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The Mimetic Roots of Flannery O'Connor's  
The Violent Bear It Away

A Thesis  
presented to the  
Department of English  
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Thunder Bay, Ontario.

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of the requirements for the  
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by  
Stephen George Zamic ©  
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## Abstract

Literature from classical antiquity to the end of the eighteenth century was predominantly mimetic: that is, the general function of literature was to present a heightened imitation of reality, and, in particular those aspects of reality which are most crucial to understanding the meaning of human destiny.

Although Flannery O'Connor does not use the term "imitation," her carefully formulated aesthetics bear witness to this basic orientation. More than her comments on the art of fiction, her literary achievement, specifically her second novel, The Violent Bear It Away (1960), reveals a mind that has a firm sense of the demands of mimesis, and is intuitively close to the principles and values of this tradition.

Through a detailed analysis of The Violent Bear It Away, I show how it is mimetic--how it represents an imitation of reality in the sense theoretically outlined by Aristotle. My thesis attempts to discover a plausible critical basis upon which O'Connor's fiction can be understood and evaluated. I believe that as one of her mature works, The Violent Bear It Away is representative of her fictional approach: most of her fiction tends to fall within a closely circumscribed thematic, social, and emotional range. If this is true, then perhaps my approach to the novel can be applied to other individual works.

When viewed "reflexively," The Violent Bear It Away appears to comment upon O'Connor's fictional art, and as this thesis demonstrates, the attitudes in the novel correspond to the classical ideals surrounding mimesis. For example, Aristotle's theory of katharsis was connected to his belief in the formative effect of art on the mind. Katharsis operates by stimulating our ability to convert insight into feeling, while at the same time controlling and directing that feeling according to a dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered form. But The Violent Bear It Away suggests that humanity's redemption by Jesus Christ is a process of "dark and disruptive" grace which carries with it its own terrifying katharsis. O'Connor suggests that God uses evil (as her novel uses negative emotions and violence) as a kind of therapeutic instrument to purify and instruct the protagonist of the story, Francis Marion Tarwater.

Acknowledgements

I can say that the basic idea for this thesis grew from a suggestive comment by Professor John Futhey, who taught a course on the history of literary criticism (including, of course, classical criticism and the Poetics). He described O'Connor to me as "a neoclassic."

Thanks to Professor William G. Heath for being a sensitive reader and critic of my draft thesis.



## Introduction

This thesis attempts to prove that Flannery O'Connor's second novel, The Violent Bear It Away (1960), is rooted in mimesis, that it is imitative of life in the sense theoretically outlined by Aristotle in his criticism. Aristotle believed that the basic aim or function of poetry or art was "to present a heightened and harmonious imitation of nature [or reality], and, in particular, those aspects of nature that touch most closely upon human life" (Bate 15-16). In other words, an imitation is especially concerned to present those aspects of reality which are most crucial to understanding the meaning of human life and destiny. But mimesis does this first thing in order to accomplish a further goal: to develop in the reader the capacity to react vitally and sympathetically to the essential truth which it presents or imitates. In other words, underlying The Violent Bear It Away is the Aristotelian premise that art, in presenting a heightened and harmonious "imitation" of reality, is formative.

The first two chapters of my thesis focus on theoretical matters, while in chapters three and four my analysis centers on The Violent Bear It Away. In chapters one and two, I discuss a number of important aspects of Aristotelian mimesis. At the same time, I briefly suggest how these aspects of mimetic theory are embodied in The

Violent Bear It Away. I also compare Aristotle's theory of art with Flannery O'Connor's own comments on the art of fiction, using quotations from her essays and letters. Then, in chapters three and four, I take the concepts developed in the first part of my thesis and apply them to a detailed discussion of O'Connor's novel.

## Chapter One: A Discussion of Aristotle's View of Mimesis

### i. Art as an Imitation of Nature

The basic classical premise that art is an imitation of nature involves a number of attitudes, principles, and values, the various aspects of which "are compactly interwoven with each other" (Bate 3). A convenient starting point for our discussion of these interrelated principles has been suggested by W. J. Bate: "In speaking of an imitation one cannot get very far without first understanding what it imitates" (Bate 359). Because Aristotle's mimesis is based upon his conception of nature or reality, we must discuss an imitation in terms of the kind of reality that it presents or duplicates. Aristotle believed that art offers, in its own completed and harmonious form, an active rival or duplication of the ordered process of nature itself:

Whereas Plato regarded ultimate reality as consisting of pure 'Ideas,' divorced from the concrete, material world, Aristotle conceived of reality or nature as a process of becoming or developing: a process in which form manifests itself through concrete material, and in which the concrete takes on form and meaning, working in accordance with persisting, ordered principles. Now art, as Aristotle said in the Physics, has

this characteristic in common with nature. For art, too, employs materials--concrete images, human actions, and sounds--and it deals with these materials as form or meaning emerges or dawns through them.

Poetry, then, although it imitates concrete nature, as Plato charged, does not imitate just the concrete. In fact, its focal point of interest--the process of which it is trying to offer a duplicate or counterpart--is form shaping, guiding, and developing the concrete into a unified meaning and completeness (Bate 14).

Like Aristotle, Flannery O'Connor conceived of reality as a process of becoming or developing. But as a Catholic, she firmly believed that the visible universe is a reflection of an invisible universe, that the natural world somehow contains the supernatural. In particular, she believed that the reality we call nature was itself the reflection of a central Christian mystery: the Redemption. The Redemption is the mysterious process by which man is gradually perfected by the power of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ. Convinced that God plays an intimate role in the life of man, she sought to capture and imitate the presence of grace as it appears in nature. This means that she conceived of nature in religious terms, which Aristotle did not. However, the total and completed structure with which her art duplicates nature, is essentially Aristotelian. It

is through this harmonious design that she attempts to offer a living imitation or counterpart of the essential Christian truth which she believed to be operating through nature.

ii. Form and Matter: The Incarnational Attitude

Aristotle also emphasized that art is a concrete and realistic presentation of truth. The universal principles of reality are embedded in the natural world. While art as an imitation of nature is focused on persisting, objective forms, "the universal forms must work through the material and the concrete in order to fulfill themselves, i. e., they must have something to form in order to become forming agents, although the concrete itself is nothing except as it is being formed" (Bate 4).

Like Aristotle, O'Connor tended to see the ultimate principles of reality as being grounded in the material and the concrete. But as we noted above, her aesthetic thinking was also influenced by Catholic dogma, especially by the traditional teaching of the Incarnation. According to this doctrine, God is pure Spirit (transcendent) but our salvation was accomplished when the Spirit was made flesh (incarnate). O'Connor wrote to correspondent Cecil Dawkins in 1957:

I don't really think the standard of judgment, the missing link, you spoke of that you find in my stories emerges from any religion but Christianity, because it concerns specifically

Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It's not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh. As the Misfit said, 'He thrown everything off balance and it's nothing for you to do but follow Him or find some meanness.' That is the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories (O'Connor 1034-1035).

As a result of her theological belief in the Incarnation, in the Word made flesh operating in history, O'Connor seemed unable to separate form and matter, spirit and flesh in her thinking. She told Dr. T. R. Spivey in a 1959 letter, that she could not conceive of "the spiritual by itself alone or the spiritual not embodied in matter" (O'Connor 1113). In a sense, her standpoint is very much like Aristotle's principle that form and matter exist only through each other. For example, in her essay, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" (1957), she discusses the taste of "the average Catholic reader":

If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down . . . he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché [sic] and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms,

the sentimental and the obscene. . . . He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence and that innocence whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our innocence in the Fall and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite (O'Connor 809).

