

Flannery O'Connor and Dante's "Divine Comedy"

by Benjamin B. Alexander

Flannery O'Connor in discussing her fiction suggests "what makes a story work" and "what makes it hold up as a story" is "an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level. That is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it."¹ This is a remarkable statement from a 20th century writer. The striking use by Miss O'Connor of the communal pronoun "our" to describe the corporate participation in "Divine life" is indicative of an alien idiom to modern ears. O'Connor's pronoun selection belongs to another world, another time, another way of looking at things. Her words are those of a divine comedian and in order to comprehend the massive assumptions behind her descriptions of her work we are beckoned to the patristic and medieval sources of her vision.

In Dante's *Divina Commedia*, we discover explicit portrayal of O'Connor's "Divine Life and our participation in it" in the immediate action of the *Commedia*. The whole scope of the epic entails the connectedness of the theological reality of grace and the supernatural with the natural order and history. The subject of the *Commedia* defines this reality in the indicative statement that opens the *Paradiso*: "The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less."² This is the explicit unconditional premise of Dante's comedy that he dramatically sets forth as he, the author himself, comes to observe the "glory of Him" in one part and another. The *Paradiso* is a marvelously amusing religious drama as Dante dramatically illustrates a psychology, anthropology, and spirituality infused by grace that provides a corrective to the deficiencies of reason alone in comprehending the providential order. And when Dante tells of this overwhelming experience in the first canto, he is recollecting the infusion of the Holy Spirit into the mind. Of this experience he says that "I may show forth the shadow of the blessed kingdom imprinted in my brain."³

Tumultuous Events. Such an exalted vision of comedy may seem arcane, tedious, and theologically obscure in our time. This seems to be an even sounder observation as we try to discover the presence of divine comedy in O'Connor's fiction where families are murdered, young boys drown or hang themselves, the retarded are abandoned in roadside cafes, artificial limbs are taken from the handicapped who are left alone in barn lofts, Southern

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- 1 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York, 1962), 111. Hereafter cited as *Mystery and Manners*.
 - 2 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford, 1966), 19. Hereafter cited as *Paradiso*.
 - 3 *Paradiso*, 19.

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matrons of grand old families and good taste are gored by bulls, good old Southern boys get pictures of the Byzantine Christ tattooed on their backs, and Polish immigrants fleeing the terrors of World War II are treacherously betrayed in their relocation to the American South.⁴

These tumultuous events are indicative that O'Connor is familiar with her audience's thorough unfamiliarity with divine comedy. This would appear to be an almost insurmountable obstacle with which Dante does not have to contend in the 13th century in the crafting of the *Commedia*. Indeed O'Connor has by education and by disposition all the attributes that would indicate that her comedy conforms to the tastes and sensibilities of our age, which is to say a practice of comedy that could hardly be considered divine in Dante's sense. We discover that Edgar Allan Poe, a fellow Southerner, was the one writer who influenced her before she became a serious writer and reader in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Iowa. O'Connor remarks of Poe's stories: "These were mighty humorous — one about a young man who was too vain to wear his glasses and consequently married his grandmother by accident; another about a fine figure of a man who in his room removed wooden arms, wooden legs, hair piece, artificial teeth, voice box etc.etc; another about the inmates of a lunatic asylum who take over the establishment and run it to suit themselves."⁵

Exalted Vision. When O'Connor speaks of these stories being "humorous," she is talking about humor in a way that would be familiar to a contemporary audience. She also realizes that in the wild action of Poe's stories she found the roots of comedy that would eventually become divine in her mature writings. But what she saw initially was a comedy of sensation, distortion, farce, and extremity. And it is such qualities that a modern popular audience associates with comedy — not the exalted vision of divine comedy that Dante sets forth in epic magnitude in the *Commedia* and that O'Connor would come to embrace in her own writings.

Dante had assured cultural and religious advantages that buttressed his epic and without which he could not have achieved what he does. O'Connor observes that the "model for balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory, and paradise." She goes on to observe that "Dante lived in the thirteenth century when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age."⁶ O'Connor recognizes that Dante enjoyed a shared communal tradition — the "faith of his age," she puts it — that rooted the theological presupposition of the *Divine Comedy* in the coherent faith of medieval culture. For instance, the proposition derived from St. Thomas that man is a theological organism was axiomatic in Dante's religious culture. What to Dante is an unquestionable truth in O'Connor's world of pluralistic options and existential dilemmas becomes a conditional alternative. The Thomastic premise is no longer an indicative reality. Dante's culture would have understood readily what he meant and executed in his epic as religious comedy, while O'Connor's culture, for the most part, does not embrace or understand such comedy. For divine comedy to be communally understood, there must be a shared faith to interpret the vision. And as the writer of Proverbs succinctly remarks, "where there is no vision, the people perish." What in Dante was a corporate vision that

4 See "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," "Greenleaf," "Parker's Back," and "The Displaced Person" in Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York, 1988).

5 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (New York, 1979), 98. Hereafter cited as *Habit of Being*.

