

The Iconographic Fiction and Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor

“What the word says, the image shows silently; what we have heard, we have seen.” That is how the Seventh Great Ecumenical Council held at Constantinople in 787 summarized its defense of the use of icons in Christian worship. What the council confessed to have heard from scripture and to believe is that God became man in Jesus Christ. According to the Gospel of John “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:13-14). Through an act of unfathomable *kenosis*, humility and love, the infinite had become finite, the uncircumscribable was circumscribed in a human being, and the invisible was made visible. In so far as the divine Word, the Only Begotten Son of the Father, had become flesh and took the body of a man, he and the saints could be painted on wood or represented in mosaic or mural art. The Old Testament prohibition against images had been lifted by God himself.

Flannery O'Connor did not use paint to make icons; however, she was an “iconographer” with words. For she embraced the Incarnation with utter seriousness in her life and in her fiction. To her close friend

whom we know in the correspondence only as “A,” she writes in September of 1955, “God became not only a man, but Man. This is the mystery of Redemption.”¹ Some years later, in another letter to “A,” O'Connor explains how this belief in the Incarnation ran up against the secularity of her audience as she was challenged to lend fresh expression to the Christian vision of life.

The setting in which most modern fiction takes place is exactly a setting in which nothing is so little felt to be true as the reality of a faith in Christ. I know what you mean here but you haven't said what you mean. Fiction may deal with faith implicitly but explicitly it deals only with faith-in-a-person, or persons. What must be unquestionable is what is implicitly implied as the author's attitude, and to do this the writer has to succeed in making the divinity of Christ seem consistent with the structure of all reality.

Vigen Guroian is a professor of theology and ethics at Loyola College in Baltimore. He is the author of numerous books including *Ethics after Christendom* (1994), *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination* (1998), and *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening* (1999). This essay was first delivered as a talk to a recent gathering of ISI Weaver Fellows at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal in Mecosta, Michigan.

This has to be got across implicitly in spite of a world that doesn't feel it, in spite of characters that don't live it.²

The ancient defenders of icons said essentially the same about paintings and the Incarnation. The icon made the divinity of Christ seem consistent with the structure of all reality, and most especially human existence. Icons of Christ and the saints testified to the real potential of human life, exceeding even the highest expectations of pagan humanism. God became man and made it possible for man to become God—not, of course, by nature God, but most assuredly by grace that transfigures life. The Incarnation made it possible for all believers in Jesus Christ “to be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Christian humanism introduced the ideas of Creation, Incarnation, and the sanctification of life while at the same time rejecting the strong prejudice of Hellenic culture that spirit is opposed to matter and that, therefore, God, who is spirit, would never enter the material world. In light of the Incarnation and bodily Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, human salvation could no longer be thought of as an escape of the captive soul from the prison of the body. The early church condemned as heresies Docetism and Manicheanism, two gnostic movements within Christianity, precisely because they embraced this dualism of matter and spirit. In her day, Flannery O'Connor combatted what she viewed as modern reincarnations of these ancient gnostic heresies. She detected the gnosticism in currents of contemporary spirituality that thrived even within the Christian churches. In her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O'Connor names the enemy:

The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. This is also pretty much the modern spirit, and for the

sensibility infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art.³

This passage needs some explanation. After all, aren't moderns materialists? And yet O'Connor seems to maintain that contemporary people value material things less than spiritual reality. How is she able to say this in the face of society's massive appetite for material goods and obsession with the body and sex? O'Connor does not dispute this description of modern tastes and behavior. But she does point to a two-fold irony in it. First, this much-discussed and depicted sex is radically devalued sex—not that it is reduced to mere animal sex. Human sexuality is thoroughly permeated by spirit and always transcends mere instinct. Rather, modern sex is either trivialized by sentimentality or distorted into obscenity and pornography. Sentimentalized sex leaps over sin to “a mock state of innocence.” Obscenity (and pornography) is also “essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purpose, and so far disconnects it from the meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake.”⁴ Sentimentalized and romanticized sex ultimately devalues the body, as it views the body as merely an instrument of the self, not constitutive of it. This frequently leads to alienation, *ennui*, and boredom. As for materialism and consumerism, the objects with which contemporary people clutter their lives do not satisfy their need for a meaningful life. The mandarins of marketing and advertising know this. So they constantly fuel this dissatisfaction and inflame the acquisitive spirit with incessant promises that the next purchase will quench the craving.

