

“The Catholic Sophocles:  
Violence and Vision in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation’”

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(Quotations from Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation” taken from Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *O’Connor: Collected Works* (Library of America, vol. 39) New York, 1988.)

The specter of violence and religion haunts the front pages of our newspapers and the recesses of our consciousness in these first years of the twenty-first century. In what follows I want to explore the work of a writer whose reception by her readers was fraught with complication precisely due to her own yoking of violence and religion in mid-twentieth century America. Flannery O’Connor’s stories garnered publication in the best journals of short fiction, won O. Henry Prizes, even sold well when collected. But they were also regularly, even predictably, a source of controversy and misunderstanding that befuddled and bewitched her. Her own correspondence reveals the pains she felt she needed to take to correct those who seemed not to understand why she wrote the way she did. And their number was – if not exactly legion – sufficient that it is clear, in retrospect, that her fascination with literary violence troubled and confused those who read her work when it appeared as much as it does those who read her today.

The misunderstanding and confusion result from the distressingly simple equation of O’Connor’s fiction, namely that violence and vision go hand in hand. As most graphically and famously illustrated in the early story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” – in which her imminent murder prompts the Grandmother to identify the Misfit, in a flurry of desperate religious fervor, as one of her own children – it is always the act of aggression that spurs insight. Recoiling at her recognition of him, the Misfit shoots the Grandmother, then reflects as his minions drag her body into the adjacent woods that “She would of been a good woman, if it

had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” What the Grandmother sees provokes the Misfit to the ultimate violent act for an individual; his act spurs, in turn, the most appropriate epitaph on the victim’s life, which comes from the murderer himself. O’Connor forces the reader to feel both repulsion and acknowledgement, and asks that the reader contemplate that they complement one another, in the grammatical sense of inflection: we cannot separate the Misfit’s murder from his pronouncement, and we cannot distinguish the Grandmother’s recognition of her child from the fact that just that recognition sealed her fate. Her radiant face, beaming heavenward as she crumples to the ground following the shooting, is the equation’s coda.

This unremitting intimacy of violence and vision is the hallmark of O’Connor’s fiction. Its development is one of increased subtlety, to be sure, but the theme is unmistakable. Its most striking culmination occurs in her late story “Revelation.” O’Connor wrote the story in the second half of 1963, during the final round of her bout with lupus erythematosus, and published it before her death in 1964. To judge from the circumstances of its speedy composition and the letters about it collected in *The Habit of Being*, she herself set particularly high store by “Revelation” as a fundamental expression of her writing.<sup>1</sup> If we want O’Connor’s most mature literary rendering of violence and vision, we need to look at the story in some detail. Before doing that, however, it is crucial to establish a broader context for O’Connor’s fiction, the criticism of which has been bewitched by an inability to capture the role religion plays in her literary output. To do this, I take my title from a letter written by Thomas Merton, contemporary of O’Connor’s and Trappist monk, poet, and theologian, when he was informed of her death by Robert Giroux, O’Connor’s (and Merton’s) editor:

I don’t think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather of someone like Sophocles ... I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man’s fall and dishonor.

Our sense of how violence and vision connect in O'Connor, and not incidentally the question of how religion informs her fiction, in the full sense of providing its guiding ethos or sensibility and its actual structure, is usefully guided if we take Merton's analogy quite seriously. Like most playwrights in ancient Greece, Sophocles wrote for competitions, particularly those in the spring honoring Dionysus Eleuthereus. These were religious festivals, occasions when the Athenians gathered to be reminded of times when humans and gods were closer than they had ever been, before or since. As Bernard Knox reminds us, "... the important fact is not so much that the theater was the purlieu of a particular god as that it was from the beginning a sacramental arena, a place where divine forces were invoked and put to work, where the performance was, for actors and audience alike, an act of worship."<sup>2</sup> Greek playwrights sought to grasp the role that the gods played in human life; Sophocles' great theme was the fact that it is the gods who dispense good and evil, and his dramas attempt to fathom the fact and its implications. He does this, famously, by playing the organization of his drama against the audience's knowledge: his audience knew the story of Oedipus, so that nothing the hero who has slain his father and wedded his mother says can have anything other than a double meaning for them. Sophocles thus compels his audience to focus not on how the story turns out, but on the process of how such an indisputably great man could be so humbled. And Sophocles created perhaps the most brilliant, and certainly one of the most enduring, of summary literary codas in the act of self-inflicted violence with which the play concludes: Oedipus blinds himself. Here violence and vision are exactly, albeit negatively, linked. The result is, like O'Connor, a very rich rendition of the role of the divine in human life, not easily summarized in dogma or precept. The gods are clear but oblique; unmistakable yet (at least in the near term) avoidable; tenacious yet unpredictable. They are also undeniable.

