

“HIS TREES STOOD RISING ABOVE HIM”: PHILOSOPHICAL THOMISM IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR

What is first precipitated in the mind's conception is being. A thing is knowable because existence is pointed to. Therefore being is the proper object of mind.

—Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, q. 5, a. 2

Human Reason lost its grasp of Being.

—Jacques Maritain on the Cartesian Revolution in Philosophy

I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas.

—Flannery O’Connor in a letter to “A,” 9 August 1955

DESPITE its intrinsic importance, Flannery O’Connor’s Thomism is not a topic that receives much attention.¹ Nor is its existence much taken for granted or subsumed in the many exegetical discussions of her fiction. On what would seem to be an important, indeed central, topic, a remarkable silence obtains. There are at least four reasons why this should be so. First, literary studies and advanced literary training do not include Thomism in the curriculum. And while there is a sense in which literary *criticism* is of necessity implicitly Thomist (it begins with the senses, i.e., the text), literary *theory* is implicitly Cartesian (beginning not with the text but with ideas) and therefore not pre-disposed to cultivate so foreign, not to say retrograde, a field. Moreover, those whose training has been only in theory are often handicapped by a tendentious and skewed view of the history of philosophy. Second, O’Connor’s Thomism is so pervasive, so deftly assimilated into the action and idiom of her work, as to be nearly invisible to many of her readers. Third, and following from the first two, there thus seems little incentive to pursue her myriad references to, and habitual praise of, Aquinas. The stories seem complete, or complete

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enough, without them. And fourth, many of her readers simply identify, and dismiss, Thomism as Catholicism, a category mistake. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. And yet, she was insistent, and she was a person who knew her own mind.

If we did happen to be looking for the Thomism in O'Connor's work, what is it we would be seeing? Consider a passage like the following. It is tucked into Chapter Nine of *The Violent Bear It Away* and it is what we could call an ordinary example of O'Connor Thomism:

Once out of sight of the boy, he felt a pressure had been lifted from the atmosphere. He eliminated the oppressive presence from his thoughts and retained only those aspects of it that could be abstracted, clean, into the future person he envisioned.
(*Collected Works* 441)

The *he* is Rayber, the *boy* is Tarwater, and the time is five days after Tarwater's arrival at Rayber's door with the announcement that Old Tarwater, their relative, is dead. He, Tarwater, "had done the needful" and burnt the old man's house and body, defying the old man's charge to give him a Christian burial. Rayber's initial response had been something like elation. Here was a boy he could now raise "according to his own ideas," in contrast to his own son, Bishop, who is mentally deficient and therefore "useless." But Tarwater stubbornly refuses Rayber's overtures, insisting that he will not become "a piece of information in [Rayber's] head." It is this refusal to be co-opted that is the source of the pressure. Notice how O'Connor gives it a certain tactile force in the awkward phrasing "oppressive presence," so manifestly in tension with "his thoughts," thoughts specified as "abstracted." Once he has reached that level of abstraction, freed from the weight of actuality, Rayber can see the future boy he envisions. Both the diction and the mental action indicate that these sentences stand as a critique, from a Thomist perspective, of Rayber's Cartesian epistemology. Since he subordinates being to thinking, and metaphysics to epistemology, what thinking he has in mind is only itself, not its putative, actual, object.² This is the way Rayber's mind works, and that working is the focus of O'Connor's Thomistic critique.

Is this a one-off? A passage that just happens to lend itself to this sort of analysis? Consider just a few pages further on in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Rayber has driven aimlessly out into the countryside and finds himself at Powderhead, the old man's place that Tarwater burnt. Intrigued, he moves in for a closer look:

Suddenly he realized that the place *was* his. In the stress of having the boy return to him, he had never considered the property. He stopped, astounded by the fact that he owned all of this. His trees stood rising above him, majestic and aloof, as if they belonged to an order that had never budged from its first allegiance in the days of creation. His heart began to beat frenetically. Quickly he reduced the whole wood in probable board feet into a college education for the boy. His spirits lifted.
(*CW* 444 – 45)

Here is the same conflict between Descartes and Thomism, but now the stress is on metaphysics rather than epistemology. It begins with pride in possession: “The place *was* his”; “the property”; “he owned all of this.” But while Rayber is taking all this in (and notice that the nouns are all abstract), possession — “his trees” — begins to turn into something different. “His trees stood rising above him, majestic and aloof, as if they belonged to an order that had never budged from its first allegiance in the days of creation. His heart began to beat frenetically.” What is happening here, below the level of Rayber’s consciousness, as it were, is something that brings him to the verge of a metaphysical epiphany, an experience of the trees not as *his* trees but as *trees*, trees in all their tree-ness, trees *qua* trees in all their staggering *whatness* and mystery, trees as Adam might have seen them in their prelapsarian glory, majestic indeed. No wonder his heart begins to beat frenetically. But if he should accede to that intuition and give himself to that metaphysical recognition, he will effectively overturn his entire life, everything he has constructed for himself out of himself. Thus, the next sentence is a violent turn back to Cartesian comfort, made in two decisive steps, “quickly,” lest he falter. The trees are first reduced to *lumber* (property), and then lumber is abstracted further into *a college education*. Once that abstraction is complete, “his spirits lifted,” and they lift both for the comfort of the idealized vision and for the momentary resolution of the interior conflict, a conflict at the heart of the novel itself as well as of his character, and one best understood in its Thomistic terms.³

If this analysis is at all correct, then it follows that to read O’Connor well one has to be able to recognize — even in such small passages — the Thomism that characterizes her thought and pervades her writing, that enabled her to reveal the *claritas* of being in the humble particular of a mule’s hind quarter. I want to argue that O’Connor’s Thomist critique of Descartes — *Esse* vs. *Cogito* — is the meta-narrative of her fiction, the keystone of her arch, at least from “Good Country People” (1955) to the end of her work. Aquinas was, of course, both theologian

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and philosopher, and the *theological* emphases in O'Connor's fiction are generally recognized, if somewhat erratically explored: the centrality of baptism as the decisive Christian act, the action of grace which always operates through secondary causality, the noticeable absence of Hollywood "miracles," the many allusions to Scripture, and so on. But the *philosophical* aspects — there are six — have gone neglected. It is the purpose of this paper to identify the six and to provide examples of how they are working in the fiction.