Thus, when modern people turn to religion, they often look for release from this syndrome, in flight from the body and materialism to peace of mind by the quickest means available. A plethora of mysti-

cisms, transcendental religions, and new age spiritualities compete for the attention of the people. O'Connor writes: "Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as instant Uplift."⁵ As Frederick Asals has observed so wisely in his study of O'Connor's craft: "The central thrust in all of Flannery O'Connor's later fiction is to explode this...escapism or pseudotranscendence by insisting again and again that existence can only be *in* the body, *in* matter, whatever the horrors that may entail."⁶ Even this astute assessment falls short of naming all that is at stake for O'Connor in her defense of incarnate being. Nature does not end in orgasm, a full stomach, or owning a late model luxury vehicle. Nature is both a window into and a path to the supernatural. O'Connor understands the special challenges that a secular age poses for a writer of fiction with orthodox Christian convictions and a sacramental vision of life. Even the "average Catholic reader" is smitten with the gnostic spirit, she observes. "By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché"⁷ and nature is emptied of grace. In a discussion of O'Connor's fiction, Peter S. Hawkins concludes that "what is distinctive about the modern era is that the conflict between nature and grace has been resolved by the elimination of the notion of grace altogether."⁸ This may be an exaggeration. O'Connor did not believe that the modern person dismisses grace entirely. However, she does conclude that when modern people entertain grace as a possibility in their lives, they are inclined to think of it as a divine utility, not as a sacramental presence. Grace is an extra, alien ingredient added to nature by God, conjured up by priests and prayers, like gas pumped into an empty fuel tank—useful but not present under ordinary cir-

cumstances. What is more, this instrumentalist view of grace makes it "almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace," says O'Connor. Supernatural grace is not magic; it is not subject to human manipulation, or restricted to human needs. In an effort to impress this upon her readers, O'Connor says that in her fiction she approaches grace "almost negatively."⁹ In practical terms this means that the majority of her protagonists strenuously resist the action of God upon them. The lesson they learn, often through suffering, is that grace is God's own free doing and can come upon anyone even in the face of his or her disbelief.

Although Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Sienna may have helped shape her religious imagination, O'Connor felt acutely how different her location in life was from theirs. She recognized that the vast majority of people for whom she was writing lacked a vision of a unified world that comes from the hand of God, is fallen but redeemed by the Creator-Word, and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. She assayed that only a small minority of her readers, and even fewer of her reviewers, shared her incarnational faith: even many Catholics did not take the Incarnation with deep seriousness as a rule for their lives or truly believe in the resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, O'Connor made it her task to show her readers that the world is surrounded by mystery and that the physical creation is itself an icon and a window into that mystery. In her essay "Novelist and Believer" she explains that the Christian novelist will reject the influence "of those Manichean-type theologies which...[see] the natural world as unworthy of penetration," because he knows that the infinite cannot be approached directly in his art. Rather, "he must penetrate the natural human world as it is," without an ideological formula or hardened preconceptions of

what lies behind it. "The more sacramental [the writer's] theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that." With these prerequisites of belief the Christian writer of fiction seeks "to penetrate the concrete world"¹⁰ with a confidence that he may catch a glimpse of, "the image of the source, the image of ultimate reality."¹¹

Thus in Flannery O'Connor's stories, a pigpen momentarily becomes the place from whence Jacob's ladder reaches into

and the mysteries that are revealed to her protagonists join the biblical world and its events with theirs, just as the iconographer paints his gospel scenes in such a manner that the Old Testament prefigurements of the New Testament events are gathered up in icons of Christ's birth and baptism or his transfiguration. In other words, for O'Connor fiction truly is an incarnational art.