The same compulsive force animates O'Connor's fiction. Her stories create her own dramatic arena (the phrase, as we shall see, is actually deployed in "Revelation") which becomes the theater in which she explores the interaction of human and divine. Greek polis is replaced by rural Southern farm community, and tragic hero, in "Revelation," by tragic heroine. Most significantly, Greek myth is in O'Connor displaced by Catholic sacramental vision: her core commitment that the world is, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, "charged with the grandeur of God." But what was, for Hopkins, a fact of the natural world that required our fuller attention, is, for O'Connor's fiction, a fact of divine intercession: the capacity of God to interrupt the mundane, to marry grace to particular circumstance – the more unexpected, the better. And as is the case with Sophocles, this capacity of the divine to interrupt and decisively influence the human is, from the human perspective in O'Connor's fiction, to say the least ambiguous: never easy, always fraught with unwelcome complication, frequently violent. In the end, Sophocles and O'Connor differ most in the location of the vision that violence creates: for Sophocles, the violence that literally robs Oedipus of sight is meant to spawn a vision of the divine/human relationship that his audience will take back to its everyday world. For O'Connor, the vision spawned by violence is, in "Revelation" at least, part of the tale itself – with implications for the future that are at best dim.

The question of "Revelation" is the question of what happens to Ruby Turpin. This question has as its complementary referents the trajectory of her development as a character, and the nature of the vision she receives at the end. My working hypothesis starts from the simple but crucial generic observation that this is a short story: it wants to make a certain point with reference to change in a compressed narrative venue. It follows that everything we need to know can be found within the story. Our job is to get close enough to its details to let the

story do its work. O'Connor worked and reworked all her stories literally sentence by sentence. It is not overstatement to say that they bear up to this kind of reading.

The story's framing motif is the juxtaposition of two set scenes, the first in a doctor's office and the second on the Turpin's farm, at their pig parlor. Not incidentally, both are scenes of violence followed by vision. Simple math invites the comparison: there are eight occupants of both spaces, in the former patients awaiting appointments with the local physician and in the latter a sow and her seven shoats. The spaces themselves are contrasted explicitly; the waiting room is much too small for the very large Mrs. Turpin, while the pig parlor is the stage of what quickly becomes a natural arena in which Mrs. Turpin is a one-woman dramatic chorus, shouting at God. A crucial distinction is that, while the numbers are the same, the counting of the humans in the doctor's waiting room is far less straightforward than that of the sow and her progeny in the pig parlor. The difficulty is exacerbated by details of social class, depicted not only with reference to race and wealth but to clothing, demeanor, sociability, and shoes. Those impatient with the exercise are implicitly admonished by the fact that O'Connor makes the reader repeat it a total of four times, in each instance tweaking the exact number through idiosyncratic allusion and catch phrasings to mark the assembled multitude. By contrast, in the case of sow and shoats both number and social class are utterly clear, the only variation – and that foreshadowed – is the fact that the sow will soon enlarge her family through birth. The implication of fecundity and possibility is absent from the doctor's office, where we are told in redolent, comic detail of injury and illness.

