

# PROPHETESS IN FICTION

By MICHAEL PAUL GALLAGHER

*Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.* Flannery O'Connor.

TO PUT IT BOLDLY, and baldly, Flannery O'Connor is possibly the greatest Catholic imagination in English-language fiction. If she were still alive, she would be in her early sixties. But after a long battle with lupus, she died in 1964, when she was not yet forty. Her suffering seems to have given her strength and fuelled her sense of humour: she described herself on crutches as 'a structure with flying buttresses'.<sup>1</sup> Behind her she left two novels (*Wise blood* and *The violent bear it away*), a few dozen short stories, a collection of essays, *Mystery and manners*, and a marvellous set of letters which appeared as *The habit of being*. What distinguishes her from many another Catholic or Christian writer is the level of her theological awareness. She was deeply read in Aquinas, Newman, Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin, to name but a few. Living in rural Georgia and being profoundly proud of the South, she found her Catholicism of vision translating itself into the strange world of Bible Belt situations. From this crossroads she offered her readers both comedy and provocation.

This article will concentrate on the provocation or on what she herself called 'the prophetic vision' (*MM*, 44). By this she understood 'a matter of seeing, not saying' and she described it as 'the most terrible vocation' (*HB*, 372). Among imaginative writers she is surely unique in having not only a generally appreciative sense of what she called the prophetic, but a grasp of its scriptural meaning. She reviewed Vawter's *The conscience of Israel* and described the mission of the prophet 'to recall the people to truths they were already aware of but chose to ignore'.<sup>2</sup> She was also acquainted with the writings of Eric Voegelin concerning the prophets and in a letter of 1960 she mentions studying the *De*

*veritate* of Thomas Aquinas on prophecy as depending 'on the imaginative and not the moral faculty . . . a matter of seeing'.<sup>3</sup> Her own approach to fiction was to be comically faithful to the visible universe and at the same time 'go through it into an experience of mystery' (*MM*, 41), or in her own inimitable formulation, 'in fiction two and two is always more than four' (*MM*, 102). In this sense she wanted to be a prophet:

In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth (*MM*, 44, 179).

*An option to disturb*

This 'prophetic vision' was part of her choice to go 'counter to prevailing attitudes' (*MM*, 47). Although ferociously committed to a fiction that would be unpious and utterly concrete in its details, she was also ambitious in a pascalian fashion to shake the complacencies of her unbelieving readers. 'My audience', she wrote in 1955, 'are the people who think God is dead' (*HB*, 92) and she had palpable if undidactic designs upon them. Many of her stories seek to lead that audience to a moment of violent surprise, an overturning of normal expectations. Before the word was invented, Flannery O'Connor was 'deconstructing' the spiritual limitations of bourgeois readers, enticing them to enlarge what they understood by realism and reality:

For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God in a double way, or at all (*MM*, 157-158).

Granted this cultural environment, she deliberately chose to cultivate the 'grotesque' in her fiction; hers would be a 'kind of realism' that pushes 'toward mystery and the unexpected' and one which 'takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable' (*MM*, 40, 109). The typical centre of her stories involves 'an action that is totally unexpected' and therefore one that comes as

something of a shock both to reader and character; or as she said, with disarming simplicity, 'my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil' (*MM*, 118). At her best she writes some of the most challenging and memorable short stories of this century, remarkable for their comic tone and their religious vision. Her limitations are like those of Jane Austen, deliberately chosen because of the intensity of her prophetic zeal. She saw herself as dramatizing three basics of the faith, 'the Fall, the Redemption and the Judgment'—for a 'hostile audience', and hence needing to 'resort to violent literary means' (*MM*, 185).

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures (*MM*, 34).

In short, her theology of salvation and her penchant for the off-beat converge to make Flannery O'Connor a self-conscious prophetess of 'shock'.

She is ironically dismissive of many superficialities, from pious Catholic approaches to literature to the equally sentimental secularist who 'wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised' by fiction: 'his sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration' (*MM*, 48). That last phrase captures one of her constant obsessions and the reason for her strategy of shock:

Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause (*MM*, 33).

It was in this light that she was proud to belong to the southern tradition: 'we were doubly blessed, not only in our Fall, but in having means to interpret it' (*MM*, 59). She enjoys using characters that disturb because they belong to the category of 'Christ-haunted . . . prophet-freak' (*MM*, 44, 118). She delights in finding ever new embodiments for one fundamental theme:

a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul. Its centre of meaning will be Christ; its centre of destruction will be the devil (*MM*, 197).

