

The Moral Meaning of Flannery O'Connor

HENRY MCDONALD

ONE OF THE COMMON complaints made about religious writers of fiction is that they are innocent of the demands of their craft. Either they sacrifice their artistic integrity to the exigencies of religious dogma, draining their work of interest to anyone outside their own sectarian group. Or they sacrifice their religious integrity to the exigencies of secularism, so weakening the spiritual dimensions of their work that its religious character—aside from a nod to peace and brotherhood—is lost. In either case, the final artistic product is compromised.

Whatever the validity of such criticism regarding most religious writers of fiction, probably few people would apply it to Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic writer who died in 1964 at the age of 39 and whose volume of correspondence, *The Habit of Being*, was recently published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. In neither of the above senses could O'Connor be judged "innocent" of the demands of her craft. Fifteen years after her death, she is generally regarded as one of America's greatest short story writers—the sort of writer whose technical skills are often described as "unsurpassed" and "approaching perfection." Nor is her appeal

sectarian; though her religious base is Catholic, she embraces concerns that are ecumenical.

But while O'Connor effectively transcended sectarianism, she at the same time made few if any concessions to the secularist mentality of those whom she mainly wrote for. O'Connor always worked, as her friend and mentor, Caroline Gordon, put it, "within the terrain of the bull"¹—that is, on the attack. Queried by a Northerner as to why Southern writers like herself so often write about "freaks," she replied: "Because we are still able to recognize one."² Asked what she thought was "stifling the Catholic writer of today," she said, simply, "I think it's the lack of a large intelligent reading audience which believes Christ is God."³ Such a viewpoint is reflected in her fiction, where techniques ranging from extreme violence to the creation of "grotesques" are used to shock the modern reader into an awareness of a spiritual dimension. Her corpus of fiction, consisting of two novels and about thirty short stories, is in fact a consistent and well-sustained attack on a modern secular world view which, according to O'Connor, relegates spirituality to a

private domain and sets in its place a sterile relativism. Flannery O'Connor, in sum, far from weakening the religious dimensions of her work to accommodate modern secularism, wrote like a Jeremiah thundering at the gates of the unheavenly city. As she once said in an address to a writing symposium: "I am not, of course, as innocent as I look."⁴

But if most of the complaints normally directed against religious writers of fiction do not apply to Flannery O'Connor, this is not to maintain that her effort to invest her work with an explicitly spiritual dimension has been generally understood or appreciated. During her lifetime, interpretations of her work—coming from both secular and religious quarters—were at times so inaccurate as to be perverse. Reviewers who recognized that her concerns were religious often inverted the nature of these concerns, calling her everything from anti-Catholic to nihilistic.⁵ Others gave psychological and sociological interpretations of her work that were highly distasteful to her. "I am in a state of shock,"⁶ she wrote to an English teacher on receiving one such interpretation. Nowadays, her intentions are better recognized, but certainly not completely understood. ". . . argument continues about her work," the review of her letters a few months ago in *The New York Times Book Review* section said. "What sort of vision animates these strange, fierce, wickedly funny tales? . . . She stands outside most of our categories."⁷

I think that a large part of the difficulty interpreters have had with O'Connor's work derives from its virtues, not its faults. As a religious writer with a singular lack of innocence, O'Connor deprives critics of most of the usual (and often legitimate) complaints made about religious writers of fiction; in a manner that is distressingly uncompromising, she lays bare the issue of the validity of investing fiction with religious concerns in the first place. Such an issue has, of course, its own purely literary interest, but in this