6 *Mystery and Manners*, 49.

made it possible for him to write a communal epic has disintegrated, O'Connor reveals, into a modern "age which doubts both fact and value, and which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions." While Dante, O'Connor notes, benefits from an objective "balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself."⁷

Misreading of O'Connor. While O'Connor and Dante share similar theological and religious visions, their situations in relation to their audiences are nearly reversed. Notwithstanding the near inversion of cultural and religious conditions, O'Connor executes a kind of divine comedy that Dante would have immediately recognized, but that has spawned consternation, frustration, and misreading of O'Connor. A way of gauging our current unfamiliarity with the dramatic techniques of divine comedy is to recognize the extent to which Dante is virtually unknown as a communal poet in our time. We are unfamiliar with the nature of religious comedy, even though shattered bits and pieces of this kind of drama permeate our culture. We need to review briefly how Dante understands comedy. Once we see how he executes it, we are in a better position to see how Flannery O'Connor parallels him in crafting of stories.

In Dante's epic we discover a massive tapestry of order — political, theological, institutional, and moral — conveyed in the genre of religious comedy. Although Dante wrote a treatise called *De Monarchia* that attempts to account systematically for his political principles, it is the *Divina Commedia* that makes the vision dramatic and universal. The poem's timelessness has to do with Dante's uncanny ability to present in epic scope a total universe far vaster than anything explored by our space shuttle.

Spiritual Universe. One of the great ironies in the history of modern science since the Renaissance has to do with technological progress paralleled by the loss of coherent theological cosmology. While Dante would applaud the achievements of modern space exploration, for instance, he would not mistake its conquest with higher theological reality. He would insist that any kind of flight in space is merely reflective of an invisible flight of the imagination by which we comprehend God's hidden theological universe. And it is this canopy of being that gives physical form to the sky in which the shuttle flies. Indeed, it may take a tragedy like the "Challenger Seven" explosion to remind us of Dante's terrifying, mysterious, yet providential cosmology. And when President Reagan, in his eulogy to the heroic crew of the ill-fated space ship, stated that "they had a new home beyond the stars" and "they had touched the face of God," he made allusion to the spiritual universe that would be familiar to Dante. He explores it in epic proportion, an expedition that would later lead us to append the name "divine" to the incredible journey to God.

What separates Dante's epics from others in the genre of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras is that entire work takes place in another order of existence out of time and history. The setting of the poem is eternity and Dante himself remarks that his subject is the "state of souls after death."⁸ Whereas most other epics have episodes where the hero visits eternal realms of being, such as Odysseus's visit to the underworld in the *Odyssey*, the eternal dimensions remain a background action in most epics. Dante remarkably reverses the process. Eternity is the literal subject of the poem and Dante's cosmic imagination enables him to imagine various episodes of history from a timeless mode of being. The poem presents a dramatic rendition of how God views the history of man and how He

⁷ *Mystery and Manners*, 49.

⁸ Dante Alighieri, "Letter to Can Grande Della Scala," *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1971), 122.

knows the world to be. Therein lies the key to a comedy that is divine. Its point of view has to do with God's understanding of the order of many varieties of existence of which the order of time and history are merely one.

Dante's achievement revolutionizes the capacities for epic action and narrative. Dante is the greatest fantasy writer of all time. He discovers eternity as the central subject of an epic. This feat of genius reinvigorated enduring speculation about other modes of transcendent being rooted in Plato's theology and its utilization in the Gospels of the Bible and the Epistles of St. Paul. Dante is the vital medieval figure who concentrates Hellenic doctrines of transcendence and the Biblical vision of eternity. He shows the relevance of the legacy for subsequent eras. His influence is incalculable for the modern world: without Dante there would be no "Twilight Zone," "No Close Encounters of the Third Kind," and certainly no "ET." All these actions inevitably find their way back to Dante who pioneered the art of a story rooted in eternity intersecting history. The fact that "ET" is one of the most popular movies of all time is evidence of Dante's enduring achievement and contemporary relevance. When we delight in such movies, we must remember who Steven Spielberg's ultimate ancestor is.

Chic Demonic Culture. By the same token when we confront the increasing disordered images, ugliness, and dehumanization of our culture, we must recall that Dante is the preeminent architect of Satan's kingdom in the *Inferno*. While we can rejoice in the enduring popularity of "ET," we must recognize that much of our culture has now identified with the sordid comedy of Dante's Hell; or distorted images and actions are officially promoted as worthy of serious audience attention. We have a rock group naming itself after the revolting polluted marsh of Dante's hell called "Styx" and we have other groups calling themselves "Judas Priest," "Black Sabbath," and "Megadeath." Art awards, funded by tax dollars, have been given to exhibits where religious icons are submerged in human filth. A film portraying Jesus as an indecisive weakling has been nominated for an Academy Award. At a modern art exhibit patrons have been invited to walk on an American flag. A Church teaching series, used in mainline denominations, portrays Christ as an ancient forerunner of Che Guevara and pictures Him leading proletarian, revolutionary mobs.⁹ These are only a few examples of the vast suffusion in our time of what Dante would call demonic culture. Its presence as well its promotion is reflective of the massive disorder in which we live. Such conditions argue forcefully for an understanding of the sources and meaning of the sights, sounds, and images that confront us. The great difference between contemporary culture and that of Dante is that medieval culture could recognize hell as deformed and perverse, whereas contemporary culture increasingly equates hellish iconography with the normative and chic.

