. Having pleaded desperately for her life, she reaches out to touch him, murmuring, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"²¹ Here she acknowledges the humanity she shares with the man who has just murdered her children and grandchildren and who is about to murder her, and admits her maternal responsibility for him. But her statement also implies a metaphorical link

between the Grandmother and the Misfit illuminating the relationship between the ideas they represent.

The Grandmother is nominally Christian, but her Christianity, though well-intentioned, consists largely of pious clichés which trivialize human nature and sentimentalize human misery. The sight of a starving black child moves her to exclaim, "Oh look at the cute little pickanniny!....Wouldn't that make a picture, now?"²² Moreover, the narrowness of her belief denies Original Sin by ignoring the basic corruptness of human nature. For her, everyone, including the Misfit, is a good man, even though a good man may be hard to find. The Misfit recognizes the emptiness of this type of Christianity. He knows that misery is not cute, and that not everyone is a good man. Nevertheless, their respective positions are not antithetical, for it is the complacent and passive Christianity embodied in the Grandmother that gives birth to the active nihilism of the Misfit. Hence, the namelessness of the characters points to one of O'Connor's central thematic concerns, the relationship between Christianity and unbelief.

In addition, namelessness is also a way of naming the things of God and of naming the devil with a specific personality. The Misfit is a misfit in the sense that all men are misfits, exiles in a world of matter, and in that

sense he belongs to God. But by calling himself "The Misfit," he has named himself the devil for this specific occasion.²³ That the Grandmother is grandmother indicates that she belongs to God by virtue of her motherhood. But by recognizing her maternal responsibility for what the Misfit is, she also recognizes that she, too, is a devil of sorts. O'Connor reinforces this identification by likening the Grandmother's touch to the bite of a snake, an obvious allusion to the serpent of Eden.

While the connection between namelessness and the naming process is often difficult to discern in O'Connor's work, her strategic use of proper names is not. The names she gives her characters fall into one or more of the following categories: 1) those taken from the names of characters in the Old and New Testaments; 2) those alluding to specific passages or common concepts found in the Old and New Testaments; 3) those taken from historical figures; 4) those which are metaphorical or paronymic. Names in the first two categories do a great deal toward revealing the things of God, and names in all four categories help to indicate what a character is or what a character is capable of becoming, and to clarify the meaning of a story's action.

Names taken directly from the Bible include Enoch, Asa, Sarah, Ham, Mary, Elihu, Obadiah, Thomas, Elizabeth,

Ruth, and Mark, after the Evangelist. Also found in this group are such little known biblical names as Joanna, a female disciple mentioned in Luke's gospel, Susan, diminutive form of Suzannah, found in the gospel of Luke as well as in the story of Suzannah and the Elders, and Bernice, daughter of Agrippa mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. Of those names which allude to specific passages or common concepts from the Bible, four are immediately recognizable. Motes (Wise Blood) alludes to the sermon on the mount: "But why dost thou see the mote in thy brother's eye, and yet dost not consider the beam in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). The name Meeks (The Violent Bear It Away) also alludes to the sermon on the mount ("Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth," Matthew 5:4) as well as to Psalm 36 ("But the meek shall possess the land, they shall delight in abounding peace," Psalm 36:11). The name Sabbath (Wise Blood) obviously suggests the day of rest made holy by the Lord, while the name Sheppard ("The Lambs Shall Enter First") evokes the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10). Other names, apparently metaphorical, may also be veiled allusions to the Bible. Hawks (Wise Blood) suggests the unclean bird proscribed by the dietary laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Mason (The Violent Bear It Away) may allude to the masons who build walls for the house

of the Lord in II Kings 5:11; IV Kings 12:12; I Chronicles 22:2; and II Chronicles 24:12. Foxes ("The Enduring Chill") appear many times in the Bible, most notably in Ezekial 13:5-7: "Like foxes among ruins are your prophets, O Israel! Their visions are false and their divination lying." And the name "Greenleaf" is possibly derived from Jeremiah 17:7-8: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream: it fears not the heat when it comes, its leaves stay green."