Yet for these efforts, Flannery O'Connor was badly misunderstood. Her trouble was, as she well understood, that those who received her fiction lacked the biblical moorings and moral imagination to comprehend the true nature of her iconographic art. Modern interpreters of iconography have described the icon as primitive in one breath and idealistic in the next, not for once grasping its realism grounded in the Incarnation and revelation of transfigured life. When O'Connor first came on the scene, critics described her fiction as grotesque, and attributed to her the same metaphysical and moral dualism that she stood against. What possible respect could this writer have for the body when she routinely portrayed disfigured characters and, worse yet, put them through, what seemed to these critics, trials of gratuitous violence? They concluded that O'Connor was committed to the irreconcilableness of matter and spirit.

Hawkins sets the record straight, however, when he correctly observes that "the warfare she [O'Connor] wages is not, in fact, spirit against flesh, but rather, spirit *in* flesh. Her goal is not only to make it impossible to deny the sacred as present in the midst of the secular; it is to make it impossible to rest easy with any notion of secularity at all."¹² In her stories O'Connor describes a human drama in which flesh, in St. Paul's sense of *sarx* or sinful human nature, resists the action of grace by which God seeks to heal sin and destroy death. To her



Courtesy of the Ina Dillard Russell Library, Georgia College & State University.

Flannery O'Connor

the heavens and bears the saints upward; a line of tree tops may be experienced as the protecting wall of an Edenic garden sanctuary; and a water stain on a bedroom ceiling takes flight as a bird of pentecostal grace to cure one rebellious youth of his spiritual blindness. Much like the icon painter, O'Connor turns to inverted perspective and distorted form in order to impress upon her reader that the ordinary may be revelatory, that the natural bears the image of the supernatural. And like the icon painter, O'Connor's art is figural and typological. The images she paints with words

friend Cecil Dawkins, she states: "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."¹³ This, she insists, is as true for her readers as for the characters in her stories.

The psychosomatic unity of human personality and the Word's incarnation of this nature are the grounds of God's efforts to redeem the fallen creature that he has made in his own image. These are also the Christian truths that generate the drama of O'Connor's stories. Often her protagonists deny the divine image within them and resist God's redemptive purpose in their lives. In other words, they inveterately resist grace, until grace moves them to embrace the mystery of their existence within a revelation of divine meaning. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury Fox is a young man filled with hubris and immersed in self-delusion about his talents as a writer. He rejects the Christian religion because he thinks it stands in the way of his artistic imagination and fulfillment as a writer. He says to a priest in the story, "God is an idea created by man" and "The artist prays by creating."¹⁴ Asbury leaves his home on a country farm to live in New York City (the secular city) to make his mark on the literary world. But things do not go well for Asbury. He is not productive and he becomes ill.

His sickness weakens him so that he has no recourse but to return home to what he imagines will be his speedy demise. His sister Mary George, a principal of an elementary school and someone equally smitten with pride in her own intellect, sarcastically diagnoses Asbury's condition: "Asbury can't write so he gets sick,"¹⁵ she quips. But Asbury's sickness is not just in his head. It is also genuinely physical. Later in the story, we learn that before leaving for the city, Asbury drank unpasteurized milk at the family farm in an unsuccessful at-

tempt to make friends with two of the Negro workers. From this he contracts undulant fever, called "bangs" in cows, that causes painfully alternating chills and fevers in humans, though it is not fatal.

Asbury is one of O'Connor's modern gnostics, alienated from home and his own body, sick with the sin of pride, especially in his case intellectual hubris, and attracted to New Age sorts of mysticism that project man as his own savior and perfecter. Since childhood, Asbury has resisted that grace which is neither of his own conjuring nor in service to his selfish ways. A water stain on the ceiling above his bed is the sign of this grace that he resists. For as long as Asbury can remember, it has been there, taking the form of a fierce bird with icicles in its claws making ready to descend upon him. At the close of the story, Asbury lies in bed dreadfully sick but also aware that he is not going to die. "The old life in him [was] exhausted. He awaited the coming of a new." The fierce bird "appear[ed] all at once in motion," the Holy Ghost descended upon him, O'Connor announces, "emblazoned in ice instead of fire."¹⁶