The *Divine Comedy* teaches a culture how to be literate. The poem instructs the reader in comprehending how the symbols, icons, and images of his world form a providential economy. Dante conceives of this spiritual kingdom as divine, and he divides it up into three spiritual territories that he systematically explores. These are *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Lost in a Dark Wood. The poem begins on Good Friday of 1300 with Dante, the central figure of the poem, being lost in what he terms is a "dark wood." The fearful forest concentrates the Bible's banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden of the book of Genesis. The poem begins with a psychological and spiritual triumph. Dante can at least recognize that he is lost and that his life is disordered, and as a result, he has the

9 Episcopal Church Publishing Company, *Must We Choose Sides?* (Ambler, Penn. n. d.).

courage to admit it. Virgil appears as the incarnation of classical reason to lead Dante through the depths of Hell and onward to the recovery of the Garden of Eden at the top of Mount Purgatory. But first Dante must go through a horrifying journey to the center of the earth, during the process of which he observes a massive empire of evil.

Dante systematically divides Satan's kingdom up into moral categories derived from Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Dante's image of Hell is an inverted cone or funnel. At the top of upper hell reside those souls who in life came to look on the body, not as a divine biological organism, but as an instrument of individual pleasure that is solely a human possession and can thus be treated in any manner. And here we find the drinkers, the eaters, the fornicators, and others, all of whom Virgil tells Dante "subjected reason to desire." In the degrees of evil in Dante's hell, these "sinners of the flesh" are the lowest grade of offenders whose magnitude of evil has not led to violence and disorder on a massive scale.

Deliberate Choice of Sin. This kind of evil comes at a deeper stage in Dante and Virgil's trek, once they enter into the huge fortress city of Hell called "Dis." Here sin becomes a matter of deliberate choice, not an instinct of the flesh. We find the heretics popping up out of burning tombs. We find a massive category of sinners who have been violent against self, neighbors, God, and nature. The suicides, violent against themselves, are deprived of their bodies that they despised and live as trees that are incessantly picked at by ravenous birds called Harpies. Those violent against neighbors boil now in the blood they deliberately spilled. Dante also confronts blasphemers, those violent against God, and sodomites and usurers, those violent against nature. The first group are in hell because they take what is naturally fertile, human sexuality, and make it infertile. On the other hand, usurers, according to Dante's remorseless logic, take money, which is naturally infertile and try to make it breed. They are guilty of a kind of symbolic sodomy.

After surveying the overwhelming realm of the violent, Dante and Virgil are deposited in another region of hell know as "Malebolgia" or the "evil ditches." Here the fraudulent reside, those guilty of premeditated treachery against others. Dante concentrates the image of Fraud in one of the most hideous creations of the *Inferno*. It is Geryon, a monster with the face of a just man, a reptilian multicolored body, and a rapier-scorpion stinger for a tail. If you have ever been gypped or defrauded, Dante's image will not be lost on you. Fraud ostensibly appears to be just. Yet actually its substance is nothing more than the garish paint of deceit that finally stings the victim like a scorpion's tale.

In this pit of the fraudulent, Dante is introduced to an overwhelming institutional structure of sin. In Malebolgia he explores how an "evil empire" gathers momentum that the lone individual, unassisted by divine grace, cannot overcome. This portion of the *Inferno* is particularly powerful in its portrayal of an escalating community of wickedness. The categories of fraud Dante enumerates are pandering and seducing, flattery, simony, sorcery, barratry, hypocrisy, thievery, false counseling, schism, and falsification.

From Bad to Worse. As bad as these categories of fraud are, Dante has yet another division of hell that is worse. He descends from Malebolgia onto the frozen lake of Cocytus at the bottom of Hell where those guilty of what Dante calls compound treachery reside in eternal misery. And here we find those whose have betrayed the trust of kindred, country, guest, and lords. The image of such treachery is cannibalism, the ultimate action of dehumanization. It is such an action that occurs at the depths of hell where Satan monotonously chews, in a bloody parody of the Trinity, the bodies of Judas, Cassius, and Brutus.

Dante and Virgil emerge from the depths of Hell on the morning of Holy Saturday and once again see light and stars and leave the horrifying stench, sounds, and sights of hell behind. The ascension of Mount Purgatory, the second part of the epic is the reverse action of the *Inferno*. Instead of the downward descent into evil, we have the upward ascent to the innocence lost in the Garden of Eden after the fall of man. The epic action is compelling. Dante has shown that, in order to recover Eden, we must learn to recognize evil and to call it by name. He achieves this in the *Inferno* and once that region is put behind him, he can return to the innocence once lost.