NO ONE doubts O'Connor's admiration for Aquinas the philosopher. She herself spells it out, for example in letters to her old teacher Helen Greene: "My philosophical notions don't come from Kierkegard (I cant even spell it) but from St. Thomas Aquinas" (*CW* 897); to her close friend "A" (Betty Hester): "I couldn't make any judgment on the *Summa* except to say this: I read it for twenty minutes every night before I go to bed. . . . I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas" (*CW* 945); and to her friend from her Iowa days, the writer Robie Macauley (*CW* 934), with her wry designation of herself as a "hillbilly Thomist," a phrase she evidently used just the once, though it has for obvious reasons caught on — at least as a label. Moreover, references and allusions to Aquinas crop up regularly in her letters and abound in her non-fiction prose. It is clear that he was a living, pervasive presence in her thought, not some odd antiquarian interest but a nourishing and shaping power. From her own witness, then, her Thomism has to be taken as a given, and it is distinctly *her* Thomism. In the non-fiction, for example, she rarely quotes Aquinas directly, preferring summary and paraphrase ("St. Thomas says . . ."), easing his technical Scholasticism into her own colloquial idiom⁴; in the fiction she deftly absorbs the concepts into the structure and action. So, our concern is pragmatic: the different ways her Thomism functions in the stories. And while Thomism grounded her thought and nourished her sensibility, she was not a philosopher but an artist, and it is the drama and consequence of ideas, especially the central conflict between *Esse* and *Cogito*, that commanded her interest. This was probably the point she was making when she remarked to John Hawkes, "I am a Thomist three times removed and live amongst many distinctions. (A Thomist three times removed is one who doesn't read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis)" (*CW* 1149).⁵ So her direct interest in Aquinas was enriched by modern *Thomism*, the living tradition of Aquinas's

thought, as it was manifested in the great *lay* Thomists of the twentieth century on whom she also drew: Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, A.C. Pegis, and Joseph Pieper. In their work, by careful study as well as by “osmosis,” she found her own Thomism clarified and deepened.⁶

Thomism is found in O’Connor in six ways: (1) as a metaphysics of being; (2) as an epistemology of moderate realism; (3) as a historical narrative showing the consequences of the loss of the first two; (4) as a view of man as a *composite* of body and soul (not ghost or an angel in a machine); (5) as a natural law morality; (6) as an objective aesthetics, the one feature commonly recognized. These six, which interpenetrate, ground her thought and give shape and themes to her stories, as she was always quick to acknowledge. For example, once we are aware of them, we can hear all of them in just a scrap of conversation that she had with the interviewer Betsy Lockridge (*Conversations* 38 – 39): “I can accept the universe as it is — I don’t have to make up my own sense of value” — 1, 2, and perhaps 6; “I can apply to a judgment higher than my own” — 5; “I believe that a person is always valuable and responsible” — 5 again; “When I write I am a maker” — 6; “St. Thomas called art reason in making” — 6; “We have reduced the uses of reason terribly” — 2, 3, and probably 4. The point is that Thomism is pervasive in her thought, not some occasional option. She once warned Betty Hester that “if you live today you breathe in nihilism,” but clearly Thomism was her filter.

But Thomism does more than shape O’Connor’s narratives and provide her with themes. It grounds the very nature of her fiction, her basic outlook and the kind of art she made. O’Connor was a comic satirist; “Mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness,” she told Lockridge (*Conversations* 38), and she was broadly in the Jonsonian tradition of moral comedy. An obvious enough point, this, but one that calls for some consideration, for satire is notoriously difficult to write under twentieth- and twenty-first- century conditions where the diminishment or disappearance of common moral and intellectual standards undercuts its effort at judgment. F. R. Leavis, for example, thought it all but impossible and considered Eliot’s “Coriolan” poems as notable and rare exceptions. Yet O’Connor was able to write comic satire easily, almost naturally. How was this possible? Besides her native ironic wit, her satire draws on two distinct sources. One was her South, a story-telling region (and therefore closer to the concrete and specific), with a common *mythos* available to every level of society (“Christ-haunted” and steeped in Scripture), and with a distinctive idiom.⁷ The other source was her Catholicism intertwined with her Thomism (they are not the same thing!). This gave her confidence

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in reason, in a transcendental order, and in objective truth, enabling her to hold her characters, for all their freakishness, to universal moral standards.⁸ Her strategy was generally to assume the standards her vision gave her and to dramatize their violation. “What [the Catholic writer] sees at all times,” she wrote, “is fallen man perverted by false philosophies,” no weak or relativist position (*Mystery and Manners*, 177). It is time to examine the six elements of Thomism that figure in the fiction. We will take them up in reverse order.

I HAVE sent you *Art and Scholasticism*,” O’Connor wrote to Betty Hester in April of 1957. “It’s the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on. . . . He [Maritain] is a philosopher and not an artist but he does have great understanding of the nature of art, which he gets from St. Thomas” (*CW* 1030). The first two sentences, well known to O’Connor’s admirers, generally mark the limit of interest in her as a Thomist, hillbilly or otherwise. What Maritain took from Aquinas and passed on to O’Connor was remarkably similar to what Eliot was saying at just the same time. Each presented an objective view of art and the artist that rejected Romantic subjectivity and proposed instead an older, impersonal approach, one that did not exalt the poet and his feelings but put the focus resolutely on the art object as something crafted, made, carrying within itself its own artistic purpose and logic.⁹ And this is what O’Connor responded to.

Briefly then, we might say that Maritain’s book is synthesized from various *apercus* found scattered across Aquinas’s moral philosophy and theology. Art, broadly conceived, is an intellectual virtue of the practical order. As such, it is close to Prudence, but it differs in that while Prudence is concerned with doing and the person, Art is concerned with making and the object. Prudence’s concern is with the means to our moral ends; Art is an end in itself. “Art operates for the good of the work done,” Maritain says, adding that “art in no wise tends to make the artist good in his specifically human conduct” (15), addressing and directly undercutting the basic Romantic myth of the artist. By this approach, then, the work of art is impersonal and autonomous. O’Connor often echoed these views in her letters, conversations, and essays. And she also used them, *inter alia*, to stress that art could never be hijacked for pious purposes. As she told Fr. John McCown with her usual gimlet-eyed directness, “The novel is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it. I didn’t make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that

art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end.” And then veering away from any possibility of being understood in an “art for art’s sake” sense, she added, “If you do manage to use it successfully for social, religious or other purposes, it is because you make it art first” (*The Habit of Being* 157).