In other words, the presentation of supernatural grace or reality in fiction is not going to be effective if it is divorced from the material and the concrete, and if it is not faithful to the way things appear in actual life. I believe that O'Connor's fiction manages to convey what John D. Boyd calls a "divinely human" sense of the Christian moral climate, the "sense of destiny and purpose of the New Creature, as St. Paul calls the Christian, not merely a human person, but a creature and child of the Living God" (Boyd 226, 225). Boyd gives the following description of this moral climate:

The New Creature must now find his happiness and fulfillment in following a divine wisdom and

keeping to the promptings of a divine will. His ethical climate was 'otherworldly,' but in a manner more personal, realistic, and imperative than Plato had conceived of, wonderful though that was. Though eye had not seen, nor ear heard, nor mind conceived of it, the 'heaven haven of the reward' was as actual and convincing as its loss in hell was terrifying. . . . The divine dimension of this climate naturally expanded the meaning of human action and responsibility, and among the theologians of the Middle Ages this new ethical relationship helped develop a Christian sense of analogy between man and God. . . .

Through this analogy the earlier Christian 'otherworldly' orientation also had a strong human dimension. Chaucer, Dante, and Aquinas, to mention only a few, understood the far-reaching implications of the Incarnation for a life here and now on earth (Boyd 227).

When this sense of the "divinely human" moral climate is embodied in art, it is called "incarnational":

Within this moral climate two fundamental attitudes toward art and culture developed, which have persisted with varying intensity and stress until today. The one, more conscious of man's native weakness and of the intensified moral seriousness of his life, longed for a resolution



of tensions in eternity, while looking at life on earth largely as a trial and hazard to be endured. This predominantly otherworldly view is often called eschatological. The other, while aware of the inroads of original sin and of man's eternal transcendent destiny, appreciated with more relish the earth as 'charged with the grandeur of God,' a place of pilgrimage rather than a mere vale of tears. Its optimism derived from a more thorough sense of the pattern of redemption through the Incarnate God, a sense of its powers of renewal, a sacramental view of the universe and an awareness of the need for a humane and social culture for a full Christian life on earth. This view is called incarnational and is favorable to culture and the arts (Boyd 228-229).

I believe that Flannery O'Connor's artistic attitude or sensibility was predominantly "incarnational," as outlined above. She wrote in her essay, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" (1957), that as a Catholic artist, her function was to create religious literature which did not tend "to minimize the importance or dignity of life here and now in favor of life in the next world or in favor of miraculous manifestations of grace" (O'Connor 809-810). At the same time, her fiction includes a standard of judgment which says that that human life is nothing, has no meaning or value, determination or stability, except as it is being formed:

except as it is being matured and developed according to the permanent rules of divine grace.

To this end, she shows concrete images, human characters and events in the process of taking on form and meaning, working in accordance with the persisting, objective form of the Redemption. In The Violent Bear It Away, O'Connor portrays the Redemption, with its powers of renewal and regeneration, shaping, guiding, and developing concrete human life into a unified meaning and completeness. By translating this supernatural mystery into the new form or medium of her fiction, she would "reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality" (O'Connor 810). Only in this way could she present to the mind an actual experience of redemption: a concrete image or vision which is "dynamic, emerging, working through concrete material," and hence, not an abstraction (Bate 6). The reader would thus know the truth of his supernatural heritage with as vivid and full a realization as possible.

### iii. Reality as Becoming

We must understand that this process that the mimetic writer transmutes or duplicates has a fixed destination: it is not a process blindly evolving or developing. Nature is gradually revealing objective form or meaning. Aristotle was a teleological thinker: for him, reality was a purposeful, goal-directed process. This means that the mimetic writer must convey in his art a sense of fruition or

realization, the sense of the being actual of what was potential:

He characteristically viewed reality as becoming. He was content to watch man developing: as man, in gradually attaining his entelechy, that is his goal or full stature; as artist, in achieving his work of art; and as audience, in enjoying this art. From the data of experience, Aristotle tried to draw the likely conclusions about the goals to which man's activities pointed. Though these goals beckoned to him from outside, once achieved they were the built-in fulfillment of his person, for they had been potentially present in him from his earliest state, as the flower is present in the seed (Boyd 18-19).

O'Connor was content to watch her characters developing. She exhibited them, moreover, gradually attaining awareness of their Christian heritage and destiny. In her essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960), O'Connor spoke of a kind of writer who "believes that our life is essentially mysterious," and who "looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond" (O'Connor 816). In the same essay she noted that this kind of writer "will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves--whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (O'Connor

816). In other words, her characters are on an instinctive struggle and quest to complete and fulfill themselves as divinely human creatures. They attain their fulfillment in such a way as to suggest that they had been following, all along, the promptings of a divine will. This is the case in The Violent Bear It Away. O'Connor shows that Tarwater, in the process of becoming the prophet his great-uncle prepared him to be, is also completing the process of salvation or perfection already begun in nature by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The idea of reality as a purposeful becoming is also useful in understanding Aristotle's concept of structure in art, as seen in the context of his theory of dramatic tragedy:

Chapter II, for instance begins with '. . . the objects of imitation are men in action (1448a),' and this idea is repeated throughout the Poetics. In a minimal way, this can only mean that to be viable as structure a drama must present, be about, significant human action; for the forms of probability derive ultimately from life. The drama must treat of the human quest for fulfillment, for achieving the entelechy spoken of above, this quest providing clue to meaning in human life (though, of course, tragedy treats of the failure of this quest). . . . Here Aristotle is saying that the poet shapes his material into a

kind of action that will reveal in a distilled way what is at stake, including the working out of human motivation, when one seeks a given, significant goal. A poet must not try to imitate the entire life of his subject, but only a single, significant action that can be presented as unified and coherent (Boyd 21-22).

P. Albert Duhamel, in his essay, "The Novelist as Prophet," seems to imply that The Violent Bear It Away presents, is about, a single significant human action: "In her second novel . . . Flannery O'Connor dramatized the making of a prophet whose mission was the same as the function of her novel--to burn the South's eyes clean so that it could recognize its true heritage" (Duhamel 88). In other words, Tarwater is on a quest to become something, to give his life a universal meaning and significance. This special thematic truth that the novel presents or imitates is embodied in the plot in a more obvious way:

As the novel develops, the conflict focuses more and more sharply on the single issue, the baptism of Bishop. . . . [O'Connor] had labored to give this central incident of the novel a special significance. She had realized that when she decided to write a novel 'in which the central action is baptism,' for the larger percentage of her readers baptism would seem a meaningless rite, and therefore she would 'have to imbue this action

with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery.' The awe and terror she infuses into the act are not those which would be already familiar to believers in baptism's sacramental significance. For believers and non-believers alike, she metamorphoses the act into a metaphoric discriminant between opposed views of history and reality. According to the prophetic view of history, the view wherein the great-uncle reared Tarwater, baptism is the only means whereby man can be born again to live a life of freedom until his hunger is finally satisfied by the true Bread of Life. According to the schoolteacher's view of history . . . baptism is an act without significance. It is just another washing. . . (Duhamel 95-96).

O'Connor does not try to imitate the entire life of Tarwater, but only this crucial episode that can be presented as unified and coherent, revealing in a distilled way the course he must take if he is to justify his redemption.

#### iv. Baptizing the Imagination, Katharsis, and the Formative Aspect of Mimesis

Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away embodies, in dramatic form, another important aspect of mimesis. Aristotle believed that art, by enabling the reader to

contemplate essential reality through a structured imitation, has the power to persuade the mind to unconsciously desire, and react vitally and sympathetically to, the truth. In his essay, "Flannery O'Connor's Testimony: The Pressure of Glory," Nathan A. Scott, Jr. suggests that one goal of O'Connor's fiction is to develop and nourish human awareness of supernatural reality. In the following passage, in which he describes the function of O'Connor's fiction, Scott uses a suggestive image which he attributes to C. S. Lewis:

She [O'Connor] had, in other words, a constructive purpose as well as a negative purpose: she wanted not only to exhibit what is banal and trivializing in the desacralized world of modern unbelief but also to portray its vacuity in such a way as to stir the imagination into some fresh awareness of what has been lost--and thus to 'baptize' it, to render it open and responsive once more to the dimension of the Sacred and the pressure of glory (Scott 144).