Joyful Hope. The action of the *Purgatorio* amounts to the epic conquest of what Dante regards as the seven deadly sins – pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Dante and Virgil climb four terraces of ante-Purgatory and seven terraces of the mountain proper. We witness the poem's version what we might call in our athletic idiom, "no pain, no gain." The pain entails penitent sinners undergoing for a small amount of a few centuries by world time the opposite action of what they so enjoyed in flawed, but not infernally depraved, lives on earth. The prideful learn to be humble by carrying heavy boulders while they look at magnificent portraits of examples of humility and sing hymns of submission. The envious sit in sackcloth with their eyes stitched so that they can now only look at pictures of generosity and sing songs of meekness. The *Purgatorio* usually is regarded as the most accessible portion of the *Divina Commedia*. The reader identifies more with the joyful hope of those in Purgatory and less with the surrealistic damnation of Hell and the beatification of the blessed in Paradise.

Dante ascends through the Garden of Eden at the top of Purgatory. Here we have a poignant moment in the journey in which Virgil makes Dante both a Prince and Bishop over himself and suggests that reason is inadequate for the negotiation of the realms of paradise. A new guide appears in the form of Beatrice who embodies the divine infusion of grace as a theological mystery to usher Dante into the holy realm of heaven.

Looking on the Face of God. The *Paradiso* renders dramatically the ascent of the soul to the invisible world of God's pure being. Dante tells the reader that these realms have never been explored, and he asks for inspiration to recollect for his audience God in his essence. Dante meets the great heroes, doctors, martyrs, and saints of the Faith who now in detached divine wisdom give their estimation of world history that has gone awry. St. Francis and St. Dominic lament the decadence of their orders on earth. St. Peter examines Dante about his knowledge of St. Paul's virtues of faith, hope and charity. He then denounces the sewer of greed that the medieval Papacy has become. St. Peter's criticism balances an earlier hair-raising scene in the *Inferno* where Dante confronts rapacious Popes buried upside down, with their feet on fire, from whom he as a layman hears confession. Dante finally ascends to the Empyrean, a realm of God's pure being. St. Bernard, the final guide of the *Commedia*, explains the flowering of the queen of heaven's court in a beautiful rose. Dante in conclusion looks on the face of God at the end of the journey. He sees in three circles the image of man in the holy visage of Christ.

Dante wrote this massive epic at a crucial time in history. John Ruskin's calling him the "central man of all the world" is not too extreme. Dante provides a towering synthesis of classical philosophy and medieval Christianity. The massive learning and resources of these eras he concentrates to produce an epic picture of an ordered universe.

How to Read Today's Events. The *Divine Comedy* is the poem to read in a time beset by all manner of disorder – the resurgence of Islamic terrorism, the persistent drama of Jim and Tammy Bakker, the sin and television repentance of the Reverend Jimmy Swaggert, the revolutionary activity of Central American priests who carry both Rosary beads and

machine guns, or an Episcopal Bishop appearing on a talk show to provide theological sanction to Dr. Ruth. Dante's *Divine Comedy* teaches a culture how to "read" such events because it imparts to us both the spirituality and imagery of how such scenes are part of the tapestry of the kingdom of God. What is vital and universal in Dante for any age is the *Divine Comedy's* spirituality and its use of character types, scenes, and imagery. Dante offers to contemporary culture both doctrinal stability and coherent symbolism. The presentation of a stable political and religious order is conveyed through graphic images and scenes in a comprehensive epic of political and religious coherence. Dante has his own versions of the Bakkers and the Swaggerts. He has his own renditions of contemporary Biblical hermeneutics bent on recasting Judeo-Christian revelation to conform to ideology of either the left or right wing. Yet what is vital in his poem is the location of these mentalities within the comic topography. Dante can teach an age that is profoundly disoriented that the Reverend Mr. Swaggert, Mr. Bakker, and politicized or ideologically inspired religion hardly represent the mandate of the Gospel or the authority given by Jesus to His Apostles.

The *Divine Comedy's* moral and spiritual realism, then, has important contemporary applications. The poem imparts a perspective that enables us to see that we have equated many varieties of disorder — cultural, political, and religious — with order. Dante provides a needed clarity to a disjointed and fragmented culture that is growing so accustomed to its disjuncture that it cannot recognize that it inhabits its own version of the *Commedia's* "dark wood" where Dante finds himself at the outset of his journey. Dante is the writer to read when a culture such as ours steadily is losing the capacity to recognize its own disorientation and increasingly identifies the pervasiveness of fragmentation with normalcy.

Lacking Perspective. In our time the experience of comedy occurs, for the most part, in distilled or derivative forms of formal religious comedy. These include farce, satire (often cynical), and contorted dark humor. Such expressions are as familiar as the "Three Stooges," "The Cosby Show," and the spectacle of a rock music. Cut off from the earthiness of its black roots, it aggressively promotes degradation of women, sexual violence, and sadomasochism. When you walk through the record stores of suburban malls in this country, astonishing sights and sounds engage the eye and invoke the imagination. Yet ours is a culture that lacks a perspective on exactly what we are watching and listening to, and particularly what is happening to the minds of young people who regard the dehumanization of rock music as routine. What is the meaning of a young teenager studiously perusing violent rock albums while emblazoned on his tattered blue jean jacket is an icon of the rock group "Black Sabbath" that proclaims "Evil Lives"? Or what is the meaning of a young man pumping gas with a Satanic pentagram emblazoned on his shirt that advertises yet another rock group called "Motley Crue?"