O’Connor felt the need to push back against the Romanticism of the age. She could be deadly wry in remarking on the pretentiousness of the artist and his “vision,” someone creating out of his own mind a new heaven and a new earth. Instead, she saw her task as finding the meaning in the world God made, not expressing her own feelings or exalting her “vision.”¹⁰ She particularly disliked any extolling of the writer as a Shelleyean hierophant “with words expressing what the ordinary person understands not,” or *vates* dwelling on himself and proposing himself as an unacknowledged legislator for the world. “I even dislike the concept *artist* when it sets you above,” she wrote Hester. “All it is is working in a certain kind of medium to make something right. The material is no more exalted than any other kind of material and the idea of making it right is what should be applied to all making. St. Thomas said the artist is concerned with the good of that which is made, that art is a good-in-itself” (*CW* 1029). O’Connor could be pretty caustic about “Creative Writing” because she thought such programs overplayed the artist-as-special-person line and played down the hard truth that writing is hard work, disciplined hard work, needing what, following Maritain, she called the *Habitus* of art — a combination of natural talent, discipline, connaturality, disinterestedness, tacit appropriation of tradition, and a commitment to the good of the work itself, its formal cause.

While rejecting the artist as exalted figure, she always allowed that the artist’s imagination and reason could be *prophetic* — even while insisting that this prophetic ability conferred no intrinsic superiority. It simply meant one was endowed with imagination, a gift. Her authority for this was once again St. Thomas, via Maritain:

According to St. Thomas, prophetic vision is not a matter of seeing clearly but of seeing what is distant, hidden. The Church’s vision is prophetic vision; it is always widening the view. The ordinary person does not have prophetic vision but he can accept it on faith. St. Thomas also says that prophetic vision is a quality of the imagination, that it does not have anything to do with the moral life of the prophet (*CW* 1116).

Her shorthand for this insight was that the writer-as-prophet was “a

realist of distances" (*M&M* 179), someone who could approximate the remote and familiarize the wonderful, showing the reader the implications and consequences hidden in actions and ideas. Descartes, after all, thinking of the *Cogito*, had no idea what was hidden in the *ergo sum*.

That being said (and in scandalously brief compass), how do these ideas about the autonomy of art and the disinterestedness of the artist play out in O'Connor's fiction? I want to suggest two different ways. First, as action within the story: in "The Enduring Chill," she directly satirizes the Romantic myth of the artist as it has been swallowed and digested by Asbury like so much unpasteurized milk. One of her favorite techniques is the expanding and re-working of stereotypes and clichés — the judge who gets the book thrown at her, the philosopher left without a leg to stand on, the old lady who lets the cat out of the bag, the woman being eaten out of house and home (by a bull!), the character who cannot see the forest for the trees — because so much of our lives is spent among unrecognized clichés frustrating thought and debasing feeling. In "The Enduring Chill" she pushes the Romantic stereotype of subjectivity pretty far. Poor Asbury! What a hilarious farrago of Romantic pretense he holds: art is the path to salvation — if there is salvation, maybe it's Death that's the ideal; *epater le bourgeois!*; the Joycean artistic soul is bound in restraint by the very society he so eagerly denounces; Kafka's sufferings are a hagiographic ideal, together with the famous letter to his father outlining all the ways his father had failed him, cramped him, ruined him. O'Connor neatly varies this last point: the letter is not to the father but to the mother; Asbury eagerly quotes (but actually misquotes) Yeats (and the widening gyre of all metaphors!) to his "ignorant" mother, carefully explaining to her that it *is* Yeats; and it ends with the wonderfully comic bathos of his final cry, "Woman, why did you pinion me?" As the action unfolds, it is this Romantic claptrap that leads Asbury to the unpasteurized milk escapade and his physical undoing. And with her swift change of tone and direction, she brings Asbury and his self-regarding pretentiousness into clear satiric critique with a single acerbic line from Father Finn ("from Purgatory," of course) — "The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are," a task not eagerly welcomed by this would-be Romantic artist.

The second way O'Connor's Thomistic aesthetics comes into play is with its emphasis on the autonomous and impersonal. Consider "Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "Good Country People." In each story, the central character is a self-portrait of the artist, but their relation to O'Connor is more like that of "Dante" to Dante, "Chaucer" to

Chaucer, or Prufrock to Eliot than Paul Morel to Lawrence or Eugene Gant to Thomas Wolfe. What is remarkable is her own self-knowledge in creating two very different characters who lack that very quality and who are filled instead with pride. Each is a projection of vices or dangerous possibilities O'Connor recognized in herself, and there is certainly no self-idealizing. The little girl in "Temple" is a partial portrait of what O'Connor took herself to be at that age, manifesting characteristics that O'Connor saw as distinctive of Catholic smugness — "long on logic, definitions, abstractions."¹¹ Hulga, on the other hand, presents us with O'Connor as she thought she would have been without the Church, filled with pride and the gas of nihilism, "the stinkiest logical positivist you ever saw," as she said to Betty Hester (*CW* 948). So one in the Church, one out, both remarkably unidealized versions of O'Connor herself. O'Connor's ability coolly and dispassionately to observe negative features in herself and then dramatize them objectively, blending them into the narrative drama, testifies to her deep artistic integrity, her commitment to "getting it right" that she took from Aquinas via Maritain. A recent emphasis on "Good Country People" as a biographical transcript of a failed romance is enormously reductive and utterly misses this point.

THOMISTIC anthropology and natural law morality are fundamental to O'Connor's fiction, but they are nearly invisible and best seen through contrasts. The human person as a *composite* of body and soul, the soul as the form of the body, provides her with a perspective for satirical judgment of Cartesian dualism. Take, for example, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," a straightforward enough story, but one often oddly mischaracterized through a failure to grasp its tone. The title comes from a seemingly ubiquitous public service advertisement put out in the 1950s by the AAA club and directed at the appalling number of highway deaths in those pre-seatbelt days. Mr. Shiftlett — Tom T. Shiftlett — the shiftless, one-armed, unredeemable¹² con man is the focus of the satire. He certainly meets his match in Lucynell Crater, determined to unload her daughter, and the comic action turns on these two grifters trying to con one another over a deal in which Mr. Shiftlett can have the unused automobile rusting near the barn but only if he will take the daughter with it. Early on Mr. Shiftlett, trying to impress, asks the question, "What is a man?", and he goes on to answer that he is one, that despite his loss of an arm he has — and the announcement is preceded portentously by a rapping on the floor, Mr.

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Shiftlett specializing in The Dramatic Pause — “a moral intelligence.” That *sounds* impressive but is only part of the huckster’s spiel. And, O’Connor says, “the old woman was not impressed with the phrase.” One con artist recognizes another. And of course the action belies it, as does a later admission that is quietly decisive, at the height of the negotiations when he almost overplays his hand, demanding some money for a honeymoon:

“Listen here, Mr. Shiftlett,” she said, sliding forward in her chair, “you’d be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don’t need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain’t any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man.”

The ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlett’s head like a group of buzzards in the top of a tree. He didn’t answer at once. He rolled himself a cigarette and lit it and then he said in an even voice, “Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit.”

The old woman clamped her gums together.

“A body and a spirit,” he repeated. “The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move, always . . .” (*CW* 179)

The spirit / automobile connection is a wry comic variation on the Cartesian ghost in the machine and it helps to place and judge Mr. Shiftlett.

A second example of the body-spirit split can be seen in Hulga of “Good Country People.” There is more to say about Hulga as the Cartesian Protagonist, but for the moment it is enough to consider the scene in the loft where lofty Hulga, dead certain of her mind’s control of her body and of everything else, is first introduced to that fatal counter-argument to mind-body dualism, necking.

The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind’s control. (*CW* 278)

This misplaced confidence is her undoing as the necking intensifies and the scene reaches its climax in a moment of comic irony where

she loses not her virginity but her wooden leg. The human person, O'Connor reminds us, is a unity, a composite.

Natural law morality is pervasive in O'Connor's work, but this is not to say very much. The idea that the human person is governed by practical reason and inclined to do the good and to avoid evil is, or was, a traditional commonplace.¹³ The Enlightenment denied it, of course, and O'Connor recognized the working out of that denial in the culture surrounding her. Modern culture, she saw, has lost its grasp on natural law morality and has become deeply subjectivist and relativistic. Her dealing with this theme can be seen in her use of the words "good" and "true," those transcendental properties of being that in her fiction are revealed to have lost their traditional force and to have become little more than empty counters in banal discourse. But to lose *good* is also to be unable to recognize *evil*, and to move unwittingly into Nietzsche's territory. O'Connor's word for this was *nihilism*, and she noticed it in an example from *The Waste Land*. Madame Sosotris, that "famous clairvoyante," may have "had a bad cold" but "nevertheless"

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards.

What are we to make of *wicked* here? After all, we are dealing with the Black Arts even if in a stylized comic way. Clearly, the word does not carry its traditional force. In fact, Eliot has caught it hovering between the traditional and the modern, at the very moment it was transmogrifying into its exact opposite, the modern intensifier meaning something strongly positive.¹⁴ And with that change we are *beyond* good and evil and are truly in the waste land.

In O'Connor's first collection, three of the ten stories have the word *Good* in the title, pointedly used in the empty sense, and that is not accidental. She wants to suggest that the good, like the true, has been emptied of its traditional moral force and reduced to vague cliché. Consider this bibliographical point. In February of 1955 when she had written "Good Country People" in just four days, O'Connor asked her editor, Robert Giroux, if she could get the story into the manuscript for *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, a manuscript set to go to the printers. Two stories could be cut, she said, "Afternoon in the Woods" and "A Stroke of Good Fortune." In the event only one had to go, there wasn't that much to choose between them, so the one she kept was the one with *Good* in the title. Both stories are apprentice work and neither amounts to much. But keeping the one with *Good* helps to reinforce the overall emphasis and thereby lends a humble modicum of

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support to the two very great stories, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People.”

Briefly then, in “Stroke,” Madame Sosostris has morphed into Madam Zaleeda, a palm reader now, and she promises Ruby Hill that following an illness she will receive a stroke of good fortune — which Ruby eagerly interprets as a house “in a subdivision” and not, decidedly not, the pregnancy that it turns out to be. Ruby does not want children — the question asked by Lil’s friend in *The Waste Land*, “What you get married for if you don’t want children,” more or less hangs in the air throughout — and she is unable to see anything *good* in the bearing of new life. The story is about being unable to judge what is truly good.

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is the name of a blues song from the 1920s recorded by Bessie Smith. It caught O’Connor’s eye in a news story about a seven-year old child who won an award for singing it. And then, just before she wrote, it was featured in the movie *Meet Danny Wilson* (1952) where it was sung first by Shelly Winters and then by Frank Sinatra. In other words, the title phrase is of a piece with the rest of the weightless world of pop culture emphasized in the first, or comic, half of the story. Its importance climaxes in the pivotal episode at Red Sammy’s where the dialogue indicates that neither *good* nor *true* carries any real weight or force. The grandmother and Red Sammy are comically unable to rise above reinforcing one another’s clichés.

“You can’t win,” he said. “You can’t win,” and he wiped his sweating red face off with a grey handkerchief. “These days you don’t know who to trust,” he said. “Ain’t that the truth?”

“People are certainly not nice like they used to be,” said the grandmother.

“Two fellers came in here last week,” Red Sammy said, “driving a Chrysler. It was a old beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?”

“Because you’re a good man!” the grandmother said at once.

Yes’m, I suppose so,” Red Sam said as if he were struck with the answer.

“A good man is hard to find,” Red Sammy said. “Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.”

He and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for

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the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. (*CW* 141-42)

With the Marshall Plan well-trashed and foreign policy nicely settled, and with the comforting satisfaction brought on by easy agreement over the clichéd, the dialogue trails off, comic, but, one might think, not greatly serious. Yet, the careful reader notices what has been done to both *good* and *true*.

What is usually not noticed or understood is what O'Connor did next. In the original version of the story in *The Avon Book of Modern Writing* (1953), the transition from Red Sammy's to the darker second half is made with the words, "Outside of Toombsboro *the highway was being paved and they had to detour on a red dirt road*" (my emphasis).¹⁵ The revised version, the one everyone reads, inserts here almost two pages of new material concerning the grandmother's story of the antebellum mansion, and this changes things immensely. "There was a secret panel in this house," she said craftily, *not telling the truth* but wishing that she were" (my emphasis). In the original version, the accident is caused by the bouncing of the car on the bad road, shaking the cat out of the bag. It is the Highway Department that puts them on that road. But in the more carefully developed final version, it is the grandmother's elaborate falsehood, her lie, that is the cause.

The grandmother has only a loose regard for truth. She lives pretty largely within the superficial world of pop culture set out in the story's first half, and her thinking and feeling are guided by that, as is her vocabulary.¹⁶ She is not a "liar" in the usual sense; she is a casual manipulator who has no real sense that there should be in language an adequation of word to thing, to use a Thomist phrase. Unfortunately, in the story's second half, she is no longer in that world. This is dramatized immediately after the accident in her initial dialogue with The Misfit, very different from her last conversation with Red Sammy.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I see you all had you a little spill."

"We turned over twice!" said the grandmother.

