

THEOLOGY AND MODERN LITERATURE

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: EVIL AND HOPE IN THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

The workshop focused upon the convention theme of "Evil and Hope" by reexamining the work of the Georgia Catholic fiction writer Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964). Diana Culbertson (Kent State University) moderated the workshop entitled "Flannery O'Connor: Evil and Hope in the Catholic Imagination." Papers had been prepared by three presenters: Annette Moran, C.S.J. (Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley); Irwin Streight (Queens University, Kingston, Canada); and George Kilcourse (Bellarmine College). Each chose to summarize his or her research by highlighting elements of the formal paper and each provided a copy of the paper or a written summary of the work to participants.

Moran began with a presentation of her "Meditation on Hope: Violence in Flannery O'Connor" by locating two narratives in O'Connor's story "Greenleaf." She argued that Rene Girard's theory of mimetic violence (the expulsion of violence by violence) and the scapegoat mechanism as described in *Violence and the Sacred* provides a key to interpreting the real horror of O'Connor's stories. In the first narrative, the rivalry over their sons between Mrs. May and Mr. Greenleaf proves central. Moran interpreted the steady social climbing of the Greenleaves as a reversal of status. She pointed out how Girard argues that violence erupts from such dissolving of difference. Moran interpreted the bull owned by Mr. Greenleaf's sons as a surrogate victim. It functions as a scapegoat mechanism for Mr. Greenleaf and his family (that "blithely ignored all boundaries"—Girard). Moran explained that the outcome of this first narrative, where Mrs. May is gored to death by the bull, can be read as Mrs. May's hubris bringing her down; it is a punishing revenge for the godless world she represents.

As an alternate reading to this symbolic death reasserting the difference between the human and the divine, Moran offered a second narrative of mimetic violence which focused on the bull. She explained how the pattern of hostility, reprisal, and decisive violence that eventuates in the reassertion of difference is dismantled by O'Connor in the subtext of the story. Moran interpreted the bull's debut outside Mrs. May's bedroom window as an echo of the Song of Songs: her window is "low and faced on the east"; and the bull peeks like a suitor through the lattice, bowing to her. At the end of the story the bull reappears "at a slow

gallop, a gay, almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again." Moran concluded that the climactic cosmic imagery of the sun's merger with the woods as a large gaping wound leaves us with an order not overturned but monstrously mixed. She asked, if Mrs. May has achieved a mystical union with the divine bridegroom (symbolized by the bull) at the end of her life, how can we assert any difference between the religious and the nonreligious, those who live by faith and those who do not? Moran suggested that this second reading dismantles the first and scandalizes the religious reader's first reading.

Irwin Streight's presentation, "Christ's Back: The Turn to Evil or Grace," explored novelist John Hawkes' remark that O'Connor as a writer was "on the devil's side." O'Connor had responded to Hawkes that his idea of the devil was in her view not wholly a theological one. Streight examined three O'Connor texts, the two short stories "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" and "A View of the Woods" and the end of her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. He argued that O'Connor's own comment about the agency of evil in her work appears to present evil and grace as flipsides of the same cosmic coin, a seemingly heretical (though possibly Augustinian) conception of the principles of good (or grace) and of evil, the "image at the heart of things" in her fiction. He cited her defense of the writer's prophetic vision, seeing with her own eyes and not strictly through the eyes of the Church. Streight returned to O'Connor's declaration that the subject of her fiction was "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" and suggested that in her stories good and evil are not antithetical. Rather, he offered, whether a gesture or moment suggests or leads to grace or evil seems more a matter of perspective and choice than of some universal principle. He quoted Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu*, much admired by O'Connor: "The fires of hell and the fires of heaven are not two different forces, but contrary manifestations of the same energy."

In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," Streight interpreted the paradox of an act of grace transformed into an occasion of evil, brilliantly signaled in the transposition of the signifier "words" into the "sword" clutched by the General in his death throes. The choice, he emphasized, is not between evil *and* grace but evil *or* grace. In "A View of the Wood," Streight contrasted the incarnational, sacramental understanding mediated to the granddaughter in a view of the woods with Mr. Fortune's "a pine tree is a pine tree" and the scene before him is "just woods." Mr. Fortune's revelation upon a third look at the woods comes with his seeing "a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them." Streight argued that the description of this "uncomfortable mystery" confronting Mr. Fortune ends with his shutting his eyes and refusing the metonym of Christ's redemptive act, "wounded" on the tree (cross). This refusal of the offer of grace transformed the factual reality of the image before Mr. Fortune into a specter of evil: "hellish red trunks."