Increasingly portions of our culture are inclined to identify with these kinds of sights and sounds because they permeate our society, yet we lack a comprehensive perspective as to their meaning. That is why Dante is such an important writer in a culture that has lost its bearings. The *Divina Commedia* has its own versions of sadomasochism, dehumanization, and the trashing of women. Yet such vile elements are part of the total package of religious comedy as Dante practiced it in the 13th century. Indeed Dante has his own forms of dark humor, scathing cynicism, and farce. The *Inferno* remains the touchstone of these kinds of comedy. Popes buried upside down with their feet afire is hardly an image of beauty; nor the revolting conditions of flatterers who are so obscured by excrement in Hell's cavernous commode that Dante cannot recognize them; nor the astonishing scatological salute that a certain troop of devils employ in communicating with each other.

Poet's Prophetic Eye. Yet what separates Dante's view of such events from ours is that these scenes in the *Divina Commedia* are all viewed as grotesque and abnormal. One of the characteristics of formal comedy as Dante practices it is the presence of the vigilant prophetic eye of the poet to perceive in the scene, the character, or the image the potential resources of comedy. Yet what separates the comic perceptions of Dante from the contemporary views of the world is that the observations of religious comedy go in two directions. It is able to imagine an absolute state of cynicism and distortion, yet at the same time recall that such portraiture originates in the symbols of beauty and even holiness and beatitude.

And it is this characteristic that separates us from the fuller vision of religious comedy that Dante practices. Contemporary culture is almost locked into the infernal mode of comedy, and it increasingly has no means of comparison. Punk rockers drape upside down crosses from their ears; we have a rock singer who attracts sold out audiences under the name of "Prince," yet his whole act is the ritualistic inversion of everything princely. A singer like "Madonna" in Dante's sense inverts everything that has been associated with the religious madonna image. And when *Playboy* magazine publishes pictures of Madonna without clothes under the caption "Madonna Nude," we confront the savage exploitation and trashing of sacred iconography.

Here we find images and symbolic acts that Dante would call infernal, but that our mass culture increasingly cannot recognize in this way. These are just three of many examples revealing that we confront more and more the infernal dimension of comedy that is increasingly unrecognizable to us. If the culture does not communally share a belief in the religious meaning of "the Madonna," it is easy for it to identify with *Playboy's* "Madonna Nude." Dante, on the other hand, possesses the full range of comedy and would recognize upside crosses in the ears, the antics of "Prince" and "Madonna" undraped as infernal inversions of the higher "divine comedy."

Influencing 20th Century Writers. Dante's powerful legacy of religious comedy has influenced and continues to influence religious writers. His practices are very relevant to those religious writers of the 20th century who confront the frightful disorders and horrors of our time. W. B. Yeats predicted early in the 20th century of "mere anarchy loosed upon the world." And we have witnessed the fruition of his prophecy in the age of the "G" — the guillotine, gas chamber, gulag, and genocide.¹⁰

These are the horrendous examples of the disjuncture of power-crazed statist politics from the kingdom of God. Notwithstanding the seeming cosmic horror of these events, Dante shows how such worldly tumults and disorder can nevertheless be a reflection of a holy vision or order. The comic writer holds in the imagination a vision of wholeness in which the symbols and icons of history retain a sacred quality of signification.

Beneficiary of Dante. This kind of comic vision is evident in the often severe comic techniques of Flannery O'Connor. In her writing we can see the potent parallels and influences of Dante's comic strategies to get the audience to recall the kingdom of God. It should be noted that an exact parity between Dante and O'Connor is not what I am attempting to establish; rather, I am attempting to show how Dante changed the capacities of poetry for future generations and that Flannery O'Connor is a distinct beneficiary. Flannery O'Connor, like T. S. Eliot, was in awe of Dante. His influence is a growing

¹⁰ Erik v. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, "Lecture in American Literature 236," Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., Fall 1988.

awareness in each that they are the inheritors of his poetic practices and theological axioms. As great as Eliot and O'Connor are in their own right, they are lesser artists than an incomparable master such as Dante. His influence on subsequent writers is more of an acknowledgement by them of a participation in a tradition that he fully defined rather than the conscious belief on the part of either O'Connor or Eliot that they had fully comprehended their master. After all there is only one author of the *Commedia*, and those shaped by his practices instinctively defer to him even as they achieve a kind of relative greatness. As Eliot once remarked, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third."¹¹ And Miss O'Connor once remarked in a letter, "For my money Dante is about as great as you can get."¹²

Such humility, though, does not diminish the parallels between O'Connor and Dante. It is becoming increasingly clear from the publication of O'Connor's correspondence and recently the published annotation of her library that she was a massively learned writer, steeped in the lore of philosophy, theology, and literature.¹³ O'Connor possesses an intensity of mind and breadth of learning that is original in American literature. Her achievement is changing the way we look at the canon of the Republic's literature.