"The Enduring Chill" is as complex a story as Flannery O'Connor penned, and we cannot touch upon all facets of its meaning. Several details in the story, however, point to its principal themes. Early in the story, O'Connor establishes that Asbury has a "peculiar" relationship to the bovine species. It is not just that he drinks their milk and gets sick. More important is the fact that although he is not a cow, he *can* get sick with a disease that *is* a cow disease. O'Connor reminds us that human beings share an animal nature with other creatures. During a car ride back to the farm, Asbury notices that "a small walleied Guernsey...[is] watching him steadily as if she sense[s] some bond between them." With sardonic humor, O'Connor comments: "On the point of death, he found

himself existing in a state of illumination that was totally out of keeping with the kind of talk he had to listen to from his mother. This was largely about cows with names like Daisy and Bessie Button and their intimate functions—their mastitis and their screw-worms and their abortions.”¹⁷

Asbury's endeavors to practice an intellectual angelism are defeated. He wants to die, or more accurately, he wants to shed his body. But it is not his body, nor the bodies of the cows on the farm, that blocks his “illumination.” A spiritual disease frustrates his creativity and prevents his happiness. “I think it is usually some form of self-inflation that destroys the free use of a gift,” says O'Connor in one of her essays.¹⁸ Ironically, the bird that descends upon him *is* a product of Asbury's own furtive imagination, suggesting that this young man's most creative period of life might lie ahead of him. He will live, and maybe even inherit the kingdom of God, in a physically diseased body but with humility, because “the last film of illusion...[has been] torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes.”¹⁹

Like the humanism of a Thomas More or a John Henry Newman, Flannery O'Connor's Christian humanism is grounded in an unwavering incarnational faith and sacramental vision. But faced with the modern temper, she chose a strategy that she gambled would shake the spiritual cataracts from her secular readers' eyes and open their vision to the operations of grace in the everyday world. In her essay “Novelist and Believer,” she explains:

When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel—its language, its structure, its action. I have to make the reader feel,

in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal.²⁰

O'Connor does not limit herself, however, to the traditional sacraments to make her case. It is fitting that the last story she finished stands up as her most profound affirmation of the sanctity of our bodies as imprinted with the image of God and having a place of permanence in the redemptive purpose of God. For she completed “Parker's Back” in her hospital bed in defiance of her doctor's instructions not to press her own failing body any further. “Parker's Back” crowns the achievement of O'Connor's Christian humanism. In this story, she resoundingly rejects gnosticism and iconoclasm and shows that the Incarnation is the true source of lasting beauty, goodness, and truth. Without the slightest didacticism she builds the case that beauty and goodness are not ends in themselves but point to the Creator of those things in which they may be seen, enjoyed, and the truth known. Through a back country character, whom she describes “as ordinary as a loaf of bread”²¹—an only slightly disguised allusion to the bread of the Eucharist—she shows that divine truth is never an abstraction, but is always manifested concretely in the human being who praises God in his glory.

Obadiah Elihue Parker is the opposite of Asbury Fox in almost every respect, except that like Asbury he is driven by a desire for perfection. Asbury is an intellectual who thinks that he can create beauty and truth out of his own head, whereas Parker—for that is the name he goes by, since he is ashamed of his first and middle names—wants to wear beauty on his body. When O'Connor introduces us to him at the start

of the story, Parker is twenty-eight years of age and has married a young woman named Sarah Ruth who is the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher. "They were married in the County Ordinary's office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous."²² But we have to be taken back to when Parker was fourteen years of age to fully understand what moves him throughout the story. In that year, at the fair, Parker set his eyes on a tattooed man whose entire body, from head to foot, was covered with images. O'Connor writes: "Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed." Parker does not exactly think these thoughts about mystery and life, for O'Connor makes it clear that he is a character moved more by instinct and emotion than by intellect. "It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed."²³

Nevertheless, the course of Parker's life had been changed. For the first time, he entertained a vision of beauty. His search for God had begun. "The man, who was small and sturdy, moved on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own." From that moment on, Parker wanted the same for himself. He wanted to wear everything that there is on his body in bright color and beautiful design. He began to appropriate tattoos. But strangely, no tattoo kept him satisfied for very long; and "as the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general." No combination seemed to achieve the desired result. The overall effect was not the harmony of color and form and movement, the beauty Parker saw on the tattooed man, but "something haphazard and botched." Changing metaphor and perspective on human desire and

the longing for happiness, O'Connor adds, "Hungry people made Parker nervous."²⁴

When we meet Parker at the beginning of the story, his entire body is covered with tattoos, except for his back. "He had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself." Parker has no idea that he is



Courtesy of the Ina Dillard Russell Library, Georgia College & State University.