essay I wish to view her religious commitments in the broader context in which O'Connor herself saw them. Just as she believed that religious vision, far from restricting or hampering the artist, made it possible for him to write—freed him, in the most literal sense, to see and describe the world around him—so too she believed that religious faith freed the individual to engage with the world. For O'Connor, it was not merely a question of investing our lives with spirituality; rather, she believed that our lives take on a concrete and sensuous shape only by means of such spirituality. And since for O'Connor the "concrete" meant both the natural and the social world, there could be no question of confining spirituality to "our merely private experience" and keeping it apart from broader, more public concerns. On the contrary, such public concerns gained meaning—or existed at all—only to the extent they *were* spiritual. What she says about the fiction writer and his work she also believed about people and the conduct of their lives in general: the "discovery of being bound through the senses to a particular society and a particular history, to particular sounds and a particular idiom, is for the writer the beginning of a recognition that first puts his work into real human perspective."⁸ What O'Connor held out, in sum, in both the way she went about writing and the values she attempted to embody in her writing, was a vision of "the whole man," one in whom reason and faith, our public selves and our private selves, were not merely united but made to serve as the basis for one another. As I will try to show, such a vision carries with it profound moral implications.

O'Connor's theme of "the whole man" is present in all her fiction, but perhaps one of the clearest examples of the way in which she sees modern, secular man as *unwhole* is in her portrait of Rayber, the psychologist and schoolteacher of her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*.

Rayber is O'Connor's portrait of the rationalistic atheist. "The great dignity of man," he declares, "is his ability to say: I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellowman in this life is all of my portion and I'm content with it. It's enough to be a man."⁹ The problem, however, is that Rayber isn't really a "man"—or at least not a whole one. His personality is divided and he often speaks and acts in ways he can neither predict nor control. This disunity results from his hypertrophied rationalism, his separation of the head from the heart. O'Connor at one point describes his eyes as "like something human trapped inside a switchbox."¹⁰ Rayber, defending himself from a charge of cowardice, declares, "My guts . . . are in my head."¹¹ The final view of Rayber given to the reader is of him staring out the window, watching while his own idiot child, whom he both loves and does not want, is drowned. And what is so terrible in this scene, O'Connor makes clear, is less Rayber's tacit complicity in the act than his failure to let himself feel pain at its execution. "He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed."¹²

But if Rayber is O'Connor's prototype of the unwhole man, O.E. Parker, the hero of *Parker's Back*, is a comic version of the opposite—one who manages to become whole in the course of the story. In the beginning, he has no particular values, religious or otherwise; he is spiritually myopic. "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion."¹³ One day, however, he goes to a fair and sees there a man whose entire body is covered with tattoos. The sight arouses a deep, inexplicable wonder in Parker and he begins to have tattoos put on his own body. He has a "tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a cobra coiled around a torch on his chest, hawks on his

thighs, Elizabeth II and Phillip over where his stomach and liver were respectively. He did not care much what the subject was so long as it was colorful; on his abdomen he had a few obscenities but only because that seemed the proper place for them."¹⁴ Nearly half his body, the front half, is covered with tattoos by the time he meets his future wife, Sarah Ruth, a religious zealot. He neither likes nor is attracted to Sarah Ruth, but nonetheless experiences a strong desire to please her. Sarah Ruth for her part disapproves of his irreligious ways—particularly his tattoos, which she regards as worldly and frivolous—but Parker makes repeated attempts to mollify her. Finally, in his last attempt (which takes place after they have married), he has a picture of a Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back. The final comic scene of the story takes place when he comes home to show it to her:

"Another picture," Sarah Ruth growled. "I might have known you was off after putting some more trash on yourself."

Parker's knees went hollow under him. He wheeled around and cried, "Look at it! Don't just say that! *Look* at it!"

"I done looked," she said.

"Don't you know who it is?" he cried in anguish.

"No, who is it?" Sarah Ruth said. "It ain't anybody I know."

"It's him," Parker said.

"Him who?"

"God!" Parker cried.

"God? God don't look like that!"

"What do you know how he looks?" Parker moaned. "You ain't never seen him."

"He don't *look*," Sarah Ruth said. "He's a spirit. No man shall see his face."

"Aw listen," Parker groaned, "this is just a picture of him."