The function of baptizing the imagination, in which the intellect or imagination is made more open and responsive, is, in a sense, an important aspect of mimesis. Aristotle's well-known theory of katharsis was connected to his belief in the healthful and formative effect of art on the mind. According to Aristotle, the dramatic katharsis operates by calling forth our ability to convert insight into feeling;

it deepens the intensity of our feeling while molding and channeling it by a harmonious and ordered form. But The Violent Bear It Away suggests that the Redemption is a process of "dark and disruptive" grace which carries with it its own terrifying katharsis (O'Connor 862). The novel suggests that God uses evil as the instrument to correct, purify, and instruct the protagonist of the story, Francis Marion Tarwater; in other words, it suggests that God uses evil (as the novel uses negative emotions and violence) as a means of growth to bring His creatures to spiritual health and maturity: in short, "evil as therapy" (Miller 373).

The notion of evil being used for a therapeutic purpose is suggested throughout The Violent Bear It Away. But this therapeutic katharsis, in which the experience of evil helps to develop human awareness and insight, is not limited to characters in the novel. In an essay, Flannery O'Connor has suggested that the artistic manner in which human experience is presented in modern fiction is capable of involving the reader in the fictional experience in a heightened way. In her essay, "Fiction Is a Subject with a History--It Should Be Taught That Way" (1963), O'Connor states:

Modern fiction often looks simpler than the fiction which preceded it, but in reality it is more complex. A natural evolution has taken place. The author has for the most part absented himself from direct participation in the work and has left the reader to make his way amid



experience dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered. The modern novelist merges the reader in the experience; he tends to raise the passions he touches upon. If he is a good novelist, he raises them to effect by their clarity and order a new experience--the total effect--which is not in itself sensuous or simply of the moment (O'Connor 851).

The passage suggests that O'Connor believed that a work of fiction is capable of seizing the mind and emotions in a vivid awareness, and that this is achieved through the reader's heightened and sympathetic participation in the experience of fiction.

A similar idea is implied in Aristotle's theory of katharsis; as interpreted here by W. J. Bate:

Accordingly, the emotion of the spectator, after being drawn out and identified with the 'imitation' before him, is then carried out and made a part of the harmonious development and working out of the particular drama. And the intellectual realization of what has happened, emerging through the ordered structure and body of the drama, is therefore also emerging through the spectator's own feelings; in so emerging, the intellectual realization lifts our feelings to a state of harmonized serenity and tranquillity. . . . Above all, it has joined feeling to insight,

conditioning our habitual emotion to that awareness of the essential import of human actions which poetry, through 'imitation,' is capable of offering (Bate 19).

The Violent Bear It Way provides a therapeutic or formative katharsis for its reader in a manner similar to the one described by Bate. Underlying the novel, then, is Aristotle's belief that art, through imitation, is capable of developing our capacity to react vitally and sympathetically to the truth.

Flannery O'Connor's novel therefore embodies, in concrete form, this classical conviction that truth is formative. Mason Tarwater, the old prophet, suggests this value more completely than any other character in the novel. His character perfectly illustrates the remark made by Coleridge: "The heart should have fed on the truth, as insects on a leaf, until it is tinged with its food, and shows the color . . . in every minutest fibre" (quoted in Bate 363). The novel suggests that the old prophet's awareness of his redemption by Jesus Christ, is a truth that has so completely entered into him, that it has really enlarged his way of feeling and thinking. The character of Mason Tarwater is one way in which the novel tries to stress the point "that knowledge of whatever sort is of genuine value only to the degree that one has assimilated it and immediately reacts in accordance with it" (Bate 255).

Francis Marion Tarwater, who is raised by the old man,

unconsciously internalizes or assimilates the standard set by the prophet. Tarwater gradually acquires the prophet's attitude, and especially his way of feeling and reacting. After a long struggle within himself, which O'Connor concretely dramatizes, the novel ends with Tarwater acknowledging the existence of the Redemption. He commits himself to his spiritual destiny and becomes the prophet which the old man prepared him to be. O'Connor suggests that the old man's passionate devotion to the truth is a formative agent or catalyst which develops the boy's feelings and motivation.

But O'Connor does something else. She presents Tarwater's emerging awareness in such a way as to stimulate in the reader a similar awareness. By presenting, in a completed and harmonious form, the process by which the developing prophet gradually realizes his destiny, her fictional imitation enables the reader to participate in the same meaningful process of fulfillment. Accordingly, his emotion is drawn out and informed by a new awareness. After being aroused, his emotion undergoes a katharsis which enables him to assimilate thoroughly this awareness or insight. O'Connor has thus "baptized" the imagination, making it open and receptive to the mysterious pattern of redemption underlying everyday life.

## Chapter Two: Classical and Christian Realism

### i. Mimesis as "Realistic"

Before I discuss The Violent Bear It Away in detail, a fuller development of the Aristotelian principles introduced in the previous chapter is necessary. This will enable us to understand how Flannery O'Connor realized the religious themes and developed the kind of characters we find in The Violent Bear It Away. As we have seen, Aristotle's theory of art must be understood against the background of his philosophy. Aristotle believed that the writer or poet must "present a meaning distilled from the human scene," a meaning that is "ultimately derived from the world of real action" (Boyd 23). Aristotle's theory of art is, in a special sense, "realistic":

The meaning of a poem has a special character for Aristotle. It is realistic in the sense that it presents a comment on human action that goes beyond the surface of life, a comment in some ways resembling his philosophic realism. 'Realism' thus understood has a validity of literary reference, despite the vogue since the nineteenth century of applying the word almost exclusively to literature that deals largely with techniques akin to the photographic. This is far from Aristotle's brand of realism. For him, the poet searches into

human action whose meaning, as we have seen, is ultimately specified by its goal. As we have said, his process in this resembles that of nature, where the concrete forms mold, guide, and develop matter in accordance with their purposeful pattern (Boyd 24-25).

Because of this underlying "cognitive realism," Aristotle viewed "form" or structure in art in a flexible and imaginative way. Bate explains:

The word 'form' here should be interpreted broadly, and not as a synonym for mere 'technique' in art. It applies to the direction which something would take if it were permitted to carry itself out to its final culmination. It thus applies to what is distinctive, significant, or true about that person, object, or event, if accidental elements are not allowed to intervene or obstruct its fulfillment. . . . The word 'form,' then, may here be applied to the direction in which something is capable of reaching its complete fulfillment, and in such way as to reveal its distinctive nature.

The term 'form' also applies to the value of that object or event--to its full meaning and character, and hence to its worth and importance. Accordingly, the object or event must have, said Aristotle, 'a certain magnitude,' if the

development of it is to have a significance worth the disclosing (Bate 14-15).

We can interpret the basic thematic structure we find in The Violent Bear It Away in similar terms. The novel exhibits the principle or "form" of divine grace shaping, guiding, and developing concrete human life into a unified meaning and completeness. The novel can also be read as attempting to show the direction that the human mind and imagination must take if they are to complete their awareness and thus develop the capacity for prophetic insight which the novel embodies.

Mimesis requires that the poet realize plot and character in a certain way if the deeper and more permanent values at the root of human nature are to be revealed:

But taking the plot as typical of Aristotle's concept of structure, we see that its coherence as a thing made depends upon what he calls 'probability or necessity.' Further, before we can discuss what this probability or necessity means, we must understand that drama is outward-going in the sense outlined earlier. It gets its start from form found in the real world, that is, in the ontologically meaningful element in human life. . . . But while drama looks to the ontologically real world, it does not present facts, that is, actions which really occurred, in the way history does. . . . Rather, concerned with

presenting action according to probability or necessity, it tells 'what may happen,' 'how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act' (Boyd 21-22).