The most frequently used historical name belongs to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, which O'Connor employs in Wise Blood, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," and "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." In "Greenleaf," she gives the surname to one of Mrs. May's sons, an intellectual who hates everything. Bobby Lee ("A Good Man Is Hard To Find") probably takes his name from the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, while Francis Marion Tarwater is named after the famous "Swamp Fox" of the American Revolution. Ignatius Vogle, S.J., of "The Enduring Chill" suggests Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, and Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" recalls Julian the Apostate, the fourth century Roman emperor. George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends, provides

a curious namesake for Mary George Fox of "The Enduring Chill." And O'Connor has a bit of fun by splitting movie actor Wendell Cory's name between Wendell and Cory Wilkins in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost."

Some of the more notable quasi-metaphorical names belong to Chancey Shortley ("The Displaced Person"), Mrs. Freeman and Joy "Hulga" Hopewell ("Good Country People"), and Mary Pitts and Mark Fortune ("A View of the Woods"). The most obvious paronomasic names belong to Red Sammy Butts ("A Good Man Is Hard To Find"), whose name suggests both the burnt out ends of cigarettes and the human buttocks, and Manley Pointer ("Good Country People"), whose name suggests the male sex organ as well as someone who points the way. But the cleverest paronomasic name is found in "The Enduring Chill." The name "Ignatius Vogle" means "fiery bird," and anticipates A-bury Porter Fox's final vision of the Holy Ghost descending "emblazoned in ice instead of fire."

The limitations of space prohibit a detailed discussion of all these names and categories. We can, however, discern something of O'Connor's onomastic strategy by looking briefly at her short story, "The River."

"The River" is about the baptism of five-year-old Harry Ashfield whose alcoholic parents have abandoned him

to the care of Mrs. Connin, an extremely religious woman. Mrs. Connin gives him an old book entitled The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve, which contains, among other things, a picture of Christ "Driving a crowd of pigs out of a man." Later she takes him to a camp meeting where a preacher named Bevel Summers preaches of the River of Life and subsequently baptizes the boy. Also at the camp meeting is an old, pig-like man named Paradise who comes to mock the ceremony and to show "he ain't been healed." The morning after the baptism, disillusioned with his squalid home life and entranced with the idea of a kingdom in the river, the boy returns to the river to baptize himself a second time. At first, the river rejects him, but after his second attempt, Harry sees Mr. Paradise bounding after him "like a giant pig" and tries once more. This time the river catches him and pulls him under. His fury and fear leave him, for he knows he is getting somewhere.

The three most important names in this story belong to Harry Ashfield, Bevel Summers, and Mr. Paradise. The surname, "Ashfield," suggests a wasteland, a field of ashes which is sterile and devoid of life, and which may serve as a metaphor for the state of the individual soul prior to baptism and Harry Ashfield's life at home, a

place that smells of dead cigarette butts. The boy implicitly acknowledges the connection between his surname and his home when, on the morning of his death, he empties two ashtrays on the floor and rubs the ashes into the rug with his fingers. It is also important to note that in the Roman Catholic liturgy ashes are a reminder of man's mortality and a symbol of penitence, commemorated on Ash Wednesday, which begins the penitential season of lent. The name may also suggest the ash tree, possibly connected with Yggdrasil, the tree that in Norse mythology holds the world together. During the Middle Ages there was a popular legend that the cross on which Christ was crucified was formed from the wood of an ash tree.

The given name, Harry, is equally suggestive. As a verb form, it means to plunder or to devastate. It is etymologically related to the verb "harrow," which immediately suggests the harrowing of hell, but which is also an agricultural term describing the first step that must be taken to prepare a field for cultivation. ²⁴ As a proper noun, it is one of the familiar names for the devil, Old Harry.

Neither name designates what Harry Ashfield is, but each indicates his potential for both good and evil. It is significant, however, that he rejects both names, or

at least the negative potential they both represent, the surname symbolically by emptying the ashtrays and rubbing the ashes into the rug, the given name by choosing, on the day of his baptism, not the name "Harry," but the name "Bevel," after the Reverend Bevel Summers.