Flannery O'Connor

being moved by and toward a profound theological truth. But through comic irony, O'Connor invites the reader to explore the serious notion that man is a microcosm of creation, that in the human being, whom God has created in his very own image, the whole universe reverberates. God intends that man be the custodian and priest of this creation, giving it order and blessing it to good use, even lending it his voice to glorify God. Once again, Parker does not think these things, but he does feel them, or more precisely, he "senses" them. It is revealed in his eyes, which O'Connor describes as "the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflect[ing] the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea."²⁵

To please his wife, for nothing seems to please her, especially not his tattoos, Parker is determined to have a tattoo done on his back that she will approve of. He is also moved by a “dissatisfaction [that] began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo. It had to be his back. There was no help for it.” One day Parker crashes a tractor into a tree and sets it on fire. Immediately, he takes flight in his truck straight to the city fifty miles away where he visits the local tattoo artist. Parker is convinced that nothing short of a tattoo of God himself will please Sarah Ruth. He pages through a book of pictures of God and is caught by the “all-demanding eyes” of a Byzantine Christ, “as if he were being brought to life by a subtle power.”²⁶ Parker is about to have himself inscribed by the image of him whom St. Paul calls the “express image” of God the Father and the archetypal image of our humanity. His earlier “skirmish” with the burning tree—an allusion to Moses’ revelation on Sinai—signifies and foreshadows Parker’s personal appropriation of the Incarnate God, inscribed on his own flesh.

In her description of Parker’s crash into the tree that sends him on this mission to get tattooed one final time, O’Connor employs the ancient Christian double entendre of the sun and the Son of God. I have added the emphases to the text to highlight not only this use of the double entendre but also the other biblical allusions that she carefully plants within the scene.

As he circled the field *his mind was on a suitable design for his back*. The *sun*, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front of him to behind him, but he appeared to see it both places *as if he had eyes in the back of his head*. All at once he saw the *tree* reaching out to grasp him: a ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, ‘GOD ABOVE!’

He landed on his *back* while the tractor crashed

upside down into the *tree* and burst into *flame*. The first thing Parker saw were his *shoes* quickly eaten by fire.... He could feel the hot breath of the *burning tree* on his face. He scrambled backwards, still sitting, *his eyes cavernous* and if he had known how to *cross* himself he would have done it.²⁷

Soon Parker will have “eyes in the back of his head,” or more precisely on his back. His “cavernous” eyes mirror proleptically the eyes of the Byzantine icon of Christ. And the image of the burning tree anticipates the end of the story when Parker encounters another fiery tree that is his “cross.”

We need to review briefly the action before this denouement. When he leaves the farm for the city, Parker has embarked on a transformative journey of discovery and revelation. When the tattoo artist taunts Parker, “Have you gone and got religion? Are you saved?” Parker objects, but his protestations seem “to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he never uttered them.” On the way home, Parker stops at the local pool parlor where he is ridiculed when he shows off his tattoo. “O.E’s got religion and is witnessing for Jesus.” The locals throw him out of the building “as if the long barn like room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea.” Like Jonah, Parker’s resistance to his calling is to no avail. He is reminded once again that in some mysterious way he has become a follower of the One whose image he has had put on his back. “The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything.” It is as if, like Jonah, Parker is driven to a foreign country where he truly comes to himself and completes his service to God. “It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night.”²⁸

When Parker arrives at home just before

dawn, the door is locked. He calls to Sarah Ruth. "A sharp voice close to the door said, 'Who's there.'" Parker answers, "I don't know no O.E.," the voice answers. At that moment the sun comes up. "The sky had lighted slightly and there were two or three streaks of yellow floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline." It is the lone pecan tree in the yard and Parker suddenly has an ecstatic religious experience: "He felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees, birds and beasts." This ecstatic moment is quickly extinguished, however, when Sarah Ruth expels him from their home. For when Parker uncovers his back and shows it to her, the results are not as he imagined. At first Sarah Ruth is confused. She does not recognize the face on his back. "It ain't no body I know,"²⁸ she says. Her words are packed with irony.

