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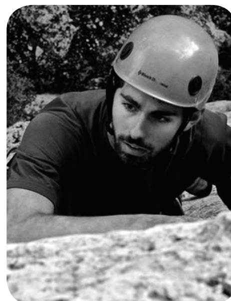
How the Violent Bear It Away and Bring It Back Again:
Flannery O'Connor and Prophetic Violence

by Jacob Terneus, Wyoming Catholic College Class of 2016



> 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 meaningless, 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 … exaggeration has a purpose.

For Flannery O'Connor, writing in the mid-twentieth century, what the world needs most is a shaking up and unmooring, a reduction of false ideologies to their absurd conclusions. It must be shown that it is not in control, that it cannot sustain itself, that it is fundamentally dependent upon its creator. This revelation is not accepted willingly, but needs to be forced upon the self-righteous and the ignorant, and is therefore violent. Violence, according to O'Connor, is not merely the cruel act of a wicked man—it is that, but it is also more.

Violence hunts down those people who seem to be citadels of personal strength, and, when it finds them, topples their paper fortresses, artificial structures which they have built around themselves in an attempt to hide from the awful truth, that they are not God. O'Connor finds unwilling prophets in the wicked and the blind, characters who, in the very act of destroying each other, accidentally drag the other out of unreason and unbelief. O'Connor's stories display the revelatory power of violence and suffering, a power with redeeming, life-giving, and shocking aspects, which is unleashed by means of unholy prophets.

The precedent for violent conversion is first found in Scripture: "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" St. Paul's conversion requires that he be thrown to the ground and blinded before he realizes his old errors and is able to see the heavenly light. God treats Jonah roughly, too, in order to convince him of his calling—Jonah is swallowed by his own unbelief and cowardice, and wallows in it for three days until he is fully convinced of the terror towards which sin leads. When error is hard-baked into someone, often only violence can soften him and reveal the truth, which it does in three ways: as redemptive, as new life, and as a shocking extreme.

Afflicted with lupus, an autoimmune disease from which she died at the age of 39, O'Connor herself was intimately aware of the connection that violence, and hence suffering, has to redemption. In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, she depicts her main character, Hazel Motes, as obsessed with self-mortification. Feeling vaguely the weight of sin, he fills the bottoms of his shoes "with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone" and goes for slow, painful walks. When his landlady discovers this strange behavior, the following conversation ensues:

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> "What do you walk on rocks for?"
> "To pay," he said in a harsh voice.
> "Pay for what?"
> "It don't make any difference for what," he said. "I'm paying."

While Hazel does not understand the divine union into which his sufferings lead him, he does have a blind faith that they are somehow ordered towards his redemption. In him we see the mysterious power of violent suffering to bring redemption, a redemption which will conquer all pretense and, eventually, unveil the beatific vision.

O'Connor's second type of revelation comes as a moment of death and rebirth, for only by death can we enter into a different life, a life

full of light. Just as Plato's shadow-people must be dragged out of their familiar cave into the sunlight beyond, O'Connor's southern folk must completely depart from this life to undertake the next and the wisdom it contains. In her story "The River," a young boy experiences feeling loved for the first time when he is baptized at a riverside revival and is told that the "old red river" goes on "slow to the Kingdom of Christ." The next day, he returns to the river and drowns himself, and in that act knows that he is "getting somewhere." His drowning is a figurative entering into new life.

Violence serves as a moment of shock for O'Connor—an enlightenment brought by the stripping away of pretense and false ideology, leaving the truth, even difficult truth, as the only possible answer, an answer from which there is no recourse. Violence grabs the character and rushes him along the road upon which he has been traveling to its absolute limit, where it shows him the horrific abyss into which it leads. It is through this third, most explicitly revelatory, type of violence that O'Connor's characters fulfill their prophetic role. At first glance, it is true that her characters hardly seem violent prophets, but rather, simply violent; they form a crowd of unreasonable discontents, each trying to push the rest of the mob in a different direction.