Flannery O'Connor's spiritual theology is in some ways unremarkable; it is traditional if often brilliantly independent, even in her non-fictional prose. But her genius lay in being able to transmogrify this theological vision into narrative forms that remain stunningly powerful still. There her sense of evil is always accompanied by a huge humour, and her choice of the grotesque detail merges into her overall vision of healing mercy. The shock strategies and the vehemently prophetic note are only entry points into a large celebration of grace. As she remarked in one of her letters, in fiction one may 'have to approach it (grace) negatively' (*HB*, 144). It has to be negative because most of her characters are people standing in unrecognized need of conversion, and hence this will be the most typical obsession of her stories, the arrival of disturbing grace.

In this respect it is worth mentioning that the best article I know on Flannery O'Connor from a theological perspective is a fairly recent one by Stephen Maddux. He studies the Pharisee characteristics in her central figures and offers a detailed study of one of the stories, 'Revelation'. In general he argues that she 'made spiritual blindness and insight the special theme of her fiction':

Nearly all O'Connor's stories portray characters who must be jolted out of their habitual way of seeing themselves by a special grace (usually a quite disagreeable one). It is a particularly modern predicament: people resist the spiritual nature of sin, which hates to recognize itself, but also because of the modern spirit, which is reluctant to admit anything beyond the human self.<sup>4</sup>

*A comedy of conversion*

Everybody, as far as I am concerned, is The Poor . . . God rescues us from ourselves if we want him to. (*Habit of being*, 103, 118).

The story that I wish to concentrate upon here was in fact her own favourite, 'The artificial nigger'. It tells of one day in the lives of Mr Head and his grandson Nelson, a day when they leave their rural Georgia and visit the city. The whole day turns into a power struggle between the ten-year-old boy and the old man, each pretending to be more sure of himself than he really is. Most of all it is the story of Mr Head discovering the harshness of his pride and then his need for forgiveness. Even in the opening

paragraph, when he wakes up before dawn, the implications of the comparisons are ironic and indicative of his unconverted pride.

He saw half of the moon five feet away in his shaving mirror, paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter . . . The straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost notable air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant . . . (*GMHF*, 102).

Those three similes are a warning from narrator to reader that, unknown to himself, Mr Head is another victim of original sin and in need of an 'action of grace' (*HB*, 160). As the day unfolds, with its accumulation of frustrations and minor disasters, the comedy mounts against Mr Head until the main crisis comes. The pair find themselves lost in a black ghetto of the city, going round in circles to find their way back to the station. Exhausted with hunger and heat, Nelson falls asleep in a side street. Mr Head decides that it 'is sometimes necessary to teach a child a lesson he won't forget' and hides himself behind a garbage can. When Nelson wakes up, he panics at not seeing his grandfather, runs some three blocks and knocks down an elderly woman with her groceries. Mr Head approaches a now angry group of women and Nelson clings 'panting against him'. But his grandfather senses the arrival of a policeman and suddenly comes the moment of betrayal.

'This is not my boy', he said. 'I never seen him before'. He felt Nelson's finger fall out of his flesh. The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him (p 123).

As Mr Head walks on still in search of the train home, Nelson follows him in stony silence and his grandfather 'began to feel the depth of his denial'. Eventually they both come across a plaster figure on a garden wall.

They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. Mr

Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew it now (p 128).

One would have to enter more details of the story than can be touched upon here in order to realize the power of this moment. The irony of that last phrase is central to Flannery O'Connor's universe: again and again she enjoys mocking people of unconverted pride in order to shock them into some possibility of change. It seems crude to say that this is a story about Fall and Redemption, or that the statue is a Christ figure; but truth lies in that direction. The last page or two of 'The artificial nigger' are unique in O'Connor's stories in that she allows herself a more extended and indeed eloquent commentary on the spiritual drama than elsewhere.

Mr Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it . . . He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair . . . He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as he forgave, he left ready at that instant to enter Paradise.

Many of the other stories close with a similar moment of potential conversion, not always realized and seldom so overtly interpreted by the narrative voice. Again and again she finds fresh and haunting ways of surprising the reader, rather as she surprises her central characters. Her sharp eye builds up detail after external detail, but her real focus is with dispositions; it is there that the conflict of pride and poverty is confronted or evaded. In this sense, but with a much less solemn tone, she would agree with the statement of Patrick White, another prophetic novelist, when he puts these words into the mouth of Laura Trevelyan: 'When man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so'.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The habit of being*, p 151. The following abbreviations will be used for reference to O'Connor's works within the text: *MM*—*Mystery and manners: occasional prose*, ed Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Faber & Faber, London 1972); *GMHF*—*A good man is hard to find. ECIT* (stories) introduced by Lisa Alther (The Women's Press, London, 1980); *HB*—*The habit of being*, ed Sally Fitzgerald, (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: voice of the peacock* (New Brunswick, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Feeley, *ibid.*, p 144.

<sup>4</sup> Maddux, Stephen: 'Flannery O'Connor and the christian pharisee', *Communio*, 11 (1984), pp 336-337.

<sup>5</sup> White, Patrick: *Voss* (Penguin edition), p 387.