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The Place of Prophecy in Flannery O'Connor

Recently, in one of the most controversial debates regarding sexual identity in the church, the Anglican committee, the ECUSA, ruled that its stand on the issue would not remain traditional but progressive and new. The view that the church is supposed to absorb the culture and move with its trends is without question one of the biggest debates of our age. In the mid- 20th century, Flannery O'Connor recognized this dangerous belief at a time when rumblings of these trends were beginning to shape the Catholic Church. Rather than accept new orientations for traditional views of sin, she remained orthodox. Things understood to be progressive were mere chronological snobbery. She predicted a further onslaught in the trade off of dogma over and against modern, progressive, scientific reasoning and in response to this loss of faith, she wrote "more than ever now it seems that the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence, or not at all. You have to push as hard as the age that pushes you" (*Habit of Being* 229). In two of her short stories, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and "Parker's Back," O'Connor presents characters that exhibit a prophetic role and are distinguishable by their struggle with a particular mission against these modern ideas. Whether they come to accept or reject it, they serve

to expose and push against the sin of their age. For O'Connor a prophet is one who can recognize mystery, bring about violence, and embody the transformation that their community rejects.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the protagonist is not at first clear. The action arches around the confrontation and ruin of an average, though insufferable, American family by an escaped convict, called the Misfit. The conflict occurs when he and the Grandmother engage in a series of doctrinal questions. There are some who read the story as a triumph of the Misfit because he is the one with the last word. O'Connor corrects this perspective by humorously pointing out that it is perhaps easier to find the Misfit more interesting than "your" grandmother, but he is actually the "prophet gone wrong" (*Mystery and Manners* 110). What business does a false prophet have in a story about spiritual awakening? Ironically, it is the Misfit who speaks the most intelligibly about the hard truth about faith. He speaks of his conviction quite plainly: "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him" (O'Connor 132). The miracle of the Resurrection is what makes all the difference. If there is no miracle, than all that is left is "meanness". Without the presence of not just the supernatural, but the work of Christ, we are left with only the material, or the random state of nature.

The Misfit is aptly named because he is trying to identify himself in a world that insists on labeling his deeds as misunderstood. Accused of killing his father, O'Connor implies Freudian thinking but also the killing of God the Father. He is confused and frustrated by the lack of litigation that should deliberate upon his moral state and pronounce a punishment that would fit his crime. Instead, there is an attempt to normalize and rehabilitate him he wishes for the truth that only the resurrection of Christ would prove. Looking to the Christian pinnacle of belief he seeks a way of measuring his sins. He recognizes that, through the divine, his life will have boundaries, but without it, he is left to commit senseless acts. The irony of his senseless act is that he makes possible a meaningful moment for the one he is killing. O'Connor explains that the point of death "is the most significant position life offers the Christian" (*Mystery and Manners* 110). Only violence can serve to bring about the Grandmother's confrontation with reality. The Misfit stands over her as sheriff judging between what is true and mere illusion. This confrontation is what causes the Grandmother to turn towards grace.

A woman of hypocrisy, lies, and selfishness, she stands in contrast to the principled criminal. If it weren't for her insistence that the family indulge her Civil War fantasy and drive off the known path, she would not have realized her mistake, startled her cat, Pitty Sing, to spring from his hidden valise, and caused the car to overturn. Through this series of absurd events she is drawn into her death. As he talks of wishing he had seen Christ's miracle, her head clears for an

instant and she makes sense of the absurdities and connects her to him, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (132). Only at the point of death does she discover their similarity in that both are sinners and in terrible need. A cruel Misfit and a manipulative old lady are connected by their humanity to each other through the painful confrontation of death. Reaching out to him in this moment of revelation, she almost stirs what would throw him off balance, forgiveness. Wincing out of fear he recoils back like a snake and shoots. The Grandmother dies with her legs crossed and her face smiling up to the sky. She recognizes the mystery given as a result of the murdering false prophet. About this mystery, O’Connor says:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story . . . This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unsuspected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the 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. It would have to be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery. (*Mystery and Manners* 111)

O’Connor’s characters who recognize mystery, even for a moment, are safe. She keeps her characters hovering by the edge of death because she knows that for some, human nature is too blind to recognize mystery elsewhere. The prophet gone wrong is unable to share in the Grandmother’s revelation at this point cannot enter into paradise. His commitment to reason is what damns him.

Now let us leave the Misfit for a moment and look into the actions of another conflicted prophet. In “Parker’s Back” the enveloping action centers around one chosen to come against mystery. Like all her true prophets, Obadiah Elihue Parker is eccentric and comical. The foolishness that disguises the prophet serves to prevent people from making idols out of them and thus, deactivating their message. In this story, the prophet is arrayed in a garb of colors and images. Like the Misfit, O.E. Parker instinctively points to what can not be described, and unlike the prophet gone wrong, Parker accepts the truth into his own person. “Parker’s Back” is the strange tale of a man whose epiphany centers around three events in his life: the emotions felt when witnessing his first tattooed man, joining the navy, and marrying Sarah Ruth. All three culminate in perhaps the most prophetic moment in O’Connor’s stories, Parker’s acceptance in bearing the image of Christ.