Mrs. Turpin herself is obsessed with the social complexities presented in the doctor's office. Indeed it is only too accurate to say that they govern her life. She constantly wonders about her own status and about what might have been. These self-queries show Mrs. Turpin to be the opposite of James Thurber's Walter Mitty: she can as easily imagine herself lower rather

than higher than she actually is in the caste system of 1960s rural Georgia. An extended internal monologue about her insomniac musings reflects on an imagined encounter in which Jesus himself offers Mrs. Turpin the choice of being “white trash” or becoming colored. After some inevitable agonizing Mrs. Turpin concludes that she would prefer to be “a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” rather than “white trash.”

More vexing complexities beckon. Mrs. Turpin recollects her frequent nocturnal musings, when she occupies herself “naming the classes of people.” Most colored people and white-trash occupy the bottom of the heap, followed by home-owners and then home-and-land owners (where she and Claud belong). But she is much clearer about what is below than she is about what is above:

Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. 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 together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven (636).

This overwhelming complexity that blurs the internal distinctions of the human social order has as its complement in “Revelation” an uneasy but unmistakable minor key that blurs the differences between human and animal. In the doctor’s office a “thin leathery old woman” wears a cotton print dress that, when we first meet her, only *resembles* sacks of chicken feed but comes ultimately to be described as “the feed sack dress.” An extended discussion of hogs proceeds in terms very similar to those Mrs. Turpin herself deploys for people: “Hogs. Nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place.” So says another denizen of the doctor’s waiting room (whom Mrs. Turpin describes as “white-trash”). Ever one to rebut an

insult to her own, Mrs. Turpin responds in similar terms to her internal monologue with Jesus: “Our hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink ... They’re cleaner than some children I’ve seen. Their feet never touch the ground. We have a pig-parlor – that’s where you raise them on concrete...’ Cleaner by far than that child right there, she thought. Poor little nasty thing.” Confusion of caste, in a nice irony for such a tale so utterly of the American Christian south, extends to the animal kingdom. It is in Mrs. Turpin’s confusion, or perhaps better her own eagerness to secure her social status, that the blurring shows. This is underscored by the parallel between the woman’s repeated descriptions of the hogs – “A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin” – and the classes of people in the box cars “roiling and moiling around in [Mrs. Turpin’s] head” as they are headed for the gas oven.

The same woman who expresses contempt for hogs also expresses her contempt for the colored community. Here the complexity bears down again upon Mrs. Turpin, but in this case it is mitigated by her contempt, shared openly with the pleasant-faced lady (Mary Grace’s mother), for the “white trash” who is her interlocutor. Regarding herself as vastly more sophisticated in such matters, Mrs. Turpin proceeds to distinguish types of colored people, averring “There’s a heap of things worse ... It’s all kinds of them just like it’s all kinds of us,” to which the pleasant-faced lady responds in her musical voice, “Yes, and it takes all kinds to make the world go round...”

Precisely these social niceties transform Mrs. Turpin’s exchanges of look with the one denizen of the doctor’s office she cannot classify: the comprehensively unpleasant college girl, Mary Grace, daughter of the pleasant-faced lady with whom Mrs. Turpin bonds so readily. Initially buried in her book and annoyed by the patter and its interruption, smirking at the discussion of the clock, it is after she slams her book shut in disgust that Mrs. Turpin cannot avoid Mary Grace’s penetrating gaze:

She looked straight in front of her, directly through Mrs. Turpin and on through the yellow curtain and the plate glass window which made the wall behind her. The girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give. Mrs. Turpin turned her head to see if there was anything going on outside that she should see, but she could not see anything (637).