Steeped in Church Fathers. In looking at the way her learning developed, we can see that she read widely and deeply not as a research scholar or academic, but as an artist. As a result of her wide reading, she carries on profound conversations with the great thinkers of the West, often couched in a colloquial tone. Only O'Connor, steeped in Aquinas, could tell her often curious mother that she closed her eyes to see the light; that bedtime was a time of invisible illumination. Characteristically, we find in these conversations both a boldness and a humility that encourages her to debate with the Church Fathers whom she read deeply, to grasp instinctively the core of the Gospels and St. Paul's Epistles, to delight in Aquinas, and to absorb his legacy in the writings of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Teilhard de Chardin. The quality of her mind, then, made it a fertile recipient and ever alert to the practices of Dante.

Dorothy Sayers observes in an illuminating discussion about the influences of Dante on other writers, "Sources and influences and borrowing are not the whole story; the coinherence found among the practitioners of the grand art is not of this simple kind." In Dante's influence on O'Connor, we have to find the parallel patterns, the convergence of similar interests, intentions, and poetic techniques. In tracing the similarities between Dante and O'Connor we are diminishing what Sayers calls the "period sense of Dante." She observes "If we look upon Dante, for example, as a man totally explicable in terms of a vanished period, we may succeed in forgetting that he is a man like ourselves. If we account for everything that he said by the consideration that, being born when he was, there was nothing else he could very well say, we shall have provided ourselves with an excellent excuse for not applying what he said to ourselves: it performed a function in history, and there its interest ends."¹⁴

In contrast to such an understanding, Sayers outlines the imaginative writer's approach to Dante – and these observations are helpful in identifying the similarities between Dante

11 T. S. Eliot, *Dante* (London, 1945), 146.

12 *Habit of Being*, 116.

13 See Arthur J. Kimmey, *Resources of Being* (Athens, Georgia, 1985).

14 See Dorothy Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York, 1987), 192, 183. Hereafter cited as *Whimsical Christian*.

and O'Connor. In this approach Dante would be hailed "across the negligible gap of six centuries as a fellow-poet, a fellow lover, and fellow-Christian." In this tradition Sayers notes that "the handing over of the symbols of art, time's arrow flies both ways." And it may be the later poet (such as O'Connor), not the original poet (in this case, Dante) himself "who discovers the wider relevance. If so, he is justified in so interpreting it in the place where he finds it; for the relevance was always potentially there, and once seen and recognized it is actually there forever."¹⁵ Sayers remarks suggest the ways in which the parallels between Dante and O'Connor take shape. O'Connor discovers in Dante the "wider relevance" of his work, particularly in maintaining loyalty to her theological convictions while addressing an alien audience.

Article of Faith. O'Connor never lets either the reader or herself forget her allegiances: "All of reality is the potential kingdom of Christ, and the face of the earth is waiting to be recreated by his spirit." And "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that," she declares. These articles of faith are made concrete over and over again in her work. She declares her premises in remarking that her universe "is founded on three theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic – the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment."¹⁶ In her correspondence, O'Connor remarks that the "ultimate reality is the Incarnation, and the present reality is the Incarnation." Yet in another place she observes that the "true laws of the flesh" are "the virgin birth, the Incarnation, and the resurrection"; this last miracle she notes as "the high point in the law of nature."¹⁷

These are the given universals of her work. In the authentic tradition of St. Thomas, the vocation of writing entails a deepening exercise of the intellectual virtue of prudence. O'Connor shows dramatically the application of the principles of faith to a world that is far more hostile or indifferent to such truths than it was to the same truths in Dante's time. O'Connor remarks that she derives from St. Thomas vigilance for "prophetic vision" that "is always widening the view."¹⁸

Yet the enlarging self-effacing odyssey of the pilgrim writer is alien to O'Connor's age. She remarks that "the supernatural is an embarrassment today even to many of the churches. The naturalistic bias has so well saturated our society that the reader doesn't realize that he has to shift his sights to read fiction which treats of an encounter with God."¹⁹ O'Connor reiterates this observation in stating in a letter that "the very notion of God's existence is not emotionally satisfactory anymore for great numbers of people."²⁰

Blessing in Disguise. While O'Connor would have us believe that the lack of common understanding between her beliefs and those of her audience are a hinderance, it would appear that actually such a lack in the long run was a blessing in disguise. Her predicament with her audience drove her to the arms of Dante as a mentor. In him she could find the practices that would enable her to enlarge her faith as a function of divine comedy. For in Dante she finds that the tension between the comic vision of order and the actual upheavals or tumult of the particular age provides the grist for the mill of comedy.

15 See *Whimsical Christian*, 185, 192, 193.

16 See *Mystery and Manners*, 173, 32, 185.

17 *Habit of Being*, 100.

18 *Habit of Being*, 365.

19 *Mystery and Manners*, 163.

20 *Habit of Being*, 100.

The contortions of a particular period of history, whether it be the political hijacking of the Papacy to Avignon in Dante's day or the ascendancy of the ruthless, predator regime of Nazi Germany in O'Connor's lifetime, only stimulate the comic writer's dramatic vision of God. O'Connor is strengthened in that she is a living anachronism in a profoundly non-comic age. She is tolerant and amused by those who recurrently misread her work, particularly contemporary intellectuals.