In other words, according to Aristotle the mimetic poet "imitates nature by shaping the action of his play toward its goal, in somewhat the same way nature shapes our ends in real life, but this involves an orientation toward the arena of human struggle and quest" (Boyd 23). And if the poet is successful in this mimetic shaping, he achieves a special kind of knowledge or truth, "which we variously call truth-to-life or the poetic universal. It is the truth which Aristotle saw as more universal than history because it embodied knowledge of what was probable or necessary, given what it is to be human" (Boyd 23). This concept is often referred to in classical criticism as "the ideal" or "what ought to be." It means that the mimetic writer "in his portrayal of character . . . must show the character as it 'ought to be,' that is, he must show how a particular type of character would act and feel when subjected to a certain series of incidents" (Bate 4).

The Violent Bear It Away can be seen as presenting human action according to this concept of "the ideal" or "what ought to be." But the novel embodies knowledge of what is probable or necessary given what it means to be divinely-human creatures. For Flannery O'Connor, the ultimate reaches of human nature are entwined with the fate implied in the Cross.

## ii. Metempirical Knowledge

In stating Aristotle's belief that the poet searches into human action whose meaning is ultimately specified by its goal, it must also be pointed out that the goals or destiny to which man's activities point are not necessarily visible or apparent on the surface of human affairs. But in spite of the secular and naturalistic orientation of Aristotle's thought, the basic realism of mimesis, as John D. Boyd's interpretation makes clear, requires from the writer or poet an attitude toward human life which is compatible with a religious point of view:

With respect to both the ultimate cause of tragedy in something like Fate and to the ultimate secrets of life, Aristotle is deliberately silent, as he is when he discusses politics or ethics. And yet, as Else makes clear, Aristotle's limitation of tragedy to the hero's reactions and his failure to deal with what happens to him from outside the realm of human events, the very thing to which he is reacting, is inadequate theory. . . . This limitation of Aristotle's system, which is due to his notion of a closed universe in which God's influence cannot be known, does not rob mimesis of its essential need to feed upon a strongly metempirical nature in order to be and to remain viable. Aristotle's notion of the probable, of



men's motives and characters, and of human causality demand of the human scene a third dimension of depth well beyond Lockean empiricism. But more important still, the Greek experience of successful tragedies, which regularly took into account the divine motivation upon which Aristotle is silent, and the religious element in Greek life both take this depth of focus for granted. Asserting that Aristotle did not completely systematize the whole Greek experience is quite another thing from denying its impact on the actual work of the poets (Boyd 66-67).

When Boyd speaks of "the metempirical," he means that the attitude toward life implied in mimesis is quite different from the more positivistic attitude we find in modern thought. Positivism, which was developed between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is a philosophy which doubts that man is capable of knowing something beyond what he sees or hears: that is, positivism doubts that some kind of knowledge other than the strictly empirical exists. This view also sees "the human capacity for reason as being completely subject to the senses and internally directed by the laws of mathematics" (John Paul 33). Aristotle believed that human knowledge was primarily a sensory knowledge, but his theory of art was not limited by the positivist perspective. The mimetic poet must be open to the possibility of extrasensory truths, or, in Boyd's words,

"the metempirical." To put it another way, art needs some religious or transcendent insight to keep it "humanely meaningful" (Boyd 78). Therefore, in the realm of human experience the poet will find "good and evil, truth and beauty, and God" (John Paul 34).

In a brilliant essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960), O'Connor implies that vision in contemporary fiction can be limited by a positivistic attitude. Because of this attitude, she felt "that in the public mind the deeper kinds of realism are less and less understandable" (O'Connor 814). She describes a different kind of realism, one that is very similar to Boyd's "metempirical" knowledge:

All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality. Since the 18th century, the popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man. If the novelist is in tune with this spirit, if he believes that actions are predetermined by psychic make-up or the economic situation or some other determinable factor, then he will be concerned above all with an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man, with the natural forces

that he feels control his destiny. Such a writer may produce a great tragic naturalism, for by his responsibility to the things he sees, he may transcend the limitations of his narrow vision (O'Connor 815).

In contrast to this secular and naturalistic view of human affairs, the Christian writer seeks to capture and "imitate" what to him are the deeper reaches of human nature and destiny:

On the other hand, if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where the adequate motivation and the adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust

beyond themselves--whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. To the modern mind, this kind of character, and his creator, are typical Don Quixotes, tilting at what is not there (O'Connor 816).

In other words, the writer who hopes to reveal mysteries, the ultimate secrets of life, will need to have "fed upon a deeply metempirical sense of what was real" (Boyd 67).

### iii. Ideation

As we have seen, the mimetic poet transforms form found in real life, in order to create his own heightened, realistic, and artistically achieved insight, "which possesses the substance of philosophy without its abstraction, and at the same time the immediacy of human life" (Boyd 59). Boyd calls this process of transformation "ideating":

This process is sometimes described as distilling the form or meaning of some human event, releasing it from the accidental hindrances it may encounter in its quest for concrete fulfillment or perfection. . . . One might better use the word 'ideating,' rather than 'idealizing,' to describe the heightening process involved in forming 'the probable.' Here the stress is on finding the meaning involved in human experience and activity

presented in drama and poetry, not on finding its ideal archetype. The word 'ideate' is used here in analogy with 'aerate,' which describes a process of purifying water. As water is made more itself, and made fit for human use, by having air pass through it, so the poet's creative intelligence finds the potential of meaning in human activity by seeing the struggle for goals in the very concrete and unfinished process that inspires his composition (Boyd 25).

The distinction which Boyd makes between ideating and idealizing suggests, too, that we ought to stress "the implication of coherence in meaning rather than of generality" in Aristotle's view of poetry:

It is not so much the presenting of ideals, abstractions, or schemes, as it is the rich understanding of form. For this reason I prefer to call this process 'ideation,' a process which presents intensified understanding through structures entirely aimed at this end. The stress is on the quality of the work of art, measured by its intense coherence and intelligibility, rather than on presenting a perfect copy or an ideal (Boyd 61-62).

I believe that Flannery O'Connor realized the themes and characters in The Violent Bear It Away through a process of artistic transformation similar to the "ideating"

outlined above. In his essay, "The Novelist As Prophet," P. Albert Duhamel discusses The Violent Bear It Away together with an analysis of O'Connor's basic fictional principles. He finds that The Violent Bear It Away brings together "a multiplicity of meanings under tension," which are so rich that they resist exhaustive paraphrase:

No summary of the literal, external events of the plot, even combined with an attempt to suggest some of the multiple thematic implications of word and metaphor, can ever succeed in paraphrasing the achievement of the art work. Flannery O'Connor has brought together a multiplicity of meanings under tension, where they exist as in a magma, never polarized, never still. Hers is a peculiar mimesis, in the sense in which Erich Auerbach has used the word, for she does not imitate the universal as in a traditional allegory, nor the particular as in a contemporary novel, nor the typical alone as in a morality play, but a combination of all these three (Duhamel 102).

To put it another way, the quality of her art--measured by its intense coherence in meaning and intelligibility--implies that a rich mimesis has been achieved. He also seems to think that the novel can be read as embodying in concrete form O'Connor's characteristic "manner of 'seeing' and expressing" (Duhamel 91). He believes that the novel "develops though a series of images,

each with its own literal function, but each also intended to awaken the reader to a recognition of other levels of significance. Flannery O'Connor is attempting to do for her readers what the prophets did for their chosen people, enlarge their vision of reality" (Duhamel 103). Duhamel also discusses O'Connor's ideas about the art of the novel in light of a talk she delivered just after she had finished writing The Violent Bear It Away in 1960. He notes a similarity between O'Connor's conception of the novelist's function and Allen Tate's definition of the nature of metaphor:

The dialect of total or prophetic vision is the dialogue of metaphor, the systematic interplay of symbolic images wherein the specific contains under tension an analogous universal. As Tate repeatedly used images, concrete examples in his essays to suggest the larger implications of his position, so the novel, in a more sustained and 'tense' way, employs a series of images to convey ultimate meanings through present sensibilities. . . . As Tate put it, 'Images are only to be contemplated, and perhaps the act of contemplation after long exercise initiates a habit of imitation, and the setting up of absolute standards which are less formulas for action than an interior discipline of mind.' The Violent Bear It Away is at once a defense of the prophetic

vision of the novelist and a demonstration of how it can set up the beginnings of an interior discipline which might enable its readers to face up to the totality of nature and abandon pusillanimity where principles are at stake (Duhamel 90, 91-92).