Henceforth Mrs. Turpin cannot avoid Mary Grace's stare, and the odd physical expressions of revulsion that go with it. She snaps her teeth and curls her lips, and her subtlest physical gesture is to grip her book tightly, "with white fingers," when Claud tells a joke about colored people. But it is her eyes that Mrs. Turpin cannot avoid: they are like drills to her, and "there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them." Mrs. Turpin resolves to overcome what she initially takes to be social rudeness through her stock-in-trade, a foray into polite conversation; but Mary Grace will not reply, and her mother speaks for her, rather condescendingly and archly. By turns the mother contrasts Mrs. Turpin's good disposition with Mary Grace's bad one, and Mrs. Turpin's gratitude with Mary Grace's lack of gratitude. This exchange leads Mrs. Turpin to a peroration:

"If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "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!' For one thing, somebody else could have got Claud. At the thought of this, she was flooded with gratitude and a terrible pang of joy rang through her. "Oh, thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!" she cried aloud.

The book struck her directly over the left eye ... (644).

This is the pivotal moment of "Revelation," the fulcrum on which the contrast between Mrs. Turpin in the doctor's office and Mrs. Turpin at the pig parlor rests. It yokes violence with vision: Mary Grace's book, *Human Development*, strikes Mrs. Turpin above the eye, and the ensuing effects of this attack all have to do with Mrs. Turpin's capacity to see. The harbinger is that immediately her vision narrows and she sees as if "through the wrong end of a telescope" (644); quickly thereafter it suddenly reverses itself, and "she saw everything large instead of

small" (645). Trying to focus, looking for Claud in the immediate aftermath of the attack, she feels "like some one trying to catch a train in a dream" (645), echoing her earlier dream of box cars filled with people heading for the gas ovens. Everyone is, in fact, roiling and moiling about the doctor's office, "a-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin"; but Mrs. Turpin's own gaze is drawn not to her husband or to any of the others but inexorably to Mary Grace's "churning face" which she sees over the doctor's shoulder.

Mary Grace is waiting for her, too, for it is only when Mrs. Turpin sees her that Mary Grace's eyes stop rolling and come into focus - on Mrs. Turpin. Much lighter blue than before - "as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air" - they compel Mrs. Turpin toward their fierce brilliance. "There was no doubt in her mind," thinks Mrs. Turpin, "that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition." But they compel more: a question, "What you got to say to me?" asked "hoarsely ... waiting, as for a revelation."

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's. "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target (646).

Having had her encounter with grace, Mrs. Turpin watches as the girl subsides into unconsciousness and is carried away. The immediate change in her character, notable throughout the remainder of "Revelation," is a ruthless discarding of all social niceties. Impatient with the doctor, she returns home with Claud half expecting to see her farm eviscerated, "a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys." Now she cannot sleep, but the images that fill her brain are not those of mock dialogues with Jesus or of the human race sorted to her sense of caste; they are, instead of "a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears." It is at this point, not merely sleepless but utterly restless and

discombobulated, that she confronts the full brunt of what she has been told: "She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied." Her denials have no force, and she is left with the unrebutted charge.

Wrath soon replaces tears and with it comes hard-headed realism – this is a function of her eyes, and it is described in terms that separate it from her will ("The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath"). The realism is remorseless and now turned outward, seeking answers. Even husband Claud suffers from this transition. Once "a caution," her source of mirth and of beseeching gratitude to Jesus for such good fortune, Ruby Turpin now watches her sleeping husband and reflects: "He did not think about anything. He just went his way" (648). Unlike him, she cannot sleep but scowls at the ceiling: "Occasionally she made a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong." This is a woman with no time for small comforts, eyes directed outward in search of answers.

It is similar with the colored help on the farm, but with the important distinction that only with this group does Mrs. Turpin choose to convey her experience in the doctor's office. She does so tersely but with unsparing accuracy, inflected with the hesitation not of social grace but of pain at indictment: "'She said,' she began again and finished this time with a fierce rush of breath, 'that I was an old wart hog from hell.'" The protests to the contrary with their invocations of Jesus only elicit Mrs. Turpin's internal mental dismissal ("Idiots! ... You could talk at them but not with them").