"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 seen him."

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

"Idolatry," Sarah Ruth screamed. "Idolatry.... I don't want no idolater in this house!" and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it...and large welts...formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door...still gripping [the broom] she looked toward the pecan tree and her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.³⁰

The story ends this way. O'Connor gives it no full closure. The fate of this scourged and "crucified" figure is left unknown. But it seems clear that Parker has come to some

deep subliminal understanding of the meaning of his name and the destiny it holds for him. Obadiah means "servant of God," which Parker has become, in spite of his aversion to God and religion. And Elihue means "God is he," with whom Parker has identified in the most intimate manner by carrying his image in his own flesh. What is more, Elihue is a variant of Elihu, who in the book of Job turns from explaining suffering as the result of human sin to interpreting it as part of the divine mystery of God's creation. Let us recall that Sarah Ruth as one writer said "sees his tattoos as 'vanity' and a sign of sinfulness, whereas to Parker they represent ineffable mystery." What is more, Parker signifies someone "whose home is a park, a walled garden like those in icons of the Expulsion from Paradise and of the New Jerusalem. Parker courted Sarah with apples and other fruit, an allusion to Eden."³¹ When he arrives home at dawn, Parker imagines that he indeed has gotten to Eden. After being forced to repeat his full name Obadiah Elihue, he feels "the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees, and birds and beasts."

In *Voice of the Peacock*, Kathleen Feeley comments: "It seems strangely fitting that the story of a man led in mysterious ways to incarnate the Redeemer on his own body should be the final story of an author led by equally mysterious ways to make Redemption a reality in her fiction."³² Feeley turns our attention back to the powerful incarnational vision that drove Flannery O'Connor's fiction and stood at the heart of her Christian humanism.

O'Connor's iconographic fiction was drawn out by the challenges to Christian orthodoxy that she felt compelled to answer. And "Parker's Back" in particular helps us to understand where and on what grounds she parts company with the funda-

mentalist religion of the South—a religion that on various occasions O'Connor said she otherwise stood beside as a Roman Catholic in opposition to the secular mind. Ironically, modern fundamentalism doesn't take the Incarnation seriously enough. It limits the limitless God to the written word and denies his presence in the physical creation. Sarah Ruth completely fails to detect God's presence in the drama that unfolds around her. She is unable to see the image of God in her husband and does not comprehend his participation in the suffering of Christ and redemptive victory on the cross. Could this be because she is a Christian gnostic? O'Connor leaves Sarah Ruth no better off in relation to God and humanity than the secular people she abhors. On another occasion, Flannery O'Connor penned these words about her art which crystallize in her characteristically homely way her remarkable incarnational and humanistic vision of life. "Fiction," she said, "is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you."³¹ Now that is a lesson not limited to writing but applicable to the whole of living.

Notes

1. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 102.
2. O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, p. 290.
3. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 68.
4. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 148.
5. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 165.
6. Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 66.
7. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 147.
8. Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace* (Cowly Publications, 1983), p. 24.
9. O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, p. 144.
10. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 163.
11. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 157.
12. Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, p. 24.
13. O'Connor, *Habits of Being*, p. 307.
14. Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p. 376.
15. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 373.
16. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 382.
17. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, pp. 362, 367.
18. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 82.
19. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 382.
20. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 162.
21. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 513.
22. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 518.
23. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 513.
24. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 515.
25. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 514.
26. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, pp. 519, 522.
27. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 520.
28. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, pp. 524, 527.
29. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, pp. 528, 529.
30. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, pp. 529-530.
31. Credit is due here to a splendid little paper submitted in a course I taught in the summer of 2000 on the icon as theology. The paper, entitled "Ironic Icon," is by Annette M. Chappell and the quoted material is taken directly from that paper.
32. Kathleen Feeley, *Voice of the Peacock* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 15-51.
33. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 68.