At this point Duhamel appears to imply a connection between this dialogue of metaphor and O'Connor's tendency to depict life in fiction that was "grotesque." O'Connor often used words like "distortion" and "violence" to describe her own fictional approach. For example: "The direction of some of us will be toward the concentration and the distortion that is necessary to get our vision across; it will be more toward poetry than toward the traditional novel" (O'Connor 821). Duhamel implies that her procedure should be understood more in terms of poetic concentration than mere distortion:

She has succeeded because she has been able to anchor the universal-typical to the concrete-particular. Her metaphors are constantly of a kind wherein the vehicle sustains the interests in the particular whereas the tenor suggests the universal. Ordinary detail would not be strong enough to serve as an anchor for all the upward thrust toward universality it must sustain under tension, and consequently many of her details are extraordinary, unusual, or, like the



baptism, made to seem so. Because the juxtaposition of unusual detail with traditional universal meanings frequently produces violent contrasts, her style can seem 'garish' or 'bizarre' (Duhamel 103).

The surreal quality of some of O'Connor's metaphors can be construed as an attempt on the part of the artist to duplicate and transmute essential Christian reality, and to embody this reality or truth with as full and vivid an awareness as possible. But in mimesis "elaborating, heightening, developing, and perfecting through the artistry of the mind the implications" or the potential particularization "of form was the central concern of the poet" (Boyd 61). In other words, the novel can be interpreted as a process which presents intensified understanding of Christian truth by means of specialized metaphorical structures evolved precisely for this purpose.

#### iv. Distorted Images of Christ

In her essay, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" (1963), we can see how similar O'Connor's principles of composition were to Aristotle's theory of structure in drama. The essay gives us insight into how she realized her grotesque prophet-heroes, Francis Marion Tarwater and Mason Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away. For example, O'Connor believed, as did Aristotle, that art gets its start from form or meaning found in the real world:

The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. His interests and sympathies may very well go, as I find my own do, directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill. The Catholic novelist in the South will see many distorted images of Christ, but he will certainly feel that a distorted image of Christ is better than no image at all. I think he will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development (O'Connor 859).

According to O'Connor the Catholic novelist in the South is looking for special seeds of meaning, distorted images of Christ, to transmute and duplicate in fiction. To put it into Aristotelian terms, the writer is searching into human action whose meaning is ultimately specified by its goal, and this because mimesis must treat of the human struggle or quest for fulfillment. In the same essay O'Connor goes on to illustrate what a distorted image of Christ might look like, using a real-life example:

A few years ago a preacher in Tennessee attracted considerable attention when he sacrificed a live lamb chained to a cross at his Lenten revival service. It is possible that this was simple showmanship, but I doubt it. I presume that this was as close to the Mass as that man could come. . . . There is only one Holy Spirit, and He is no respecter of persons. These people in the invisible Church make discoveries that have meaning for us who are better protected from the vicissitudes of our own natures and who are often too dead to the world to make any discoveries at all. These people in the invisible Church may be grotesque, but their grotesqueness has a significance and a value which the Catholic should be in a better position than the others to assess (O'Connor 859-860).

The Tennessee preacher represents a special instance of the grotesque which feeds the mind of the poet. By penetrating to the human aspiration beneath this bizarre display of religious enthusiasm, the Catholic writer "sees not only what has been lost to the life he observes, but more the terrible loss to us in the Church of human faith and passion" (O'Connor 860). The Tennessee preacher has a genuine intensity of belief that needs to be expressed. But having no sacraments as a means of grace, he is strangely compelled to improvise weird substitutes for them.

There is evidence to suggest that O'Connor's fictional prophets were inspired by figures like the preacher from Tennessee. In a 1963 letter to Sister Mariella Gable, O'Connor made the following remarks about Mason Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away: "Another thing, the prophet is a man apart. He is not typical of a group. Old Tarwater is not typical of the Southern Baptist or the Southern Methodist. Essentially, he's a crypto-Catholic. When you leave a man alone with his Bible and the Holy Ghost inspires him, he's going to be a Catholic one way or another, even though he knows nothing about the visible church" (O'Connor 1183). Like old Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away, the Tennessee preacher is essentially a crypto-Catholic: his awkward celebration of the Eucharist is seen by O'Connor as a valid attempt by the man to meet a theological truth beyond his understanding.

This real-life grotesque presents a concrete and dramatic image of belief; a violent witness that is capable, by reason of its passionate intensity, of seizing human awareness. These people in the invisible Church "are not comic, or at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden and to fix us with eyes that remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten. They are prophetic figures" (O'Connor 860). The spiritual gropings of the grotesque have value for O'Connor because they present in a distilled and heightened way the mystery of salvation that she believed is shaping human life

according to its truth. In other words, O'Connor's creative intelligence discovered the potential of this meaning in human activity by seeing the struggle for supernatural goals in the concrete and unfinished process which inspires her fiction.

The backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists we find in The Violent Bear It Away also present a peculiar image for the reader to contemplate, an image that "embodies values which seek our espousal" because they remind us of realities which have been forgotten or ignored (Vivas 82). For example, Mason Tarwater, the boy's great-uncle, is presented as a prophet whose vision expresses certain meanings and values which O'Connor felt were struggling to be born into human history. Through the great-uncle the reader is meant to contemplate the emerging truth of the Paschal mystery: man's salvation through Christ's death and resurrection, a process of salvation which the old man is thoroughly immersed in.

The novel itself is an expression of this prophetic vision, a vision which fulfills a formative purpose. Francis Marion Tarwater is presented with a world which becomes intelligible and ordered for him by the prophetic vision of his great-uncle. The boy gradually "discovers in himself strange needs for intangible things that have nothing to do with his physical survival" (Vivas 84-85). Because of his great-uncle's vision the boy becomes "alive to values that control his activity by demanding that he

espouse them and that thus he fulfill his destiny" as a creature of God (Vivas 85).

The great-uncle is also a kind of redemptive figure. He is a witness to and teacher of the truth of redemption. Rayber the schoolteacher detects a morbid guilt in the boy and believes the boy is trying to free himself from the old man's ghostly grasp. The truth is that young Tarwater believes that he has been redeemed by Christ. The Redemption creates a debt that has to be paid. He is trying to shake off his sense of debt and his inner vision of Christ. Christ to the boy is like a violent ghost who haunts his imagination.

The action of the novel is built around a baptism, but it was necessary for O'Connor to begin the novel with a meaningful death in order for the baptism (and murder) of Bishop to have any significance. For this reason the action of the novel proper begins with the mysterious death of the old man at the age of eighty-four. And like the baptism of Bishop, O'Connor works to imbue the death of the old man with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery to the reader.

The great-uncle presents an image of a peculiar kind of death, the significance of which is not apparent at first. But the great-uncle dies in a way that suggests that he is in the process of being touched by his Redeemer in death.

Young Tarwater is challenged by the strange death of his great-uncle. It disrupts and reorders his existence.

It constitutes a unique intervention into his own personal history which will reorder it according to a new vision and purpose. It is like the mystery of Christ's death which has given us our vision of perfection. Through the death of the great-uncle the reader is being invited to cooperate on an imaginative and unconscious level in the concrete process by which humanity returns to and regains its innocence. The book implies that the great-uncle is further along in this process of spiritual development, making his example instructive. The Crucifixion is an event which has already taken place: the Paschal Mystery is by now grafted onto the history of humanity, onto the history of every individual; just as it is being grafted onto the individual histories of Tarwater and his great-uncle.

The old man instructs the boy about the time they are together at Powderhead. The education the old man gives him is an education for death. He impresses upon the boy the fact that the creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare for his death in Christ.