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Streight examined the character of Tarwater and O'Connor's signifier for the agent of the Devil, a presence first appearing in the text as "the stranger," the voice of an Other in Tarwater's consciousness. His

defiant refusal to bury his uncle's body and the decision to set fire to Powderhead signify for Streight O'Connor's figuratively blowing to hell the notion of redemption in Christ. He examined Tarwater's running from his divinely appointed injunction to baptize the mentally retarded child of his cousin, a schoolteacher named Rayber, and his eventual drowning of the child. But in the concluding pages of the novel, Streight identified the forked birch tree Tarwater sets fire to as the polysemy of either the demonic image or of the stock-in-trade image of the divine: the burning bush. What had been flames of perdition are now seen as the sign of God's covenant with the prophets. Streight concluded that the flaming forked tree that Tarwater sees burn like a candle with two wicks symbolizes his choice ultimately to act in obedience to the will of God and against the evil of his own will to self-determination.

George Kilcourse's presentation, "Everything Off Balance: Flannery O'Connor's Christ," began with a quotation from O'Connor's essay "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South": "But good and evil appear to be joined in every culture at the spine." This was connected with the statement by O'Connor's character, the Misfit, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": "Jesus come and throw everything off balance." With this imagery and symbolism of balance, Kilcourse proceeded to examine O'Connor's short stories ("The Lame Shall Enter First," "Good Country People," "Revelation," "The Displaced Person," and "Everything That Rises Must Converge") for metaphoric revelatory moments of conversion and grace in which characters lose "balance" and are symbolically opened to a radical change of boundary or horizon in terms of their reorientation to the mystery of Christ. He built upon Anthony Di Renzo's interpretation of O'Connor's fiction in terms of Christ's *kenosis*, emptying himself of divinity to take on the humiliation of humanity.

Kilcourse insisted upon a strong connection between the kenotic motif and O'Connor's imaginative use of grotesques in her fiction. He placed special emphasis upon her essay "Introduction to a Memoir of Mary Ann" in which O'Connor reflected upon the "passive diminishment" of a child grotesquely disfigured, but spiritually mature under the care of the Hawthorne Dominican sisters. He connected these claims to O'Connor's observation that readers want "grace warm and binding, not dark and disruptive" and her insistence that all stories "demand the redemptive act" in offering restoration to the fallen. Thus, he argued, in O'Connor's ironic stories we find kenotic, "distorted images" of Christ. Kilcourse concluded with an analysis of the metaphors of "balance" in "The Artificial Nigger" and "Parker's Back" symbolic of the simultaneous humiliation and conversion of O'Connor's protagonists.

Discussion from participants in the workshop began with affirmative comments about the appropriateness of Girard's theory of mimetic violence for an interpretation of O'Connor's fiction. Several persons offered remarks about the Augustinian background of O'Connor's own spirituality. The question was posed as to how we appropriate today the Catholic imagination of O'Connor in light of her being influenced by the generation of theologians including Jacques

Maritain, Romano Guardini, and William Lynch. Discussion concluded with comments about appraising O'Connor's fiction vis-à-vis David Tracy's understanding of "Catholic" in *The Analogical Imagination*.

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NEWMAN'S CONVERSION: 1845-1995

On October 9, 1845 John Henry Newman (1801-1890) converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism. At the end of September, two of Newman's closest friends and members of his Littlemore community, John D. Dalgairns and Ambrose St. John, had converted to Catholicism. Dalgairns invited his friend the Italian Passionist Father Dominic Barberi, who had received him into the Church, to spend the night at Littlemore on his way to Belgium. On October 8 Newman began his confession to Father Dominic, and after completing it the next day, he was received into the Church with two others from Littlemore, Frederick Bowles and Richard Stanton, and a local family, the Woodmasons. At the end of October, Newman went to Oscott College near Birmingham to be confirmed. He also met with Nicholas Wiseman, then Coadjutor to the Vicar Apostolic, who agreed not to censor Newman's *Development of Christian Doctrine*. He had written the book during the months leading to his conversion and he was a Catholic before the printing was complete.

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of Newman's conversion in 1845 four papers were presented at the convention. The first paper was delivered by Edward Jeremy Miller from Gwynedd-Mercy College, titled, "Newman's Conversion: Lessons for Ecclesiology." In this paper the author discussed the importance of Newman's conversion for clarifying the relevance of the language we use and the conclusions we draw when we encounter similar experiences today. It is more helpful to examine what attracted Newman to Rome rather than concentrating on the blows that he described as preceding his conversion—the melting away of his argument in the *Via Media*, the Anglican Bishops' rejection of his *Tract 90*, and the Jerusalem bishopric affair. Newman became convinced that he was duty-bound in conscience to join the Catholic Church as God's prophetic voice and sacramental holiness in the world. Three ecclesiology features can be drawn out of his conversion. First, we can understand Church membership as an impelled choice that involves assent, acting on conscience to