Ruby Turpin begins to function in a manner that parallels even as it contrasts directly with that of Mary Grace in the doctor's office. Like her accuser Mrs. Turpin is brief, impatient, impertinent, ugly. But there are distinctions, and they are important. Instead of making faces that suggest an animal-like demeanor, her inflicted injuries do the job: the swelling above her

eye resembles “a miniature tornado cloud,” and her lip protrudes dangerously. Her shoulders are now “massive” – unembarrassedly so. She marches out to the pig parlor with “the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle.” She does not need a psychology text to do her damage; instead she takes the hose from Claud and inflicts misery on the shoats, shooting water at their hind quarters to force them to remain standing when they would sit and – in the closest parallel to Mary Grace’s violence against her – squirting water directly into the eye of the old sow. And she begins to speak voluntarily, to the sky: finally in the open, she can now apostrophize God. Like Job, she is beyond simple anger and nice bargains. What, she asks in tones both imploring and defiant, would God have her be? What was earlier banal interior monologue is now defiant confrontation. She has found the appropriate arena for her encounter with the divine, and having replicated Mary Grace’s violence in her treatment of the sows, she is rewarded with a vision:

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. 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. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. 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 (653-654).

From the time Mrs. Turpin is struck by the book, but most dramatically in the story's final pages as she approaches the pig-parlor and engages the sky, her sensory interaction with the world is compromised: she cannot make a sound, she does not see what is in front of her eyes, and she does not hear the sounds that are reported to us. At the same time she wills a response from the sky (foreshadowed by her staring bouts with the ceiling as Claud sleeps) and is ultimately rewarded with a vision that renders simple the previously overwhelming complexity of the world. In that vision of the marching saints top and bottom are reversed and the social niceties (here "virtues") are burnt away, settling complexities of caste with a finality that mirrors the idiotic but undeniable order of the hogs in the pig-parlor. Note that she looks at the hogs here just as she looked at Mary Grace after being hit by the book - with a combination of insistent will and uncertain determination - and that her gesture, "hieratic and profound," suggests priestly proportions.

Only with the sensory deprivation induced by violence can Mrs. Turpin fully see the divine truth about the world. Crickets become hallelujah choruses, hogs are the venues of vision, saints leap like frogs. Animal and human freely intermingle, and what distinguishes and elevates the human from the remainder of creation - the social virtues Mrs. Turpin once cherished and used to regulate her life - is eviscerated. The divine answer to Ruby Turpin is to invite her to see what shall ultimately matter in the procession upward. And what she sees is what she could not, absent violence, view with credulity.

It is an answer that ruthlessly underscores the autonomy and independence of the divine, its utter capacity to transcend human perception in all its aspects. In this O'Connor is most like Sophocles: the role of art is to remind us of how massive, how decisive, how utterly

“other” is the divine and its insight in relation to human knowledge and understanding. That is the most important and not incidentally the most humbling lesson. Ruby Turpin ends undeniably shriven and undeniably great, having gotten there in the only way available to her in the very fallen but compelling world of Flannery O’Connor. The apparent oxymoron of “abysmal life-giving knowledge” expresses precisely how this Catholic Sophocles sought to convey what was true about human life and divine reality.

What makes O’Connor a *Catholic Sophocles* is her commitment to the linkage of violence with the disclosure of meaning in the human/divine encounter. The heavenly procession is closely linked for Mrs. Turpin with the combination of being hit with *Human Development* by Mary Grace and subsequently being labelled a “wart hog from hell”: the procession discards as “virtues” the social graces that Mrs. Turpin awards to herself, and instead marries grace to violence. The vision teaches that it is not Mrs. Turpin’s obsession with the details but her misconstrual of their significance that matters: the world is indeed charged with the grandeur of God, as Hopkins wrote, but the word “grandeur” is loaded with the fullness of a divinity who is utterly supernatural and beyond the ken of our fondest hopes and wildest imaginings.

It is an index of Mrs. Turpin’s greatness as a character that she accepts the vision, and with it implicitly accepts the humiliation of her own wishes and hopes and, perhaps equally important, her ways of being in the world. More than being humbled, she assumes humility. She reaches the point that, unmistakably sacerdotal, she can shout at God and live with the consequences. In short, she can bear the truth.