In a 1955 letter to A., O'Connor wrote: "I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call 'A Good Man' brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them, and when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused

because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror" (O'Connor 942). The backwoods prophets in The Violent Bear It Away are grotesque, misshapen, comic and violent. But O'Connor suggests that in spite their freakishness, they are also full of promise. They are rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem to be born again. Their grotesquerie is meant to suggest the gap between what they are as fallen and immature creatures and what they will become by participating in the mystery of salvation. The Violent Bear It Away attempts to make us see the Crucifixion as a profound act of violence meant to undo the deep-seated violence done to the human personality during the Fall. We were left freakish and grotesque when compared to our vision of perfection. The old man and the boy are prophetic figures because they can be sensed as figures for our essential displacement. They are distorted images of Christ. They present a forceful reminder of the fact that we are living amidst the violent and disruptive process of being formed in the image and likeness of God.



## Chapter Three: Burying the Dead Right

In chapter one of The Violent Bear It Away, we learn that the old man considers himself a prophet and that he has stolen the boy away from Rayber, the schoolteacher, in order to raise him to take his place when he dies. As soon as the old man dies, the boy is left alone with the threat of the Lord's call. He heads for the schoolteacher and the burden of the book is taken up with the struggle for the boy's soul between the dead uncle (or his spiritual legacy) and the schoolteacher.

The action of the novel proper begins with the death of Mason Tarwater, Francis Marion Tarwater's great-uncle. The finely-wrought sentence which announces this fact also accomplishes something important to the development of the book: it plants an image of death in the mind of the reader that functions like a seed of meaning; this seed of meaning is of the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the process of salvation which the novel as an imitation of nature is attempting to present in a heightened and harmonious fashion:

Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast

table where it was sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up (O'Connor 331).

This seed of meaning or truth is intended to grow in significance for the reader as the story develops, silently insinuating itself into the mind just like the roots that appear to have sprung from the cross which Buford Munson erected over the old man's grave, and which the boy sees when he returns to the clearing at the end of the novel:

The grave, freshly mounded, lay between them. Tarwater lowered his eyes to it. At its head, a dark, rough cross was set starkly in the bare ground. The boy's hands opened stiffly as if he were dropping something he had been clutching all his life. His gaze rested finally on the ground where the wood entered the grave.

Buford said, 'It's owing to me he's resting there. I buried him while you were laid out drunk. It owing to me his corn has been plowed. It owing to me the sign of his Saviour is over his head.'

Nothing seemed alive about the boy but his eyes and they stared downward at the cross as if they followed below the surface of the earth to where its roots encircled all the dead (O'Connor 477).

Through flashbacks the full meaning and significance of the old man's death and its implications for Tarwater are explored and developed. Buford Munson carefully tends to the old man's corpse, marking the grave with a cross, a symbol O'Connor once described in a 1955 letter to A. as "the ultimate all-inclusive symbol of love" (O'Connor 976). But to O'Connor the Cross was more than a symbol: it was the means chosen by God to bring about human growth; a universal form or principle operating in nature, actualizing and manifesting itself through concrete material.

The image of Christian burial at the beginning of The Violent Bear It Away is an expression of O'Connor's sacramental view of the world, a view that was influenced by the funeral rites practised by the Catholic Church. Catholic funeral rites are based on the understanding that the body of a Christian has been a temple of the Holy Spirit and is something sacred; after death the body is, as it were, a seed placed in the ground which will rise gloriously on the day of judgement.

We should recall here that for Aristotle the universal forms and principles of reality are embedded in the natural world, moulding and shaping the concrete. According to Christian doctrine, human life only began to take on meaning, purpose, and value when Christ accepted His crucifixion and death and was laid in the tomb. To present a living counterpart or imitation of this essential form in human life, O'Connor had to portray the meaningful

sacramental action of Jesus's death and resurrection through the concrete particulars of life that are appropriate and which could be made believable. The image of Buford Munson ensuring old Tarwater received a proper Christian burial reminds the reader that the natural world, the very ground that once contained the Savior in death, now contains His servant Mason Tarwater who is part of the mystical body of Christ and a participator in the Redemption.

Christianity is a religion of salvation, and this fact is expressed in its sacramental life. According to Catholic doctrine, Christ Himself "discloses for us the sources of this life. He does so in a particular way through the Paschal Mystery of His Death and Resurrection. Linked to this Mystery are Baptism and the Eucharist, sacraments which create in man the seed of eternal life" (John Paul 74-75). Baptism is called the sacrament of the dead, since its purpose is to confer life on the soul, supernaturally dead from sin.

As O'Connor understands it, the history of salvation begins with the fundamental observation of God's intervention in the history of humankind (the Incarnation). "This intervention reaches its culmination in the Paschal Mystery--the Passion, Death, and Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ to heaven--and is completed at Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles" (John Paul 58).

As one prominent Catholic writer has noted, "This

Mystery of salvation is an event which has already taken place. God has embraced all men by the Cross and the Resurrection of His Son. . . . As indicated by the allegory of 'the vine' and 'the branches' in the Gospel of John (cf. Jn 15:1-8), the Paschal Mystery is by now grafted onto the history of humanity, onto the history of every individual" (John Paul 74). The same writer suggests that "The history of salvation not only addresses the question of human history but also confronts the problem of the meaning of man's existence. As a result, it is both history and metaphysics. It could be said that it is the most integral form of theology, the theology of all the encounters between God and the world" (John Paul 59).

The history of salvation was a stimulating theme for O'Connor. John F. Desmond notes in his study, Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History, that "Seeing and vision, sight and blindness: this is the central image of all her major fiction. The image of 'seeing' takes on many nuances throughout her work, of course, but in the deepest sense it indicates the power of vision through which her characters understand themselves and their place within the order of the cosmos, within history, and thus their grasp of the meaning of existence" (Desmond 40-41). O'Connor's protagonist in The Violent Bear It Away, Francis Marion Tarwater, has to learn to "see" before he can be alive to the important realities which are being born in and around him.

O'Connor shows how the history of salvation is being grafted onto the individual histories of Tarwater and old Tarwater. P. Albert Duhamel believes that what happens to young Tarwater in the novel, "happens in a way intended to suggest that he is at once retracing old routes and pioneering for those to come after" (Duhamel 93). The truth is he is being called to complete the process of salvation already begun in history by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The sudden death of the old man one morning at the breakfast table elicits a strange emotional response from Tarwater:

He knew the old man was dead without touching him and he continued to sit across the table from the corpse, finishing his breakfast in a kind of sullen embarrassment as if he were in the presence of a new personality and couldn't think of anything to say. Finally he said in a querulous tone, 'Just hold your horses. I already told you I would do it right.' The voice sounded like a stranger's voice, as if the death had changed him instead of his great-uncle (O'Connor 336).

The death of the old man begins the hidden metaphysical and psychological process that will gradually convert or baptize Tarwater's imagination into a Christian vision of reality and history. Death seizes the old man in a violent and frightening manner, striking in a way that suggests the hidden hand of God is descending:

He was a bull-like old man with a short head set directly into his shoulders and silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads. . . . Tarwater, sitting across the table from him, saw red ropes appear in his face and a tremor pass over him. It was like the tremor of a quake that had begun at his heart and run outward and was just reaching the surface. His mouth twisted down sharply on one side and he remained exactly as he was, perfectly balanced, his back a good six inches from the chair back and his stomach caught just under the edge of the table. His eyes, dead silver, were focussed on the boy across from him (O'Connor 335-336).

While he does not see the Holy Ghost descending upon him in tongues of fire, Tarwater does sense that some invisible burden is being passed onto him, and by fixing the boy with its mad, fish-coloured eyes, the corpse reminds him that he bears some heavy responsibility whose nature cannot be forgotten. Tarwater is made to feel that the death of the old man has set in motion a mysterious process that must be brought to completion, a process which silently demands his participation: "The boy knew he would have to bury the old man before anything would begin. It was as if there would have to be dirt over him before he would be thoroughly dead. The thought seemed to give him respite from something that pressed on him" (O'Connor 336).