She tells the story about a serious young teacher who asked her why the Misfit's hat was black to which she replied, "Most countrymen in Georgia wore black hats." Searching for the deeper truth he persisted, "What is the significance of the Misfit's hat" to which O'Connor replied "It was to cover his head."²¹

Seeing the Humor. Miss O'Connor had the remarkable ability to be withering, yet never bitter or superior. And every scene or situation could be channeled into her comic imagination. She was ever alert to comic possibilities that presented themselves. The vigilance for divine comedy allows her to see humor in every situation. When she saw a picture of Roy Rogers's horse, Trigger, attending a Church service in Pasadena, California, she did not judge the scene or speculate about the congregation; instead, she noted that Trigger "looked like he was having a good time" and that his presence "doubled the usual attendance."²² Other events in her immediate past, such as her mother's taking on displaced persons or itinerant Bible salesman in rural Georgia, became the historical stage for stories of universal religious meaning, "The Displaced Person" and "Good Country People." Local occurrences stimulate the ever enlarging providential panorama of comedy. In discussing her work, she states that "Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate."²³

The link between belief and perception of scenes and symbols is important in O'Connor's work. She tells us that much of her writing "takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be apparent."²⁴ She counts on the initial shock value of her writing to attract her audience, as does Dante. She is addressing a public whose power of discrimination to recognize sacred icons and symbols has all but been eliminated because of massive exposure to chaotic sensations to which it has become accustomed. Sensation, then, is what it understands, and it is the tool through which O'Connor hopes to attract indirectly the audience to a larger sacred truths. O'Connor observes that "the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural."²⁵

O'Connor's fiction makes dramatic these observations. The stories challenge what she regards as the freakishness of her culture that cannot recognize its own disorder because of its endless variety. She would concur with Eric Voegelin whom she read and admired that "Disregard for the structure of reality, ignorance of facts, fallacious misconstruction and falsification of history, irresponsible opining on the basis of sincere conviction,

21 *Habit of Being*, 334.

22 *Habit of Being*, 49.

23 *Habit of Being*, 124.

24 *Mystery and Manners*, 109.

25 *Mystery and Manners*, 33

philosophical illiteracy, spiritual dulness, and agnostic sophistication are considered the virtues of man...in the modern world.”²⁶

O’Connor’s comedy, then, has a certain Socratic character to penetrate a cultural and religious veil of allusion uncritically accepted by a society as normal. The strategy is not unlike Dante in *Inferno*. Both writers want the attention of the audience. Yet they can gain it only through extreme and risky means that not many artists can pull off.

Struggling Characters. While we may want to identify the readily visible characters of O’Connor’s fiction as bizarre figures – the Misfit, an escaped murderer on an odyssey of violence, Mr Shiftlet, a one-armed vagrant going through the country of Georgia, Rufus Johnson, a club-footed delinquent who is fully aware of his accomplished depravity; Manley Pointer, the fraudulent Bible salesman who steals glass eyes and wooden legs from his “customers”; or the hermaphrodite at the fair who cites to the audience sayings from St Paul – these are not the odd characters on whom O’Connor would have focus our attention. From the perspective of what O’Connor calls “Christian realism,” these so-called grotesque characters have a coherent religious understanding of not only the society and the world, but the universe. The Misfit is able to account Biblically for a life of crime and admits that if Jesus had raised the dead “I wouldn’t be like I am now.” Tom Shiftlet in another story proclaims to Mrs. Crater that “One of these doctors in Atlanta that’s taken a knife and cut the human heart...he don’t know no more about it than you or me.” Rufus Johnson proclaims to the preening, humanitarian Sheppard, as Johnson literally eats pages of the Bible that “I’ve eaten it like Ezekiel and I don’t want none of your food after it, nor no more ever.” Manley Pointer declares to Hulga in “Good Country People” that his unbelief is not academically fashionable because he “has been believing in nothing ever since I was born”...“I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going.”

These characters all know what they believe or they are struggling intensively with deep issues of belief, faith, and conviction. And in many cases they make a deliberate choice. As the Misfit says, “no pleasure but meanness.” But these decisions are stimulated by their often violent rejections of what they consider to be hypocritical and empty social conventions and the persistent quest for coherent religious meaning. These figures are not repugnant to O’Connor because even in their social alienation and nonconformity, they struggle with the important issues. Their dramatic role in the stories is to accentuate what O’Connor calls in a generic way “freaks in grey flanneled suits” – those ostensible intellectuals tasteful sophisticates, and arbiters of taste such as the little league baseball coach, the Ph.D. in philosophy, the Bohemian writer from New York, and the zealous activist who despises his native South.²⁷

O’Connor’s Freaks. Such characters in her stories initially blend in with the moral and spiritual indifference or intellectual self righteousness of O’Connor’s world. Yet it is these ubiquitous cultural conditions that O’Connor finds repugnant and that her highly visible characters bring into sharp focus. The real freaks in these stories are characters like Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” whose hypocritical efforts to reform Rufus Johnson lead to his own neglected and bereaved son hanging himself in the attic; or it is a character like the overly educated handicapped girl, Joy, in “Good Country People” who wallows in self-pity and intellectual superiority to the extent that she dramatically changes her name to Hulga; or it is the supposedly sophisticated writer, Ashbury Fox, in “The

²⁶ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), 178.