That is the ultimate Sophoclean dimension of O’Connor’s work; the linkage of violence and vision aims to characterize the appropriate understanding of humans to their god(s), and that understanding has as its basis the chastening recognition that reality is ultimately in divine hands, and that its effect on the human imagination and activity is at best arbitrary. Mrs.

Turpin is, in her way, as noble as the blinded Oedipus at Colonnus, no longer seeing what once could so easily distract her from the really true.

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Flannery O'Connor is often discussed as a Catholic writer. Such characterizations have their uses and their misuses. In her case the appellation is coin of the realm, and it determines the parameters of what can be said by way of interpretive criticism. Using Sophocles rather than some aspect of the Catholic tradition as framing metaphor decenters the natural recourse to dogmatic theology – a great temptation in reading fiction “religiously,” particularly fiction whose author is so readily identifiable with the religious tradition in question. It is important to note that, in offering a “decentered” approach, I am not denying O'Connor's recurrent use of such (not just Catholic, but Christian) explicit ideas as the Eucharist and the cross. Such themes are often central to her work.

What such identification can obscure, however, is the radicalism of the fiction – and, ultimately, the gripping claims of the religion it is meant to serve. Does someone have to get hit in the head with a book – or shot dead, or gored to death by a bull – to begin to see the truth about who they really are, and what they really mean to the world? Is true religious vision obtained at severe cost to our most cherished notions of social order and decorum? Indeed, can the very symbols of tradition be domesticated for such use, in betrayal of their true meaning? In the world of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the answer to all these questions is emphatically affirmative. And she judges the human capacity to hide behind various trappings, social and theological, to be a fundamental source of the need for art that reminds humanity of its real relationship to the world and the divine reality that undergirds it.

In a world where religious violence now demarcates the editorial decisions of our news agencies more than ever, this is both unsettling and clarifying. Even having lived a half century

before our own benighted time, Flannery O'Connor would be less surprised than most of us habitually are by the capacities human beings display to claim the divine mandate for violent acts. The counsel of her fiction is thus best understood not as the elucidation of dogma, but as the fundamental articulation of the human propensity to think it knows more than it does about divine purpose. One measure of that vision, which underscores both O'Connor's debt to her Catholic tradition and her utter artistic independence of it, occurs in the conclusion of her great novella, "The Displaced Person." In it O'Connor tells the story of a widow who, in her struggle to maintain the family farm, employs at the instigation of her local priest a family of Polish refugees from the Nazis. A magnificent worker, the father and husband's expertise and industry infuriates the other long-time employees and leads ultimately to his murder, after which everyone except the woman abandons the farm. The woman herself is dying a slow death, described as a vague, creeping paralysis that leaves her bedridden, and it is in these circumstances that she is regularly visited by the local priest. His habit is always the same: before he visits her, he feeds crumbs of bread to the peafowl that are the only survivors of the odd but unmistakable and violent carnage documented in the story. He then goes into the house and reads to the dying woman at her bedside from the dogmas of the Church. It is clear that the priest has his roles reversed: it is the woman who needs the Eucharist, and the peafowl who are at this point the most appropriate audience for Church dogma. Such ironic reversal, and the confidence to leave its recognition to the audience, bespeak an artist who, as Merton put it, understood well the failings of the human in a world demarcated by the divine.

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<sup>1</sup> "Yes mam I heard from C. Carver. Can't send letter as it is somewhere on desk which might as well be in Wilkinson County as I am not supposed to walk to or around it. She thought it ["Revelation"] one of my most powerful stories and probably my *blackest*. Found Ruby evil. Found end vision to

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confirm same. Though suggested I leave it out. I am not going to leave it out. I am going to deepen it so that there'll be no mistaking Ruby is not just an evil Glad Annie. I've really been battling this problem all my writing days" ("To A." letter of 25 December 1963: in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *The Habit of Being* [New York: Vintage Books, 1979], p. 554.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Knox, "Greece and the Theater," in Fagles, Robert, trans. *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*; introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 19.