O'Connor believed that nobody can be thoroughly dead if he believes in the Resurrection. Old Tarwater understood that Jesus has already conquered death by his meaningful sacrifice on the Cross. Young Tarwater is intuitively aware of this fact, which he has pushed to the back of his mind. But what gets pushed to the back of the mind makes its way forward in a different way. O'Connor wrote in "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" (1963), that "it is the business of the artist to reveal what haunts us. We in the South may be in the process of exorcising this ghost which has given us our vision of perfection" (O'Connor 861). The shocking sight of the corpse is causing Tarwater to contemplate the mystery of his salvation in an interior way. Tarwater, who is not fully convinced of his redemption, is being haunted by the figure of Christ. He is subconsciously very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of the God who rose from the dead.

Tarwater must acquire his great-uncle's prophetic vision of reality and history if he is to acknowledge his own redemption and thus begin the life prepared for him. To achieve this end, the old man gave him an education intended to arouse his awareness of the hidden processes at work in human life. Tarwater learns from the old man that behind our own individual history, deepening it at every point, has been another history:

His uncle had taught him Figures, Reading,  
Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled



from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment (O'Connor 331).

The old man conditioned the boy to see life as a purposeful process leading to salvation. He and old Tarwater find themselves "at the center of the history of salvation". The judgment of God becomes a judgment of man. The divine realm and the human realm of this history meet, cross, and overlap" at the point of Christ's death at Calvary (John Paul 67). From old Tarwater's teachings the boy got the sense that his destiny begins at this unique location where time and eternity meet:

He knew two complete histories, the history of the world, beginning with Adam, and the history of the schoolteacher, beginning with his mother, old Tarwater's own and only sister who had run away from Powderhead when she was eighteen years old and had become--the old man said he would mince no words, even with a child--a whore, until she had found a man by the name of Rayber who was willing to marry one. At least once a week, beginning at the beginning, the old man had reviewed this history through to the end (O'Connor 366).

The boy's mind was watered and fed by this prophetic view of reality and history; and through it his mind was to acquire a greater independence. By disrupting the routine

of his normal life at Powderhead the way it does, the death of the old man is forcefully reminding Tarwater of the debt he owes to Jesus; and try as he will he cannot get rid of his sense of debt and his developing inner vision of Christ.

In a letter to Carl Hartman in 1954, O'Connor wrote: "The Redemption creates a debt that has to be paid. (This is a fact to anybody who believes he has been redeemed by Christ.) The Redemption simply changes everything" (O'Connor 920). We must also recall O'Connor's words to Cecil Dawkins, that the standard of judgement embodied in her fiction "concerns specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. . . . As the Misfit said, 'He thrown everything off balance and it's nothing for you to do but follow Him or find some meanness'" (O'Connor 1035). Tarwater already has a sense of his own personal involvement in the action of Christ's death which set the world off balance for him, because while they lived together at Powderhead the old man taught him to believe in the Redemption.

In order to pay his part of the debt of Redemption, Tarwater must bury the dead. To refuse to give the dead a proper burial is to commit an offense against the mystical body of Christ. The boy is suddenly becoming aware of the hidden laws that govern a sacramental universe: he is learning that the dead have special rights and prerogatives that must be acknowledged and protected by the living.

Tarwater is made to feel that the corpse of his great-uncle is impatient to get into the ground, where the dead belong, in order to rise gloriously with the Savior who died to redeem it, and to complete the process of salvation into which it was baptized.

It is also true that the boy is confronted at the breakfast table with a new personality. By participating in Christ's redemptive death, the old man is closer to becoming the New Creature, as Saint Paul calls the Christian, not merely a human person, but a creature and child of the Living God. The old man's radical change in personality throws Tarwater's world off balance. He never experienced death before and the death he is forced to witness is imbued with an awe and terror; it constitutes a unique intervention into his personal history which will reorder it to a new vision and purpose.

The old man had impressed upon Tarwater one obligation: to see that he was buried in a Christian manner, and he gives the boy detailed instructions (which are quite humorous) on how the burial is to be carried out. These instructions are turned by the old man into a discourse on the Last Things--a discourse on eschatology, to use the theological term; that is, old Tarwater lectures him on death, judgement, heaven, and hell (the Last Things). More importantly, the old man suggests to him the present significance of these theological concerns for the life of a Christian here and now. He preaches this informal sermon

while sitting inside a coffin. The old man looks forward to death with a real zest and energy; we notice this immediately in the positive and life-affirming way he discusses his own death with young Tarwater:

The old man was too heavy for a thin boy to hoist over the side of the box and though old Tarwater had built it himself a few years before, he had said that if it wasn't feasible to get him into it when the time came, then just to put him in the hole as he was, only to be sure the hole was deep. He wanted it ten foot, he said, not just eight. He had worked on the box a long time and when he finished it, he had scratched on the lid, MASON TARWATER, WITH GOD, and had climbed into it where it stood on the back porch, and had lain there for some time, nothing showing but his stomach which rose over the top like over-leavened bread. The boy had stood at the side of the box, studying him. "This is the end of us all," the old man said with satisfaction, his gravel voice hearty in the coffin (O'Connor 337).

The image which the boy is said to be "studying" is not merely a memento mori, a warning or reminder of the fact of our mortality: it is a distorted image of Christ. It focuses our attention on the mystery of His double nature, on the paradoxical fact that Jesus had within Himself both divine and human qualities. O'Connor wants us to see the

limitless potential for human perfection that was achieved when God gave us His Son for a model.

The old man is presenting to the boy an image that shows the special formative purpose that death fulfills when we believe in the divinity of Christ. To put it into Aristotelian terms, death is being portrayed here as part of the concrete and dynamic process in which we are brought to perfection by imitating Christ in His Passion.

The coffin scene grows in significance when we read Buford Munson's words to Tarwater before the boy leaves Powderhead for the first time. When the boy fails to return from the still, the Negro goes in search of him and finds him, drunk, in the woods, the grave only half-dug. Buford said, "This ain't no way for you to act. Old man don't deserve this. There's no rest until the dead is buried" (O'Connor 360). Then, as if he were being compelled by grace to give an evaluation of the old man's worth, he pronounces the following judgment: "He deserves to lie in a grave that fits him," Buford said. "He was deep in this life, he was deep in Jesus' misery" (O'Connor 360).

His noble words pay tribute to old Tarwater's continual struggle to live in accordance with the hidden laws of this world. Buford is saying the old man has paid his part of the debt of Redemption because everybody, through suffering, co-operates in the process of salvation led by Christ. The old man wanted the hole dug for his grave to be deep (ten foot, not just eight), as token of the depth and sincerity

of his acceptance of what God willed for him. In other words, a grave that would fit old Tarwater would have to reflect accurately the degree to which he was immersed in Jesus' misery, in Christ's redemptive suffering on earth.

The old man is presented in a way that suggests that the truth is already at work in him to permeate and transform his flesh. As he lay in his coffin on the porch, his belly looked like a batch of over-leavened dough; and sitting as a corpse at the breakfast table, he was frozen in a pose of perpetual hunger, his eyes (the prophet's most vital organ) over-developed and fish-like: "the old man's eyes--insane, fish-colored, violent with their impossible vision of a world transfigured" (O'Connor 401).

The old man wants to be seen as a living witness to the spreading and transfiguring influence of the kingdom of heaven that Christ spoke of in the Parable of the Yeast in the Gospel of Matthew: "Jesus told them still another parable: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch rises'" (Matthew 13:33). In other words, the prophet is becoming what he so ardently desires. The truth of his redemption has entered him so completely that it has really enlarged his way of thinking and feeling. The prophet's creative witness to the truth has the power to mould the motivations, feelings, and imaginative capacity in others.