"Oncet," he corrected. "We seen it happen." (*CW* 146)

That phrase "he corrected" is the essence of the story, the defining difference between casual exaggeration and real truth, grounded in the nature of things. We have just moved from the banality of popular culture into the stricter connections between words and things. That

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difference is extended from the true to the good as Bailey is hauled off into the woods:

“Bailey Boy!” the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. “I just know you’re a good man,” she said desperately. “You’re not a bit common!”

“Nome, I ain’t a good man,” The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully. (*CW* 148)

In the two scraps of dialogue, the two words are cleansed of their banality and restored towards their true meaning, and again carry their proper moral force. In The Misfit’s world, truth is truth and good and evil are very different. The corrected grandmother will die redeemed, of course, and The Misfit’s famous epitaph is a just one: “‘She would have been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’” But its justice is earned only in the grandmother’s final seconds of life when her head clears and she first sees the *Truth*, “‘Why you’re one of my babies! You’re one of my own children!’” — and then does the *Good*: “‘She reached out and touched him on the shoulder’” in a final gesture of love. Even the order has a Thomistic logic: first the intellect, then the will.

“Good Country People” uses the title phrase to convey effectively the triviality of the world Joy / Hulga has to endure each day and to make plausible her cynical response to it, her “ironic and detached” view of all that her mother’s farm has to offer. It is used at least seven times to make this point, but the last use, at the climax, is by Hulga herself, shocked, outmaneuvered, and bewildered: “Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. ‘Aren’t you’, she murmured, ‘aren’t you just good country people?’” The effect here is to cancel her prideful assumption of superiority and close the gap between the triviality of her mother’s discourse and the misanthropic self-indulgence of her own. She is craving the solace of the cliché.

To summarize this discussion of O’Connor’s use of natural law principles, then: the good and the true are transcendental principles of being, and she uses them in such a way as to remind us of this, and at the same time to remind us of their debased and harmful current use, our casual emptying of their true significance, our heedless drifting into the banal, beyond good and evil. “We have reduced the uses of reason terribly,” she remarked to Lockridge (*Conversations* 39), and her use of *Good* is meant to illustrate that fact.

ALTHOUGH none of her characters attempted to extract sunbeams out of cucumbers or carve mutton into rhomboids, O'Connor may have been the most anti-Cartesian writer since Swift. The historical narrative she found in Maritain and Gilson criticized Descartes's shift from being to thought in metaphysics and from knowledge to thinking in epistemology. The ensuing subjectivism and dualism led eventually to a variety of false philosophies, and O'Connor was keenly aware of such arguments as Gilson's in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (which she greatly admired) and Maritain's in "Christian Humanism" (from *The Range of Reason* which she reviewed). As Maritain put the gist of it, with Descartes there occurred a "failure of philosophic Reason. . . . Human Reason lost its grasp of Being," and this led to a changed outlook and the new set of attitudes that underwrite "enlightened" modernity. In her copy of Aquinas O'Connor marked for special attention a passage in which A. C. Pegis noted the starkness of the difference, putting the metaphysical argument into historical terms:

We are the heirs of generations of philosophical speculations according to which man is a *thinker* and a *mind*. Now it is a fact that the Thomistic man is a knower rather than a thinker, and he is a composite being rather than a mind. In fact, St. Thomas does not even have in his vocabulary a term corresponding to the term thinker: you cannot translate such a term into Thomistic Latin. If we are to judge matters as St. Thomas has done, we are bound to say that the European man became a thinker after he ruined himself as a knower; and we can even trace the steps of that ruination — from Augustinian Platonism to the nominalistic isolationism of Ockham to the despairing and desperate Methodism of Descartes. For what we call the decline of medieval philosophy was really a transition from man as a knower to man as a thinker — from man knowing the world of sensible things to man thinking abstract thoughts in separation from existence.¹⁷

The phrase "From man knowing the world of sensible things to man thinking abstract thoughts in separation from existence" defines a type of a figure that O'Connor was much concerned from with 1955 onwards, from the time, that is, when she crafted the archetype of the Cartesian Protagonist in the Joy / Hulga of "Good Country People." After Joy / Hulga, there followed Mr. Fortune ("A View of the Woods"), Asbury ("The Enduring Chill"), Rayber and Tarwater (*The Violent Bear It Away*), Julian ("Everything that Rises Must Converge"), Shepard ("The Lame Shall Enter First"), and Ruby Turpin

("Revelation"), all variations on the Cartesian type — a type that Old Tarwater memorably sums up in a phrase about Rayber, "He wanted it all in his head. You can't change a baby's pants in your head" (LA 167). *Mystery and Manners* is replete (at least sixteen instances by my count) with O'Connor's Thomistic insistence that *knowledge begins with the senses*.¹⁸ The Cartesian Protagonists all want it all in their heads.

Joy / Hulga is the archetype. Her identification with Descartes is through a pattern of allusions and is unmistakable (more than for any of the others), beginning with the simple fact that she is a philosopher, that she identifies with that consciousness she never lost when her leg was blasted off, that she is absolutely convinced that the mind is an independent force in control of the body's sensations ("Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings" is her conscious assessment of herself in the necking). The one philosopher she quotes is Malebranche, a follower of Descartes. And then there is the typographical peculiarity of her fierce challenge to her mother — "If you want me here I am — LIKE I AM" — where the typeface alludes to both *Cogito, ergo sum* but also, and blasphemously, to Exodus 3.14, the very passage that Gilson loved to cite as Revelation's warrant for thinking about God as pure act. She is also absent during the conversation her mother and Manley Pointer have about the *good* and about *truth*, a dialogue that partly mimics the one between the grandmother and Red Sammy, though here the terms are given a stronger positive sense. And then there is the Heidegger passage, the one that so unnerves her mother when she sees it marked in one of Hulga's books. In it, Heidegger is scoring easy points against science because, unlike philosophy, it veers away from thinking about Nothing. And presumably Hulga is using this later on with Manley Pointer. But what is really important is what she *doesn't* mark, doesn't take in, is unconcerned for, namely Heidegger's great themes: *Dasein*, facticity, our loss of wonder, our surrender to technology, and our bland and blind indifference to being. There is no underlining of his great provocative question, "Why is there not just nothing at all?" Hulga the Cartesian has no interest in such themes.¹⁹ On the other hand, she has quite literally enacted the *Cogito*, remaking Joy as Hulga in a supreme act of her own thought ("She saw it as the name of her greatest creative act"). And all of this is mixed into the innocence / experience theme, and the bawdy story structure (The Travelling Salesman and the Farmer's Daughter) to show how unaware of *the real* she really is.