"Idolatry!" Sarah Ruth screamed. "Idolatry!"¹⁵

And she begins hitting him on the back with a broom, until "large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ." The story closes with Parker, "leaning against the tree, crying like a baby."¹⁶

Caroline Gordon, writing of this story, declared: "O'Connor has succeeded where the great Flaubert failed! In this story in which there are no theological references . . . the author has embodied that particular heresy which denies Our Lord corporeal substance."¹⁷ The effect of the story for this reader is very much like that of O'Connor's description of a dinner she once went to at Mary McCarthy's, in which the subject of the meaning of the Eucharist came up for a great deal of highly intellectual discussion. McCarthy conveyed her feeling that the Eucharist was a symbol and "a pretty good one"—to which O'Connor, who had until this point remained silent all evening, replied: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."¹⁸ For O'Connor, to reduce the sacred to the purely symbolic—a tendency which she felt was prominent in Catholics¹⁹ as well as Protestants²⁰—was to drain it of meaning altogether.²¹

O'Connor's vision of the unity of the spiritual and the corporeal is, of course, one which falls wholly within the domain of the Christian purview. The world is God's creation and therefore must be affirmed as good—a truth exemplified in Christian thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas. That much being said, however, it is important to note that O'Connor's viewpoint was far more akin to that of Aquinas, who consistently stressed the primacy of sense experience in his thinking (and whom O'Connor frequently referred to in her letters and essays) than Augustine, whose Platonic terminology sometimes gives the impression of a marked distaste for the sensuous world. In Aquinas, the neo-Platonic tendency to view material things as a crude and inferior imitation of divine ideas partly gives way to what some commentators have

called a "medieval existentialism," in which neither thought nor essence nor goodness but existence is God's most fundamental attribute. Thus, in Aquinas, the soul is not a complete substance in its own right but, as with Aristotle, it is the form of the body, individualized by the matter it informs. Nor does Aquinas adopt, like the rationalists in the centuries following him, a theory of innate ideas; for Aquinas the human mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth and all particular knowledge arises from sense experience. Aquinas' proofs of God are *a posteriori* arguments from creation to the divine being, rather than an ontological one, such as used by Anselm or Descartes.

The similarity of O'Connor's perspective to that of Aquinas' is in one sense merely an expression of her Catholic orthodoxy; though a very careful thinker, she was, after all, no philosopher. On a deeper level, however, I think that her enthusiasm for Aquinas was a very real expression of what might be called her "medieval sensibilities"—sensibilities which, for example, made her characterize modern culture as "Manichaeism."²² Manichaeism was a dualistic philosophy which originated in the first few centuries of the Christian era. It viewed matter as evil, spirit as good, and any contact between the two undesirable. To characterize modern culture in this way is obviously unfair and inaccurate, but O'Connor's point does, nonetheless, have substance. Most thinkers of the last few centuries have defined their positions with reference to a dualism that, while hardly Manichaeism, would have been far too extreme to be acceptable to Aquinas. This dualism, with its "scientific" (that is, pre-twentieth century scientific) conception of the material world as a partly or even wholly autonomous sphere of reality, has structured the thinking of both empiricists and positivists on the one hand and rationalists and idealists on the other. The philosophies of Descartes, Hume, and Kant, cornerstones of modern

thought, were in fact partly responses to such a scientific conception of the material or phenomenal world. O'Connor, in hearkening back to Aquinas, wished to free herself from this viewpoint—to recover a dualism which saw body and spirit less as two independent realities than as different aspects of the same, potentially transcendent reality. And she wanted to do this not just to preserve the integrity of religious belief but to broaden the horizons of reason. As she said, “St. Thomas called art reason in making. . . . In art the reason goes wherever the imagination goes. We have reduced the uses of reason terribly. You say a thing is reasonable and people think you mean it’s safe. What’s reasonable is seldom safe and always exciting.”²³