Parker’s calling does not happen at a church or through another prophet, like Tarwater or Hazel Motes, characters from O’Connor’s novels. Instead, Parker seems merely to follow some interior instincts that come about through his contact with mystery. As a young boy he is filled with emotion when he sees the tattooed man at the carnival flex his muscles “so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appear to have a subtle motion of its own” (O’Connor 513). The arabesque is a design or network of designs to reveal a pattern or connection between the images shown. It is the arabesque that is in motion here, and not the separate images. He sees a cosmos

that is not separated and objectified, but interwoven and unified. Echoing medieval interlacing, Parker's imagination is caught up in beauty, and like Dante's vision of Beatrice, these images lead him toward it. For young Parker, this moment becomes his calling. The incarnate presentation of whirling, colorful images mysteriously awakens and changes him completely. The prophet is one who beholds something of which no one else is aware. The vision is burnt on Parker's soul. The seeds for his quest finally grow full bloom and the mystery unfolds when in the end, he comes into his true self. This is seen when he reveals his name to Sarah Ruth: "all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (528). The strange vision seems mostly for him, but eventually will grow into a vision for all the world to see.

For Parker, tattoos become a yearning for mystery. Joining the navy he spends his time traveling the earth and applying many exotic and increasingly violent tattoos to his body. First must learn the process of dissatisfaction. He yearns for the beauty he first saw at the carnival but fills the space on his body with tattoo substitutes from foreign lands yet he cannot find his peace. Finally he becomes dissatisfied and the tigers and panthers tattooed on him feel like they "had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare" (514). These beasts are not in arabesque but are in disconnected motion that wages war against him. They are idols and he grows in disappointment with them. Torn apart from his own false images, Parker gives up. Reaching a final low, the

future prophet is dishonorably discharged from the navy and returns to the “country air.” However like Christ, he finds himself unwanted by all those who reject the image he offers to the world.

Parker’s calling is revealed to him within his marriage. It is rare that a biblical prophet would take a wife, so his marriage is significant on an anagogical and not an allegorical level. They stand as ways in which God is approached rather than exemplifying moral traits. In contrast to the image obsessed Parker, Sarah Ruth displays all that is straightforward. Though Parker can’t help but court and romance her, she hopes to come to the point as quickly as possible. O’Connor first introduces her as plain, ugly, and sharp. He feels he has been attacked by “some creature from above, a giant hawk-eyed angel wielding a hoary weapon” (512). Bearing both characteristics of a hawk and an angel gives a startling feature about her that is both earthly and divine, frightening and guarding. The weapon is the broom that will later be the instrument used to beat the face of Christ tattooed on Parker’s back. She acts as his judge and motivates him toward his calling. She won’t even look at his botched body and marries him only to save him from his pagan ways.

The daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, she is all that is immediate, forward, and direct. She approaches the divine with common sense and has no need for a prophet or anything to come between her and God. When they first meet she thinks churches are idolatrous and so they marry in the County Ordinary’s office. We are told Parker has no opinion about it, but “marriage did

not change Sarah Ruth a jot and it made Parker gloomier than ever” (518). What should have been a sacrament is nothing but the pronouncement of the state. The form of marriage is unimportant to her because it involves mystery. Because she seems to understand the gospel, which Parker rejects, and the fact that the Bible is her sole point of reference, Sarah Ruth is what truth is without mystery. She is unable to understand Parker’s obsession for tattoos: “At the judgment seat of God, Jesus is going to say to you, ‘what you been doing all your life besides have pictures drawn all over you?’” (519).

Parker’s experience with the burning bush moves him toward his final tattoo—the face of Christ. At the tattoo shop he flips through a book of a variety of Jesuses until he hears the voice of God telling him to “GO BACK” (522). The Christ that Parker lights upon is a Byzantine one. The prophet is told to return to something instead of going forward. As a double entendre, it is his back that must hold the shrine of the face of Christ. He will not be able to see this final etching and so it is not for him, but for the world. As the image bearer, he embodies the creation mandate to image God—what the prophet must make known. By bearing the image of the Byzantine Christ, Parker returns to an iconic way of approaching God. The icon is a way of approaching God through viewing a sacred image of Christ or the saints and in return, God gazes upon the viewer. Not only does he take Christ upon his body, but also Parker will now undergo the suffering that his iconoclast wife rejects. He embodies the transformation by humbling himself to bear Christ. Sarah Ruth cannot accept

him because he profanely uses his body in order to engraft a graven image. She rejects his idea to tattoo the Holy Bible on his back as an absurd idea, “Ain’t I already got a real Bible?” (519). Believing that the real is only what can be seen and touched, she commits the same crime as the Misfit. They can only accept empirical evidence, not what is merely represented. By refusing to enter imaginatively, they cannot experience the divine. In a letter, O’Connor wrote, “The prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet, not his moral life.” Sarah Ruth is so offended by Parker’s immoral acts, that she cannot make the right gesture when grace is given to her. Sobbing by the pecan tree, Parker has been exiled from his own home. The vehicle to God is rejected and thus, grace can not be received.

In an age when word has trumped the image, O’Connor’s vision to recall back not only the word but also the image of God is timely. The church is in a struggle either to remain committed to the mysteries or to sell itself to a modern prescription of gender and sexual identity. Prophecy is needed to bear the image of God to a people obsessed with the literal. Parker literally bears Christ in his body but also sweeps away centuries of modern preoccupation with empiricism and unveils the piercing eyes of the mystery. By conflating the two strands of thought—the literal and the anagogical—O’Connor marries both truth and mystery. The Misfit, though understanding the significance of the possibility of Christ, can not receive into his body the touch of the Grandmother whose vision connects her sinfulness and his own. His body, though clothed in the shirt

of her son, is impenetrable. Paradoxically, Parker's body is penetrable. He allows himself the transformation that will become a vehicle for transmitting the mystery of Christ. Perhaps the Misfit cannot receive the grace extended to him, because he is unable to undergo humiliation. He can enter into the intellect, but the bow before grace is too grotesque. O'Connor's true prophet cannot merely speak the truth or the word, but must go further into the suffering and hence, embody Christ to the world. Sharing in the mystical body, Parker comes into his calling.

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