Two points are especially relevant. First, O'Connor is a fiction writer not a philosopher. She is concerned to subject ideas to the pragmatic test, a realist of distances who wants to bring out the implications of

things perhaps too easily held.²⁰ With Hulga and the other Cartesian Protagonists, her concern is with the anterior attitudes hidden in the outlook, the peculiar vulnerability they generate, and the consequent capacity for deception and for self-deception. “I don’t have illusions,” Hulga tells Manley Pointer, voicing her greatest one. “I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing.” Second, Hulga’s lofty attitude and supreme self-confidence in her ability to see *through* everything all the way to Nothing are captured in her tone, her habitual delivery that defines the gap between herself and the Hopewell farm. And yet the action is cross-grained and will reveal her innocence, indeed her naïveté. She may think she sees *through* things, but the action suggests she is unable to see even simple things as they are. And as for seeing through to Nothing, that is a judgment, and she is unable to judge people or things at their real worth. Moreover, she is unable to perceive the story, the bawdy, comic story she is caught up in, and the joke of which she is the butt. Even the imagery works against her: are there two lakes there, or just one? How do the speckled wildflowers get moved from the pink hillside to the green lake or lakes? Why does she not notice that he has removed her glasses? The topography of the farm she lives on seems to have escaped her notice.

There is no need to trace this out in its artistically splendid detail, for the epistemological problem has been identified. But her vision is crystallized in a single paragraph:

During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and here, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.

(CW 186)

A few minutes of heavy necking undermines this fantasy, and she is exposed to the cold cruelty of Manley Pointer, her vulnerability heightened by the comic parody of the seduction scene and her painful, if non-sexual, ravishment. It is ironic that she should be left in the *loft*, unable to come down, churning with impotent rage for the full and final reversal of all that she has believed.

METAPHYSICS is the keystone in the arch of Thomism and it is inseparable from knowledge. It is a basic principle of Thomism that being is the condition of knowing and that “the idealist thinks whereas the realist knows.”²¹ In O’Connor this means that *ideas* and *thinking* are always suspect terms. Her characters are tempted to prefer *thinking* — i.e., his or her own ideas, own inner world where there is no let or hindrance — to *knowledge* — i.e., of things in the outer, shared, objective world in all its otherness: abstraction *from* rather than participation *in*. This is the struggle of the Cartesian Protagonist. In *Hulga*, we see the results but not the form itself, something we glimpsed however with Rayber and the trees. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor puts the matter in large-scale form and not once but twice,²² once for Tarwater, once for Rayber. Each has a moment of intuition when the singular gives way and the character stands in the presence of being itself. The passages are closely parallel but they diverge in one crucial way, for while Tarwater’s demands that he recognize being as *true*, Rayber’s demands that he recognize it as *good*, something to be *loved*. To frame the issue, O’Connor first distinguishes her three characters in relevant Thomistic terms: first, Rayber, “who had no child of his own and wanted one of his dead sister’s to raise *according to his own ideas*” (*CW* 331); next, Tarwater, “. . . the boy, who had *ideas of his own*. . .” (*CW* 332); and finally, Old Tarwater’s Thomistic admonition to the boy: “It’s no part of your job *to think for the Lord*. Judgment may rack your bones” (*CW* 335, my emphases).

It is difficult to situate briefly Tarwater’s moment because of the complexity of O’Connor’s technique of story-within-story and memory-within memory, but it comes in Chapter One as he is digging Old Tarwater’s grave. He is recalling the old man’s teaching about *freedom* (which Tarwater habitually confuses with autonomy) and about the lordship of Jesus, “madness,” he thinks, and as he does so resentment begins to color everything.

He tried when possible to pass over these thoughts, to keep his vision located on an even keel, to see no more than what was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something — a spade, a hoe, the mule’s hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him — that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation. (*CW* 343)

The demand for naming is a demand for truth, to speak the truth of things, which is to have knowledge of them and to grasp their nature, their essence, even things as humble as the mule's hind quarter, and a demand that he adapt himself to that truth. This goes against his every desire for autonomy,²³ even against his grudging willingness to be a prophet. He will be a prophet so long as it is on his terms, terms drawn from the more colorful passages of Ezekiel and the drawings of William Blake.

When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts. (*CW* 343)

Rather than name things justly, he wants them to conform to his ideas. O'Connor is using the metaphysics and epistemology of Thomism to criticize the emerging Cartesianism against which Tarwater must struggle.

The corresponding Rayber passage is somewhat longer and decidedly more chilling. For one thing it turns not on the mule's hind quarter but on Bishop, Rayber's "useless" son whom he once tried to drown, and towards whom he practices indifference. "That's only Bishop," he tells Tarwater when they first meet, and there is a good deal packed into that *only*. For Rayber Bishop is a *problem*, one he has not yet been able to solve.²⁴

His normal way of looking on Bishop was as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt. The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution, except at the moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love. (*CW* 401)

The second sentence is simply, if casually, blasphemous, an expression of Rayber's deep hatred of God. As Rayber's passage continues we recognize the parallel with Tarwater's:

Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man's walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk. If without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him —

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powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise.

We should note both “without thinking” and “lent himself to”; the first indicates the Cartesian, the second the pull towards participation in, not abstraction from. The demand in his case is to affirm the *goodness* of being, for the will should love that which is good. And this is precisely what he refuses. O’Connor then draws the line taut from the Cartesian to the utilitarian, that other fatal “false philosophy”²⁵:

He was not afraid of love in general. He knew the value of it and how it could be used. He had seen it transform in cases where nothing else had worked, such as with his poor sister. None of this had the least bearing on his situation. The love that would overwhelm him was of a different order entirely. It was not the kind that could be used for the child’s improvement or his own. It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated. (*CW* 401)

Love, here, is the properly ordered response to the transcendental goodness of being, a goodness that Rayber refuses to allow because it does not correspond to what is “in his head.” It should be clear by this point how O’Connor’s Thomism is what is at play throughout.

Her use of metaphysics defines her two characters and their differences. Each will resist the metaphysical intuition, but they will suffer different fates. Tarwater will come to accept the hard truth that his ideas have been wrong; Rayber will know the success of solving the problem of Bishop — and the shock of emptiness when he hears his son being drowned and he feels nothing.²⁶

THIS look into O’Connor’s philosophical Thomism is not to be thought of as exhaustive of any of the six aspects nor of the Thomism in any one story. Rather, it is designed as a series of signposts to assist the interested reader. That said, I would like to end by noting two stories where Aquinas himself puts in an appearance, cameos as it were, where allusions to his *legendarium* are woven into the story — tacit tributes by O’Connor to *The Philosopher*.