But it is not merely O'Connor's metaphysical preoccupations which tend to be medieval; it is her moral ones as well. Most readers of O'Connor are aware, after they have read a few of her stories, that they are in the presence of a moral sensibility vastly different from their own. O'Connor's stories are characterized by a tough-mindedness and unsparingness that is at times bewildering. Though many of her characters gain salvation, they seem to do so on the occasions of being murdered (the grandmother in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Tanner in *Judgment Day*); gored to death by a bull (Mrs. May in *Greenleaf*); or simply cursed by a disturbed teen-age girl (Mrs. Turpin in *Revelation*).²⁴ Most readers, understandably, are not likely to interpret such denouements in the light of grace and salvation; when it is pointed out to them that these interpretations are in fact in line with O'Connor's intentions, they are liable to react the way a reader of a book of O'Connor criticism I once checked out from the Catholic University in Washington D.C. did. Scrawled next to an explanation of the ending of one of O'Connor's stories was the comment: “This is the most depressing vision of salvation I’ve ever read.”

Such comments may seem comical, but the following passage, which O'Connor herself regarded as crucial to understanding her viewpoint, reflects just how real and how wide is the gap between O'Connor's and modern moral sensibilities. Speaking of the suffering of children, she writes:

One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him. . . . Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus' hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ because of the massacre of the innocents. In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.²⁵

These are harsh words, but their meaning is wholly consonant with the conception of “the whole man” outlined above. To interiorize our subjective and spiritual sides, to isolate them within a realm of purely private experience is at the same time to strangle them—to deprive ourselves of any basis for exercising reason and judgment. For O'Connor, freedom is not constituted by the autonomy of the will, but by the ability of the will to express itself in a social context. “You can't say anything significant about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a social context that belongs to it,”²⁶ she once declared. O'Connor consistently set herself in opposition to a notion of freedom that, in-

creasingly since the Middle Ages, has been defined with reference to a static and highly restricted social and physical environment. The restricted nature of this environment is reflected in the way we rigidly segregate the "natural" from the "supernatural" realms, or in our tendency to see human society as an artificial construct imposed on a pre-existing state of nature. For O'Connor, however (as for Aquinas), both man and society are integral parts of nature. Free will is therefore not something opposed to the "determined" aspects of our being, either physical or social, but something which grows out of them. ". . . free will does not mean one will," she says in the preface to *Wise Blood*, "but many wills conflicting in one man."²⁷ Free will is the end result of a struggle which takes place within our social and physical environment. What we delineate as "free" and "determined" are but the perceived products of an historical process we have ourselves helped to shape.

It is in this context that O'Connor's comments on the "popular pity" of modern culture can be understood. Since freedom is something which grows out of our engagement with the world, and since pain and suffering are experiences of this world, then to deny them is simultaneously to deny our freedom. Pain and suffering, no less than joy, must be lived through—accepted and resisted—to the varying extents we are capable; they do not in any case constitute a basis for denying *meaning* to the world, as Ivan Karamazov would do. Such a denial could make sense only from the standpoint of an ideal self exercising an exalted but disembodied pity and compassion. Suffering, far from denying meaning to the world, may (though not necessarily) be the occasion for investing the world *with* meaning—an occasion which she tries to enact in many of her stories. Pain and suffering are perhaps "evils," but evil must be understood in the traditional Christian sense of the term—as the priva-

tion of the good, not as an entity in itself. Just as O'Connor opposes any rigid dualism of body and spirit, so too she opposes a conception of evil as the strict opposite of good.²⁸ Experiences which cause suffering, she believed, can be of value to us in helping us see our relative proximity to, or distance from, the good. The deontological ethics of (among others) Kant, based on a separation of the moral and "noumenal" sides of our being from the sensuous and social world, was for O'Connor little more than modern Manichaeism, a denial of any real basis for freedom. Standards of good and bad should not be detached from the phenomenal and social world; if they are, the ultimate result will be either an abandonment of the standards or a denial of the world—in both cases, "terror" in the name of tenderness, or nihilism. The world, the totality of all our experiences, is the soil from which our "noumenal" or ideal self grows; it is disastrous to try to sunder them. Transcendence must be worked from within.