The surname "Summers" has several possible meanings, including the season of ripening between spring planting and autumn harvest. In the Middle Ages, the word "summer" referred to that season of the year we call spring, the season of rebirth as in the famous lyric, "Sumer is icomen in," and the season when baptism was normally administered. In a secondary sense, the word "summer" suggests someone who counts things, who adds things up, who makes sums. This meaning, too, is appropriate and is suggested by Summers himself who tells the boy after he has been baptized, "You count now....You didn't even count before."

The given name "Bevel" is also of primary importance. It is a carpenter's term which refers to an oblique angle of a flat surface joined to another oblique angle to form a solid joint. The most prominent use of the term that I know of in American literature is found in William Faulkner's novel, As I Lay Dying. Cash Bundren, a carpenter, explains that he made his mother's coffin on a bevel be-

cause "There is more surface for the nails to grip.... There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam....The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel...."²⁵ Although O'Connor's choice of the name "Bevel" may owe something to Faulkner, particularly with respect to the stress of death, I suspect that her reasons were more immediate and can be explained by a few brief passages in the story itself. The use of a carpentry term as a name takes on significance in light of the fact that Christ in this story is consistently referred to as carpenter. The picture that Harry sees over Mrs. Connin's bed is of Christ "sawing on a board." The picture he sees in the picture book is "one of the carpenter driving a crowd of pigs out of a man." His greatest discovery, though, is "that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ." The adopted name "Bevel" thus becomes a metaphorical one for O'Connor, manifesting what she perceives to be the intimate relationship between Christ and man. Moreover, when Harry Ashfield takes the name "Bevel" as his baptismal name, he becomes spiritually and metaphorically joined to Bevel Summers in the way that bevelled surfaces are joined.

O'Connor uses the name "Paradise" ironically in the

story. Although the name literally refers to the heavenly paradise, Mr. Paradise is anything but heavenly. He resembles, rather, the shoat that young Harry inadvertently lets out of Mrs. Connin's pen, and the pigs in the picture book. The pig image clearly aligns Mr. Paradise with the devils Christ exorcised at Gerasa (Matthew 8). Mr. Paradise's demonic associations are stressed through his mockery of baptism and most notably at the conclusion of the story when, waving the red and white striped candy cane as he heads toward the river to pull Harry out, he functions as a tempter. The juxtaposition of the names "Ashfield" and "Paradise" reinforces a dramatic irony in the story, for it is Harry Ashfield who, taken by the river, is heading for Paradise, while it is Mr. Paradise who remains behind in the field of ashes.

But the name "Paradise" involves more than a simple ironic inversion. It does not merely indicate the antithesis of what the character is, for Mr. Paradise, although of the devil's party, is not himself the devil. He is more like the man possessed in Matthew 8, or like the swine into which the devils are sent. Like the swine in the gospel who run to the sea, Paradise ends up in the river. But unlike the swine, Paradise does not drown. Instead, he, too, undergoes a kind of baptism. Having entered the water with the red and white striped candy

cane, the instrument of temptation, he emerges empty-handed, "staring with his dull eyes as far down the river line as he could see," perhaps toward that Kingdom of Christ in the river. The concluding line of the story implies that Mr. Paradise, as a result of Harry's death, has been granted a potential vision of that paradise after which he was named. In other words, he has been offered a moment of grace which reveals at least to us if not to him that his name points toward his ultimate goal as well as to Harry's. Whether he will change his direction and head toward that paradise which is his home is a question the story does not answer.

O'Connor's use of names in this story is dynamic. Two of the names, Harry Ashfield and Mr. Paradise, are metaphorical to the extent that they represent the potential within each character and illuminate the thematic **relation** between the visible world and the invisible world. The ironic inversion in name meaning suggested by the interplay of names points to a transformation both characters undergo, actual redemption for Harry Ashfield and potential redemption for Mr. Paradise. The name "Bevel Summers" is metaphorical to the extent that it represents his function in the story--agent of renewal, the one who makes people count, the one who joins.

The onomastic strategies O'Connor employs in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" and in "The River" are characteristic of all her fiction. Although the use of specific names may vary from story to story, generally names identify character types, reflect the philosophical and moral positions which the characters represent, establish metaphorical connections among characters, and provide clues to the meaning of a story's action. Onomastics for O'Connor is thus not merely an ornamental device, but is the most vital aspect of her art.