“The Comforts of Home” is theological, not philosophical, and need not detain us. The protagonist’s name is Thomas but this Thom-

as is more like an anti-Thomas, a modern materialist not a medieval thinker. In a letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor pointed out the theological issue: this Thomas is "face to face with his own evil — which is that of putting his own comfort before charity" (*CW* 1147). The element of seriocomic parody is developed from the name, from the youthful Aquinas's experience with the prostitute his brothers sent to his room to deter him from the religious life, and from an allusion to the "Dumb Ox" story. This modern Thomas puts himself, not God, at the center and the apex, and is satisfied with material comforts like an electric blanket: an image of modern man who has lost his way.²⁷

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is O'Connor's only "Catholic" story, that is to say one with a Catholic protagonist and perspective, Catholic ritual, and a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist and its sacramental action. As such it too is "theological," not "philosophical," and outside our purview, but there is an important point of epistemology that is both philosophical and theological. The child-protagonist, the O'Connor self-portrait, is smart and knows it. She is pridefully contemptuous of those who are not. But the action reveals the limits of both her knowledge and her mode of knowing, and does so in clear Thomistic terms. Briefly then, in the porch scene after Wendell has sung two Protestant hymns, the two convent girls requite him with the *Tantum Ergo*, and he, confused by the Latin, remarks, "That must be Jew singing."

The girls giggled idiotically but the child stamped her foot on the barrel. "You big dumb ox!" she shouted. "You big dumb Church of God ox!" she roared and fell off the barrel.

(*CW* 202)

She evidently does not know that for his taciturnity "The Dumb Ox" was the sobriquet hung on the young Aquinas by his fellow students,²⁸ and that Aquinas is the author of *Tantum Ergo*,²⁹ familiar to Catholics from the devotion of Benediction, common in those days. The child knows the hymn but not its author. This gap, her childish concept of martyrdom, and her view of rabbit reproduction all indicate the limits of her knowledge (as distinct from her knowingness, her prideful attitude).³⁰

This conceptual limitation bears on the child's spiritual growth. After hearing about the hermaphrodite at the fair, something she is unable to understand, she has a dream in which the figure is identified as a temple of the Holy Ghost. The hermaphrodite is in fact a serious parody, one that invokes the *paradigm* of Christ as one person

with two natures. Both parody and paradigm are beyond the child's knowledge. But the next afternoon at Benediction, during the *Tantum Ergo*, her mind empties and "she began to realize that she was in the presence of God," and when the priest raises the monstrance she has an image of "the freak at the fair." Soon after, her face is mashed by the crucifix on the nun's rosary, an anticipation of the Christian life less dramatic than her Walter Mitty images of martyrdom. And at the end, she sees the sun as "an elevated Host drenched in blood," and "the red *clay* road hanging over the trees" (my emphasis; the clay of common life). The images, the dream, are felt rather than understood; they are mysterious not discursive. And as such they represent a mode of knowledge Aquinas called *per modum inclinationis* as opposed to *per modum cognitionis*. Maritain comments on the difference this way: "A moral philosopher may not be a virtuous man and yet know everything about the virtue," — *per modum cognitionis*. "A virtuous man may possibly be wholly ignorant in moral philosophy, and know as well — probably better — everything about virtues, through connaturality" — *per modum inclinationis*.³¹ This important epistemological distinction is what O'Connor is using. The connatural mode is the one the girl is learning via the Eucharist, the better path toward the spiritual life for those of common clay.³² That mode, and not the mode of thought, is how O'Connor understands the sacraments to work. And the epistemological distinction shapes and informs the story. The child's growth is from one mode of knowing to the other, ending in calm of mind all glibness spent.

PHILOSOPHICAL Thomism is fundamental to O'Connor's thought. It animates and orders a large part of her fiction. In fact, much of that fiction has to be seen as a Thomistic critique of the central pathologies of modern (and post-modern!) life and thought. Her letters show that from 1955 onwards, she was dogged by academic responses that she found ludicrous, reductive "interpretations" casually indifferent to her craftsmanship, grounded in bizarre misunderstandings of her *donées* or her intentions. That ludicrousness is now, unfortunately, well-established in much academic scholarship, seriously compromising appreciation of the nature and value of her work. To be sure, an understanding of O'Connor's philosophical Thomism is *not* The Key to All Mythologies. But, without a lively awareness of how and why she was using it, any response to her work is unnecessarily compromised. All six aspects are important but the gravest is the historical

narrative connecting metaphysics with epistemology for the Cartesian Protagonist. From Rayber, whose spirits lifted as he reduced his trees to his ideas, to the prideful child reduced to awed silence and “lost in thought,” in inexpressible connaturality, Thomism framed and informed the characters O’Connor created and the stories she had to tell. Not to see this is to miss a good deal of what that fiction has to offer.³³

NOTES

1 Four partial exceptions, all of which lean towards the theological side: see Andretta; Bauerschmidt; Han; Montgomery. There are bits and bobs in some of the books, of course, especially the better ones, but nothing focused or developed and generally leaning to the theological side. See Asals; Edmondson; Wood. Christina Bieber Lake has some prescient remarks about O’Connor and Descartes.

2 “What a deliverance it would be for us, if we could recognize the elementary truth that the object of epistemology is not *thought*, which is only the consciousness of an act of knowledge, but *knowledge* itself, which is the grasp of an object” (Gilson 122). Cf. the moment when Tarwater tells Rayber he has “done the needful”: “He gazed through the actual insignificant boy before him to an image of him that he held fully developed in his mind” (CW 388).

3 A thrifty O’Connor will make similar use of the same trope in “A View of the Woods,” where for the life of him Mr. Fortune can’t understand why a mere view of the landscape should be counted as of more worth than “progress,” by which he means converting the landscape into money.

4 An indication of how deeply she meditated upon him.

5 In *Flannery O’Connor’s Library: Resources of Being*, Arthur Kinney lists these primary holdings in Aquinas: *Philosophical Texts*, selected and edited by Thomas Gilby (New York: Oxford University Press (1951; pb, 1960); *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. with an Introduction by A.C. Pegis (New York: Modern Library: 1948); *Truth (Quaestiones Disputatae: De Veritate)* 3 vols. (Chicago: Regnery: 1952); *Treatise on Law, On Truth and Falsity, and on Human Knowledge* (Chicago: Regnery, n.d.). The Pegis volume was her main text and *vade mecum* until she acquired her *De Veritate* in 1960. It should be noted that she also read and used non-Thomists like Gabriel Marcel, Romano Guardini, and Teilhard de Chardin.