But if O'Connor's perspective shares much in common with medieval Christian thinking, exemplified by Aquinas, I do not mean to give the impression that her views were narrow or irrelevant to modern society. Her understanding of the interdependent relationship between what we call "freedom" and "determinism" was shared—at least in certain important aspects—not only by Aquinas but by Aristotle (insofar as "free will" was an issue for him at all), Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Teilhard de Chardin. And of course what is most interesting about these comparisons is not that O'Connor's views coincided at certain points with one Christian and two non-Christian thinkers but that she should have had so much in common with history's most notorious anti-Christian philosopher. Such a comparison with Nietzsche is not meant to undermine the fundamental importance of O'Connor's belief in a transcendent God, which Nietzsche repudiated, but

rather to emphasize the relevance of O'Connor's views to the modern world.²⁹ Nietzsche has been called a lot of things, but rarely irrelevant, and O'Connor, whose moral sensibilities were close to those of Nietzsche's, deserves the characterization quite as little.

The similarities between O'Connor and Nietzsche are striking and profound. Like O'Connor, Nietzsche inveighed against any radical separation of body and spirit;³⁰ like O'Connor, he counseled an ethic of acceptance and engagement with the world, promulgating his doctrine of *amor fati*, or love of fate;³¹ and like O'Connor, he opposed the modern tendency toward the privatization of morality, denouncing in terms similar to those of O'Connor's a "popular pity" which would sever feeling from reason, personal conduct from public conduct.³² For Nietzsche as well as O'Connor, the crisis of modern civilization was a moral one³³ and to reduce it to other terms—economic or otherwise—was both superficial and dangerous. Modern man was possessed of a weakened character and the source of this weakness, as Nietzsche says in *The Use and Abuse of History*, is his failure to draw limits around himself. Failing such limits, modern man's horizons become infinite and "he withdraws into himself, back into the small egoistic circle, where he must become dry and withered; he may possibly attain to cleverness, but never to wisdom."³⁴ Nietzsche shows here, as well as in many other places, the differences between himself and other "existentialist" thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Sartre, in whose thinking the category of the free individual is central. Nietzsche's philosophy, on the other hand, is mainly social in nature.

Neither Nietzsche nor O'Connor, of course, was a "political" thinker in the traditional sense of the term, but this was less because both were apolitical than because (as Tracy Strong has argued in the case of Nietzsche) they wished to

broaden our ideas about what constitutes the domain of politics. This domain should include our personal and moral concerns—not, however, in the sense of our individuality being sacrificed to larger, external forces, like "the navy or the government or religion"³⁵ as O. E. Parker conceived of them. Rather than our individuality being sacrificed to public concerns, we should understand it is constituted by them—that it can exist only as a disembodied "pity" without them. From the perspective of both Nietzsche and O'Connor, what is needed is a transfiguration of the categories of "public" and "personal." What is personal is not necessarily private or internal; in order for our public behavior to become moral, it must be made more personal—that is, more directly concerned with spiritual matters. But in order for this to happen, our personal behavior must be made less private—that is, less concerned with matters that are non-public and sentimental in nature. We become truly political—responsible for each other and the world—only by expressing the most personal, least private sides of ourselves.

None of this, of course, should be considered a call for the abolition of all distinctions between "public" and "private"; standards of moral behavior are meaningless unless there exist varying ways that individuals can try to embody them in their lives. So long as history continues, some sort of distinction between public and private will and should persist; the tension which history imposes on life must neither be strained to the point of alienating our public and *personal* selves from each other nor lessened to the point of dissolving the barrier between our public and *private* selves. To do the former is to deprive the public sphere of any real content; to do the latter is to sacrifice our freedom and individuality. To do *either* is to drain ourselves of any capacity for moral judgment—and hence to fall into nihilism. The tensions which history im-

poses on us must be endured—and to do this requires a degree of self-control on the part of the individual. In holding out such control as an ideal of human conduct and moral behavior within a social setting, Nietzsche and O'Connor were in harmony.³⁶