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NOTES

1
Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York, 1970), p.118.

2
Mystery and Manners, p.157.

3
Generally speaking, this seems to be the position of Josephine Hendin, The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970).

4
Martha Stevens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1973), p.9.

5
Mystery and Manners, p.179.

6
Sally Fitzgerald, editor, The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1979), p.128.

7
Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York, 1973), p.248. All short stories cited are contained in this collection.

8
Like the Pardoner, the Misfit, Motes, and Pointer are all "preachers" of sorts, and like the Pardoner, each takes a rather cynical attitude toward humanity. It is also possible to argue that at least Motes and the Misfit undergo a shock which brings about their "moment of grace" analogous to the shock the Pardoner receives when Harry Bailey refuses to play his game. O'Connor's women, too, are somewhat Chaucerian. Leora Watts is the sensual Wife of Bath exaggerated to the grotesque even to the space between her front teeth, and the fastidious Grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" is a twentieth century American Prioress who can sympathize with cute little pickanninies and cats named Pitty Sing, but is somewhat insensitive to her own children.

9

Writing to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in the summer of 1952, O'Connor made the following remarks about a former teacher: "I didn't know Chaucer was at heart a pagan myself or what recompense theology is. I am just hoping I don't have to talk any of this claptrap with him." The Habit of Being, p.41.

10

A full discussion of grace and redemption can be found in The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 12 (New York, 1967), pgs.136-60.

11

Mystery and Manners, p.112.

12

Mystery and Manners, pgs.72-73.

13

The Habit of Being, p.126.

14

Mystery and Manners, p.117.

15

The Complete Stories, p.131.

16

The Complete Stories, p.128.

17

The Complete Stories, p.131.

18

The Complete Stories, p.132.

19

The Complete Stories, p.133.

20

Mystery and Manners, p.110.

21

The Complete Stories, p.132.

22

The Complete Stories, p.119.

23

This is not to say that the Misfit is The Devil with pitchfork and horns. There is little in O'Connor's fiction to indicate that the devil is an entity entirely distinct from the individual, and quite a bit to indicate that she thought of the devil as the darker side of human nature, perhaps analogous to the "id." Throughout The Violent Bear It Away, for example, Tarwater carries on a conversation with a mysterious stranger, who appears to be Tarwater's alter ego and who tells Tarwater that his choice is not between Jesus and the devil, but between "Jesus and you." The substitution of "you" for "the devil" suggests that the terms are in some sense equivalent. It is also true that most of her protagonists are seduced less by outside forces than by their own self-deception. In other words, the individual is morally responsible for his own actions, and must name himself the devil before his "moment of grace" is available.

24

The use of agricultural imagery for a specifically Christian purpose is as old as the Middle Ages. The harrowing of a field to prepare it for planting was analogous to the preparation of the human soul to receive the word of God, and Chaucer alludes to this famous analogy at the beginning and end of The Canterbury Tales. The Knight begins his tale by saying, "I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,/ And wayke been the oxen in my plough" (KT, 886-887). The Parson, in the prologue to his tale, brings the image to its conclusion, saying, "Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,/ Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?" (PT, 35-36). The implication is that the whole of The Canterbury Tales has been a harrowing of the pilgrims' souls to prepare them for the word of God the Parson is about to deliver.

The most elaborate development of the image is found in Piers the Plowman wherein Christ is portrayed as a plowman whose business is, in part, to harrow souls that the Barn of Unity may be filled.

O'Connor, too, seems to use the image in a similar fashion. Buford Munson, who appears on the back of a mule at the end of "The Violent Bear It Away," is clearly a Christ figure who has just planted a field of corn which

in Tarwater's subsequent vision feeds a vast multitude. Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person" is a first rate farmer who Mrs. McIntyre acknowledges will be her salvation. It is, therefore, not too far-fetched to suggest that Harry Ashfield's name implies the harrowing of the human soul in preparation for baptism.

25

William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying (New York, 1964), p.64 .