6 The books of special importance and influence for her were Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*; Maritain, *The Range of Reason*; Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*; Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*; Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*; and Pegis’s Introduction to his edition of Aquinas (see previous note 5). Maritain and Gilson also wrote books on literature and on painting and Pieper was deeply interested in literature. The newcomer to Aquinas and Thomism is usually directed to the final three chapters of G. K. Chesterton’s *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, but for a firm grasp of the concepts, arguments, and consequences of Thomism as understood by O’Connor he or she could hardly do better than the chapter on Aquinas in Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* p. 361-386. More latterly, there is

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Fergus Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction*.

7 Cf. "I have Boston cousins and when they come South they discuss problems, they don't tell stories. We tell stories" (*Conversations* 71).

8 "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological." See "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *CW* 861.

9 For a fuller exposition on this point see my Introduction to Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, i–xvii. Williams's *Grace and Necessity* gives a fine exposition of Maritain's thought as it leads on to *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953). *Grace and Necessity* has a chapter on O'Connor with some outstanding theological reflections, but the exegesis is somewhat cramped by a certain stiffness in the face of O'Connor's ironic comedy, a fashionable misunderstanding of one of O'Connor's titles, and an irrelevant Bakhtinian view of O'Connor's narrators.

10 As she wrote to Betty Hester, "the moral basis of poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God" (*CW* 980). And to Cecil Dawkins, "I admire a saying of Braque's that he made about painting—'I like the rule that corrects the emotion'" (*HB* 486).

11 Cf. "Smugness is the Great Catholic Sin. I find it in myself and don't dislike it any less" (To Betty Hester, *CW* 983). And, "We too much indulge ourselves in the logic that kills, in making categories smaller and smaller, in prescribing attitudes and proscribing subjects. For the Catholic, one result of the Counter-Reformation was a practical overemphasis on the legal and logical and a consequent neglect of the Church's broader tradition" ("The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," *M&M* 205). The text in *CW* is different but the same basic idea can be found there as well.

12 O'Connor to John Hawkes: "I can fancy a character like the Misfit as redeemable but a character like Mr. Shiftlett as being unredeemable" (*CW* 1108).

13 There is a classic Thomistic exposition of the natural law and its metaphysical premises, brilliantly distilled into just six and-a-half pages, in the final chapter of Murray's *We Hold These Truths* (310-17). O'Connor apparently did not own this book, at least it is not listed in Kinney, but she certainly was familiar with Murray and undoubtedly knew this argument, if only through "osmosis."

14 Ricks and McCue note that the OED's first citation for this change — as slang — is from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920). See "Commentary" in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, Volume 1 (611). Eliot's "wisest" parallels and strengthens the point.

15 In *The Avon Book of Modern Writing*, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is found 186–99; For the passage O'Connor altered, 191. It is the only change she made, and it is of such great importance that its neglect is hard to understand.

16 In order of appearance: newspapers (the sports page), television ("rabbit ears"), radio ("queen for a day"), cartoons (patrolmen and billboards), comic books, movies and pop fiction ("Gone with the Wind," a favorite O'Connor target), and pop music ("Tennessee Waltz") — all rich sources of cliché. The entire first half is satu-

rated, providing the appropriate context for her dialogue with Red Sammy; there are no such references in the second, or Misfit, half.

17 See Pegis's Introduction xxiv.

18 This is O'Connor's paraphrase, not a direct quotation. She rarely quoted Aquinas directly, preferring to run his concepts through her own idiom. *Nihil in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu* was a favorite Scholastic tag, often used against Platonists. It is not found in either of the *Summas* but O'Connor likely came upon it in *De Veritate*, q.2, a. 3, arg. 19, where Aquinas is using it for heuristic purposes. Aquinas's epistemology can be found in *ST* 1, Q 78, 79, 80, 84.

19 O'Connor held Heidegger in high regard. "Heidegger writes a good deal about the poet's business being to name what is holy. His essays on Holderlin are very rich" (To Beverly Brunson, *CW* 925). Heidegger's relation, relations, or possible relation / relations to Thomism and Being is / are typically complex and obscure. But see Barrett, 121–248; Hart, 91–104.

20 "America is therefore one of the countries where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and are best applied." Marked by O'Connor in her edition of Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York, Vintage: 1945), 4.

21 Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 128.

22 Once for the almost-blind and once for the hard of hearing — in a much-overused line from her.

23 Almost his first thought after the old man dies comes as he looks out at the farm: "I'm going to move that fence" (*CW* 337). O'Connor here blends the autonomy theme with the desire to shape things according to his own ideas.

24 We should note here O'Connor's use of Gabriel Marcel's problem / mystery distinction to deepen her characterization of Rayber. When Rayber sees Tarwater at the door he first sees "a fascinating problem." O'Connor's edition of Marcel is signed and dated 1953. Marcel, of course, was no Thomist.

25 At the end of Chapter 5 Rayber suddenly recalls "an old rage" at the physician who told him he should be grateful that Bishop's health was good, that he had "seen them born blind as well, some without arms and legs, and with a heart outside."

"How can I be grateful," he had hissed, "when one — just one — is born with a heart outside?"

"You'd better try," the doctor had said. (*CW* 205 – 06)

The submerged imagery of *hissed* is a quiet evaluation. It should be noticed that there are in Rayber traces of Ivan Karamazov.

26 "Rayber and Tarwater are really fighting the same current in themselves. Rayber wins out against it and Tarwater loses; Rayber achieves his own will and Tarwater submits to his vocation" (To Alfred Corn, *CW* 1170).

27 The virtues of this lovely story were first made clear to me by my former students Ealish Cassidy and Laura Wells.

28 And Albert the Great is supposed to have rebuked his students by saying that

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one day the dumb ox would roar. It is a well-known story.

29 The two-stanzas of *Tantum Ergo* are the conclusion of Aquinas's great hymn to the Eucharist, *Pange Lingua Gloriosi*, still sung today in Corpus Christi processions.

30 It is noticeable that the child does not recognize the allusions to 1 Corinthians 3 and 6 that the girls giggle over and that give the story its title. Catholic ignorance of scripture was something O'Connor constantly deplored.

31 Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, Chapter Three, "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 22–29, quote 23.

32 Her virtue / knowledge is only incipient and the red clay road is a long one. On the ride home she is quick to observe "three folds of fat in the back of [Alonzo Myers's] neck and she noted that his ears were pointed almost like a pig's." Grace builds on nature — and nature can be fairly intractable.

33 In memory of Joseph W. Evans and Francis J. O'Malley, beloved teachers, and of Rene Fortin and Rodney Delasanta, beloved colleagues, beloved friends.

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