The pronounced social character of Nietzsche's and O'Connor's moral concerns finds common roots within the Judaeo-Christian tradition; both, moreover, recognized their debts to this tradition. O'Connor once wrote: "The Judaeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed even the shape of modern atheism."³⁷ These are views which Nietzsche basically agreed with, even if he would have added that some persons, like himself, were capable of going *beyond* the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Though O'Connor's and Nietzsche's judgments of Christianity were, of course, diametrically opposed, there is a commonality of viewpoint even in their opposition. Nietzsche once declared, with high aristocratic contempt, that Christianity was "Platonism for 'the people'"³⁸—meaning that it was a lifeless rationalism further degraded to a popular pity. And what is striking about this condemnation is that O'Connor could have very well made it—not so much with aristocratic contempt as with cool detachment—about modern, secular culture. It is significant that in O'Connor's letters and essays there are no references to speak of to Plato but some very substantial ones to the "Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete."³⁹ It is the Judaic component in Christianity, more than the Greek one, which O'Connor was drawn to. Nietzsche, for his part (and contrary to so much of the nonsense that has been written about him), had a vast admiration and respect for Judaism. The difference is that for Nietzsche the Judaic component was per-

verted and then abandoned by Christianity whereas for O'Connor it was extended and raised to a higher, more universal level. Both Nietzsche and O'Connor repudiated Christianity as a religion of a "smiling Jesus with a bleeding heart"⁴⁰ (O'Connor's words, not Nietzsche's), only Nietzsche felt that this was an accurate and more or less complete characterization of Christianity while O'Connor believed it was a false and distorted one. Both viewed modern society as careening madly into nihilism, only Nietzsche believed Christianity to be its instrument and cause, O'Connor its solution.

Nietzsche and O'Connor, though markedly different kinds of performers, belong on the same stage—the stage of Judaeo-Christian thought. And the final effect of viewing them in this way together is not to denigrate the importance and relevance of O'Connor's religious faith but to enhance it. In many ways, it is O'Connor, not Nietzsche, who gives the stronger performance. Nietzsche sometimes referred to the Christian faith (as well as many other "faiths") as the product of little more than the desire for comfort and reassurance—the need to make life easier to bear. Could there be a more striking refutation of this view than the example of Fiannery O'Connor, who believed that Christianity in some ways made life *harder* to bear⁴¹ but who nonetheless had complete faith in it because she felt, simply, that it was the truth? Both her writings and her personal life show that she embraced the truth of Christianity with an integrity that we call, for lack of better terms, "hard-headed" and "unsparing." The manner, for example, in which she bore the illness that extended over most of her adult life, expressing only a cheerful gratitude for it in her letters, testifies to such extraordinary integrity and wholeness of belief. The ironic fact in a comparison of Nietzsche and O'Connor is that the latter was far more "hard-headed" and "unsparing" than the former. Indeed, the little Cath-

olic girl from Georgia made the self-styled anti-Christ of philosophy look like a lamb. Not only did she evince that very strength of character which Nietzsche held out as the only real solution to modern nihilism, but she gained such strength through precisely the element Nietzsche claimed had

undermined it—religious faith. O'Connor presents a challenge to Nietzsche's viewpoint on Christianity that, I believe, Nietzsche himself would have respected and learned from. Other, not so insightful antagonists of the Christian faith could benefit no less.