Upon hearing of O'Connor's death, famed author and monk Thomas Merton wrote that "she never made any funny faces. She never said: 'Here is a terrible thing!' She just looked and said what they said and how they said it." In other words, she portrays people just as they are, in a sad state of conflict where everyone is wrong. Then, according to Merton, "she would put together all these elements of unreason and let them fly slowly and inexorably at one another" until, in the end of the story, "the very worst thing, the least reasonable, the least desirable, was what would have to happen. Not because Flannery wanted it so, but because it turned out to be so." It is as if she places two raging animals in a cage and allows them, acting from their own ingrained tendencies, to pull each other apart.

Her characters take on these tendencies from real people and real faults—sometimes false piety or assumed superiority, sometimes agnosticism or excessive confidence. They share no love or respect, but instead contemn each other, the world, anything but their self-

righteous selves. The two rival camps into which they fall are well summed up by Merton, who categorizes them in regards to their view on salvation:

> Flannery saw the contempt of primitives who admitted that they would hate to be saved, and the greater contempt of those other primitives whose salvation was an elaborately contrived possibility, always being brought back into question.

To restate the case, the salvation haters are simply wicked, and the salvation questioners are modern reductionists and cynics. Both groups hold their own position on salvation as a maxim, an ideology by which to live their lives. They despise others because, without a real salvation, there is little reason to love. And yet, as with the unwilling Balaam who could only bless when he meant to curse, it is by means of these very "primitives" that a revelatory shock is delivered. God is so much in control that even destructive acts cannot but have good ends; even cruel shock can serve the ends of prophecy, which are to turn an evil man from his wicked ways and to cause him to see and accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Two of O'Connor's stories in particular demonstrate this contest, crash, and consequent unveiling: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "The Lame Shall Enter First."

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a vacationing family drives down an abandoned road because the selfish grandmother insists on visiting an old house which turns out not to even be there. They are waylaid by a notorious criminal—the Misfit—who kills them all. The grandmother is one of those who do not truly want salvation, for she is unwilling to accept death, which can never be separated from it. She attempts to convince her murderer that he is "a good man," and thus oughtn't to shoot her, almost trying to convert him to the gospel message which she herself does not believe. It is the first and last evangelization of her self-centered life, a desperate grasping for goodness which she neglects until her last moments: "She would have been a good woman," the Misfit says, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." A wicked "primitive," still hating salvation but wishing she didn't, she meets her end at the hands of that Misfit, Merton's cynic "primitive," who is also wicked.

The Misfit presents the first part of Pascal's wager, the opinion that God and redemption, while possible, are unknowable—but without the solution. For the Misfit, there is nothing left in this uncertainty but to gain cruel pleasure "by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness." As the grandmother begs for her life, it is the Misfit's very "meanness" that brings her to her knees, and thus fulfills the ultimate purpose of all prophecy. By his "meanness" the Misfit becomes a prophet, perhaps not one to laud or emulate, but a prophet nonetheless.

In "The Lame Shall Enter First," we have Sheppard, a prideful cynic and a disciple of the Enlightenment, who fails his lost and searching ten-year-old son. Despite Sheppard's desire to help people, he is a terrible father and says things such as, "Your [dead] mother isn't anywhere. She's not unhappy. She just isn't," for "no one has given any reliable evidence there's a hell." Unable to understand his son's wide-eyed wonder, Sheppard considers him selfish and stupid, and adopts, as if in his stead, an intelligent but delinquent boy, Johnson. Johnson sees the emptiness of Sheppard's Enlightenment principles and knows that he himself would be saved if he repented from his ways of vandalism and theft, but has no intention of doing so: "'Satan,' he said. 'He has me in his power.'" Out of groundless spite, Johnson manipulates Sheppard to further snub and reject his own son, who hangs himself out of loneliness. Sheppard finally realizes what he has done, but too late—too late to care for his son, but not too late to believe in salvation, not too late to recognize the radical inadequacy of human resources left on their own. Johnson intends only to spite and hurt Sheppard, but he also accidentally serves as prophet and leads him to faith.