²⁷ *Mystery and Manners*, 50.

Enduring Chill” who wants to use his mother’s farm as a social experiment station to implement his abstract theories about race, only to contract undulant fever in the process; or it is Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person” disdainfully proclaiming to a priest that Christ was “just another DP” to justify her dismissal of a Polish family fleeing the Stalinization of Poland in the aftermath of World War II; or it is Ruby in “The Stroke of Good Fortune” who is the real oddity, Miss O’Connor notes, because she “denies life at its source,” regards an extramarital pregnancy as an inconvenience, and consults a palm reader about morning sickness.

The list goes on as O’Connor exposes in story after story those distortions that her “audience is used to seeing as natural.” But finally it is the hermaphrodite on the stage at the country fair in “The Temple of the Holy Ghost” who offers the indictment of modern culture. In this scene we have a character, imparting a submissive theological understanding of a tragic malfunction of nature and proclaiming the Pauline edict about the sacredness of the body: “God made me thisaway and I don’t dispute hit. God did this to me and I praise Him.” The proclamation is an indictment of the educated, the tasteful, the academically superior characters of O’Connor’s fiction, all of whom in their faithlessness, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and pusillanimity are far more garish and parade on a larger stage than the supposed freak at the country fair. O’Connor’s comedy provides a theatre through which these realities become clear and in that mirror we can see how accustomed we have become to our own spiritual and moral disorders.

Assaulting the Audience. The master of this strategy, who parallels O’Connor in this kind of use of scene, technique, and irony is Dante in the *Inferno*. He would have understood O’Connor saying, “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”²⁸

O’Connor confronts a spiritually bland and doctrinally confused audience that does not have an inclination of the providential bounty of God simply because it cannot recognize the distortions of evil and sin to which it has become accustomed. Mrs. Hopewell is typical of such an outlook in “Good Country People” when she tells Manley Pointer, the supposed simple pious Bible salesman, that the Scriptures are beside the bed when in fact she knows they are lost somewhere in the attic. When Pointer pointedly insists that “the Word of God ought to be in the Parlor”, she replies that “I think that’s a matter of taste.” Mrs. Hopewell is one of many O’Connor characters who have reduced faith to a question of social pedigree or isolated it so that it has little effect on conduct. Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person” takes pride in her pragmatism in telling Father Flynn, “I’m Practical.” And this non-virtue allows her not to think about the concentration camps in Germany. The suffering and terror of Europe in World War II has little impact on a provincial view of history drained of its spiritual meaning. “There are no ovens here and no Christ our Lord,” she declares impatiently to Father Flynn.

Leaving the Wilderness. Such casual declarations of faithlessness bespeak the spiritual indifference and smug ignorance that O’Connor must penetrate in her writing. “At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily,” she observes.²⁹ O’Connor challenges a world that from her transcendent perspective is at least spiritually deprived, if not inverted. In

²⁸ *Mystery and Manners*, 34.

²⁹ *Mystery and Manners*, 159

order to get her audience to comprehend a journey to God, it must first discern that it is lost in its own version of Dante's "dark wood," and it must recover the psychological and spiritual impetus to "come to itself." It must undertake the spiritual *Odyssey* to leave the wilderness. O'Connor begins where Dante begins: it is in "consciousness-raising" to perceive evil in order to see God. You can't go to the mountain of Purgatory or ascend to Paradise without descending into hell. O'Connor, thus, begins with the distortions of infernal comedy. In order to rediscover what she calls our "Christ centered" heritage, we must look at the "Christ haunted" vestiges of that legacy. The ferment, deterioration, and dislocation of the native South contains the residual outlines of the higher providential order and its sacred images. O'Connor sees in the local scene the occasion for the "novelist prophecy" which entails the "seeing of near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up."³⁰

Comedy, if it is to be authentically "divine" the way that Dante and O'Connor understand and practice it, must be provoked by immediate scenes. These would provoke despair and consternation in the ordinary observer. Instead such events stimulate the prophetic vision of divine order in the comic writer. O'Connor's stories and Dante's cantos deepen both the writer's and reader's insight into providential illumination. This is a constantly evolving perspective both in Dante and in Flannery O'Connor. The writers' craft deepens the omnipotence of holy mystery. O'Connor suggests that "If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass and will always be a greater surprise to him than it can ever be to his reader."³¹ The encounter with that "realm much larger than the conscious mind" initially begins with Dante and O'Connor in the experience of what John Freccero calls "negative transcendence."³² O'Connor states that, in order to be loyal to the "ultimate vision of Redemption, You must pass over the evil you see and look for the good because the good is there; and the good is the ultimate reality."³³ O'Connor is talking about the pilgrim writer's journey to God. Dante was to show the way and O'Connor follows in his footsteps. Both Dante and O'Connor undertake the journey to "that other kingdom." The imprint of its glory is all around, even, O'Connor would insist, in the seeming dim twilight of our time.



³⁰ *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

³¹ *Mystery and Manners*, 171.

³² John Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1986), 182.

³³ *Mystery and Manners*, 179.