¹Caroline Gordon, "An American Girl," in Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson, eds., *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 127. ²Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), p. 44. ³Quoted in Friedman and Lawson, p. 235. ⁴O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 64. Evelyn Waugh, on reading O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, expressed doubts that it could have been "the unaided work of a young lady." Quoted in Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 35. ⁵See Louis D. Rubin, *Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt*, in Friedman and Lawson, p. 60; and O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 108. ⁶O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 437. ⁷Richard Gilman, "A life of Letters," *The New York Times Book Review* (March 18, 1979), p. 1. ⁸O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 197. ⁹Flannery O'Connor, "The Violent Bear It Away," in *3 By Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Signet, 1962), p. 405. ¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 396. ¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 405. ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 423. ¹³Flannery O'Connor, "Parker's Back," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), p. 516. ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 514. ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 529. ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 530. ¹⁷Gordon, "An American Girl," in Friedman and Lawson, p. 136. That O'Connor generally agreed with this interpretation is indicated by her remarks in *The Habit of Being*, p. 593-4. ¹⁸O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 125. ¹⁹See O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 147. ²⁰See O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 304. ²¹"When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken and the spirit of that step has continued apace." O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 161. ²²*Ibid.*, p. 68. ²³Quoted in Friedman and Lawson, p. 248. ²⁴"All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc." O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 275. ²⁵O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 226-7. ²⁶Quoted in Friedman and Lawson, p. 241. ²⁷O'Connor, Preface to "Wise Blood," in *3 By Flannery O'Connor*. ²⁸"Catholics believe that all creation is good and that evil is the wrong use of the good . . ." O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 144. ²⁹The only substantial reference I know of

that O'Connor made to Nietzsche is found in *The Habit of Being*, p. 90: ". . . it is easy to see that the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead." This wonderful quotation should not be dismissed as merely tongue-in-cheek (though of course it is *also* that); its content is serious and expresses far better than most commentators have what, indeed, "Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead." What Nietzsche meant was not that "there is no God," but rather that "God has died"—which implies that there is a sense in which God can be regarded to have once lived. As Walter Kaufmann has put it in his *Nietzsche* (Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 100, Nietzsche's parable of the madman in which he announced the death of God (*The Gay Science*, 125) was "an attempt at a diagnosis of contemporary civilization, not a metaphysical speculation about ultimate reality." Kaufmann has even suggested, in his discussion of Nietzsche's religious concerns, that such labels as atheism and agnosticism are "simple-minded and inadequate." Such a line of thought cannot be taken too far without obscuring the important differences between O'Connor and Nietzsche, but it does point, in my opinion, to the conclusion that Nietzsche had far more in common with O'Connor than with most thinkers who have called themselves "atheists." ³⁰As early as his first book, Nietzsche rejected "the popular and thoroughly false contrast of soul and body." *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), section 21. ³¹See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), aphorism 276. ³²"Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to desire . . . remains hidden in a chaotic inner world that the modern man has a curious pride in calling his 'real personality.' He has the substance, he says, and only wants the form; but this is quite an unreal opposition in a living thing. Our modern culture is for that reason not a living one, because it cannot be understood without that opposition. In other words, it is not a real culture but a kind of knowledge about culture . . . The opposition of *inner* and *outer* makes the outer side still more barbarous . . . modern man suffers from a weakened personality." Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins

(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), p. 23-4, p. 28. See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), Part 5, section 202, for Nietzsche's comments on "the religion of pity."³³ On the centrality of moral concerns to Nietzsche's perspective: "Every morality is, as opposed to *laissez aller*, a bit of tyranny against 'nature' . . . But the curious fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness, whether in thought itself or in government, or in rhetoric and persuasion, in the arts as in ethics, has developed only owing to 'the tyranny of such capricious laws'; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is 'nature' and 'natural'—and not that *laissez aller*." Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part 5, section 188. On Nietzsche's belief that the crisis of modern-day civilization was a moral one: "*Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality*—in other words, as we understand it, merely *one* type of morality beside which, and after which many other types, above all higher moralities, are, or ought to be, possible. But this morality resists such a 'possibility' . . . we have reached the point where we find even in political and social insti-

tutions an ever more visible expression of this morality . . . this degeneration and diminution of man . . . into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims, is *possible*, there is no doubt of it. Anyone who has once thought through this possibility to the end knows one kind of nausea that other men don't know—but perhaps also a new *task!*—" Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part 5, sections 202-3.³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 64.³⁵ O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, p. 516.³⁶ For Nietzsche, this ideal of self-control was expressed in his notion of "the Roman Caesar with Christ's soul." *The Will To Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), section 983.³⁷ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 155.³⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface.³⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 202.⁴⁰ Quoted in Miles Orvell, *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), p. 21.⁴¹ "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe." O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 354.