It might be objected that the violence in O'Connor's stories seems senseless. And indeed, it is often at least ambiguous whether or not anyone comes to a new understanding. But it must be remembered that there is another element to the story beyond the action and beyond the players, an element which belongs to it precisely as a story: the presence of the reader. In this sense, O'Connor's characters, as fictional characters rather than people in their own sub-world, are not on a different level of reality at all, but interact with and influence the reader. O'Connor makes her conclusions unavoidable by using violence to shock the reader, who might

otherwise miss or ignore them. Violence, for O'Connor, is an underlining of her own text, an emphasis which shouts, "Look here! This is important!" She explains this method in her piece, "Novelist and Believer," quoted at the beginning of this essay, when she writes that "for a majority" of her readers, her all-important subjects of faith and love are "meaningless." She intentionally designs each moment of glorious dependence upon God so that it "carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance." Violence, then, can occur not only between characters, but also between a character and the reader, so that, even when the character himself does not benefit, a violent story still has a purpose—to enlighten the reader.

This call to enlighten, to proclaim the message of salvation, is universal. It often manifests itself in tasks which, while significant, are also simple, like a boy's call to baptize an autistic child in O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*: "He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable." It is also often not a pretty call, for while the truth of the passion and the resurrection is beautiful, it is also coarse and harsh.

The Incarnation is bathetic—a grotesque descent from the lofty into the dirty. According to Anthony Di Renzo's book, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, O'Connor's image of Christ and salvation is a shocking and violent one, which emphasizes the scandal of the Incarnation: "By stripping the Christ myth of its aura, by treating it as something wholly human, [O'Connor] makes it more accessible, more intimate, more threatening." It is with this "dirty" image of Christ that O'Connor's "primitives" confront each other when they accidentally take on a little of His mission and become "the true light that enlightens every man." By their own evil tendencies, each drags the other extreme into a knowledge and acceptance of Christ. As they fall into violence, they also stumble into the universal prophetic role to bring the blind out of darkness—even the wicked are called to be prophets, sometimes to themselves.

Let us conclude with one final example of violent prophecy and revelation, from O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge." As the old woman notices the large black lady and the little black boy, she instinctively reaches into her purse, searching

for a shiny penny to hand to the boy. Her reaction, which is "as natural to her as breathing," stems from a deep-set racism, her pedantic view that all any black child wants is some shiny trinket. Just as her poor health and high blood pressure are obvious in her ridiculous, "dumpy figure," her attitude is transparent in her mannerisms. The large black woman is not pleased, and all at once she seems "to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much" and her black fist swings out, knocking the old woman to the ground. While the black folks stomp away, something seems wrong with the old woman: "One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored." Her feared stroke has finally happened and an irreversible "tide of darkness" sweeps her away. We never know exactly what the old woman's final thought is, but it is something which she had never thought before, and which she is only capable of understanding because she has become violently "unmoored" from her previous assumptions.

By reading O'Connor, we ourselves become unmoored by her unholy prophets. Her characters are types of us, with our same disbelief and prideful convictions. When their lives play out the natural conclusions of those errors, the resulting catastrophe is to some degree personal for us, a violent blow to our self-confidence. Perhaps what the world needs is more of this sort of violence, for one of O'Connor's large black women "to explode like a piece of machinery" and smite man with her huge black fist, to push his face through the brick wall of ignorance and sin into the reality beyond. Only then, by following the pattern of the Incarnation, by being forced into the death and the mud and the blood, will man be freed from his "primitive" state and rise to a new vision and a new life.

Jacob Terneus graduated from Wyoming Catholic College in 2016 and was the recipient of that year's St. John Paul II Award, an annual award which "recognizes those graduating seniors who best exemplify the overall aims of the College." He is currently studying philosophy at Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI.
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