It is almost as if his intensity of belief has caused

the old man to bear on his own body the sign of his similarity to the risen Christ. O'Connor believed that during the resurrection of the body, humanity "will be transfigured in Christ, that what is human will flower when it is united with the Spirit" (O'Connor 1117). At one point, the backwoods prophet warns young Tarwater that judgement will rack the bones of the person who shames the dead and scorns the Resurrection and the Life:

His mind continued to dwell on the schoolteacher's house. 'Three months there,' his great-uncle said. 'It shames me. Betrayed for three months in the house of my own kin and if when I'm dead you want to turn me over to my betrayer and see my body burned, go ahead! Go ahead, boy,' he had shouted, sitting up splotch-faced in his box. 'Go ahead and let him burn me but watch out for the Lord's lion after that. Remember the Lord's lion set in the path of the false prophet! I been leavened by the yeast he don't believe in,' he had said, 'and I won't be burned!' (O'Connor 344).

Old Tarwater's prophecy eventually comes to pass: the old man is not burned, though young Tarwater tries to do it, and the boy meets up with a raging lion in the woods (the devil) who seeks to devour him. Studying the old man as he lies in his own coffin, young Tarwater can recognize that the old man's body bears the same physical contours and peculiarities of character but these appear to be ordered to

a new vision. The mysterious personality growing in the box reveals the possibilities of interpenetration: the rough beast now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born again is saying silently: "I live now not I but Christ in me."

Old Tarwater's obsession with the manner of his interment, while humorous, provides serious commentary on the Christian mysteries underlying everyday life. This implied commentary is evident in the fierce debate that goes on between the boy and his mentor. Young Tarwater obviously enjoyed prodding the old man on those matters about which the prophet was most sensitive. The dialectical nature of their exchanges brings the religious concerns at the heart of the novel into even sharper focus. For example, the old man explodes into a rage when the boy, ever eager to provoke a violent response from his great-uncle, deliberately suggests that he would turn old Tarwater's body over to Rayber, who would cremate it:

The threads that restrained the old man's eyes thickened. He gripped both sides of the coffin and pushed forward as if he were going to drive it off the porch. 'He'd burn me,' he said hoarsely. 'He'd have me cremated in an oven and scatter my ashes. "Uncle," he said to me, "you're the type that's almost extinct!" He'd be willing to pay the undertaker to burn me to be able to scatter my ashes,' he said. 'He don't believe in the Resurrection. He don't believe in the Last Day. He don't believe in the bread of life . . .'



'The dead don't bother with particulars,' the boy interrupted (O'Connor 339).

The boy's insolent remark, that the dead don't bother with particulars, elicits from the old man a rage of vision that will stimulate in young Tarwater the prophet's imaginative capacity to react vitally and sympathetically in defense of the truth whenever it is being scorned or denied:

The old man grabbed the front of his overalls and pulled him up against the side of the box and glared into his pale face. 'The world was made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are,' he said, and then as if he had conceived the answer for all the insolence in the world, he said, 'There's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive,' and he released him with a laugh (O'Connor 339).

It is as if the old man intends to root out any blasphemous attitudes in his apprentice by means of his strange and violent rhetoric. Like Lucette, the child-prophet in chapter five, the old man believes the "Word of God is a burning word to burn you clean!" (O'Connor 414) He presents Tarwater with an extravagant and terrifying image in which the dead form a vast mob: a democracy of the dead. Like the democracy of the living, it has voting rights and, because the old man sees life from a Christian perspective, we can imagine the dead marking their ballots with a Cross.

Old Tarwater's response to the boy is so forceful and astringent because he believes that the human person is a spiritual entity of ultimate importance: an importance which not only survives death but is increased by it. The dead do indeed bother with particulars, such as sacramental burial rites, because their Redeemer has bought them rights and prerogatives with His death and resurrection.

As O'Connor noted in the "Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann" (1961), "The creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Père Teilhard de Chardin calls 'passive diminishments'" (O'Connor 828). The belief articulated by O'Connor, that the creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare spiritually for his death in Christ, is thoroughly explored as a theme in The Violent Bear It Away. As interpreted by the great-uncle's prophetic vision, the world itself was made for the dead. The world was created to prepare us for our death in Christ, and we take from it the material that will fashion our death.

In "An Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann" (1961), O'Connor stresses a form of ancestor worship similar to the one just described in The Violent Bear It Away: "This action by which charity grows invisibly among us, entwining the living and the dead, is called by the Church the Communion of the Saints. It is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our

grotesque state" (O'Connor 831). O'Connor pictures this belief in the Communion of Saints as a tree of divine love that grows from Jesus' act of charity on the Cross and encircles with its roots all believers who share in it.

The old man's vision of a democracy of the dead can be seen as part of Tarwater's imaginative preparation for belief in the intimate union and mutual influence among followers of Christ: "The old man had thought this interest in his forebears would bear fruit" (O'Connor 431). There is nothing unusual, therefore, in Tarwater being encouraged to venerate his ancestors: there is "in this veneration of ancestors a preparation for the Christian faith in the Communion of Saints, in which all believers--whether living or dead--form a single community, a single body" (John Paul 82). For O'Connor "faith in the Communion of Saints is, ultimately, faith in Christ, who alone is the source of life and of holiness for all" (John Paul 82). The climactic vision which Tarwater sees when he returns to Powderhead was inspired by this belief: "Nothing seemed alive about the boy but his eyes and they stared downward at the cross as if they followed below the surface of the earth to where its roots encircled all the dead" (O'Connor 477).

O'Connor makes us aware of the mysterious relationship between matter and spirit implied in Christian doctrine. For example, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body proclaims the value of what is least about us, our flesh. And according to the Incarnation, Jesus is the Word, the

eternal Wisdom who took from us our flesh. This is why Mason Tarwater puts an exaggerated emphasis on protecting the integrity of his body after he dies: it is not the soul he believes will rise but the body, glorified. The old man wants the boy to recognize the Incarnation and the Resurrection as the true laws of the flesh and the physical. To burn a body that was once a temple of the Holy Ghost, that contained within itself the seed of eternal life, is to commit a terrible offense, an act of violence, against the God who took from us our flesh.

The great-uncle warns the boy that on the last day all the bodies marked by crosses will be gathered. The old man wants the boy to be more alive to spiritual reality and how it affects him in the flesh. Tarwater is left astonished at the value the old man puts on the body. The bizarre warning about the harvest of crosses, together with the extreme and terrifying vision of the democracy of the dead, gives the required shock to start young Tarwater's unconscious mind contemplating these awful mysteries in a disciplined manner. Tarwater is being taught to look forward with awe and reverence to the resurrection of the body, which, according to the old man's prophetic vision, will be flesh and spirit united together in peace the way they were in Christ.

What the boy sees in his great-uncle's passionate devotion to the person of Jesus is a vision of the formative power of the truth. The character of Mason Tarwater (whose first name means, literally, Builder) beautifully

illustrates the classical belief in the healthful and formative effect of art on the mind; the Greek name for this is "psychagogia," the leading out or persuading of the soul (Bate 3, 13). The belief in art as a moulder and developer of human character is the ultimate goal or function of Aristotle's mimesis. Bate explains how this belief functioned as part of Aristotle's thought.

We may recall Aristotle's definition of virtue as 'rejoicing and loving and hating aright,' and his belief that we attain it by forming the active 'power' of judging and 'taking delight' in the good. So the kind of knowledge special to art. . . . does not vitally affect taste or genius if it is external to the artist, existing on the shelf of his memory for reference or consultation, but only if it becomes 'a part of himself' and is 'woven into his mind' (Bate 255).

The old man embodies this goal, showing Tarwater how to familiarize and bring home the truth, a process Bate describes as "the assimilation of truth, and the automatic desiring and acting in accordance with it. 'The heart,' as Coleridge later said, 'should have fed upon the truth as insects on a leaf, until it is tinged with its food, and shows the color . . . in every minutest fibre'" (Bate 7).

The process of baptizing or converting Tarwater's imagination began while the old man was alive. On one occasion, the old man had told the boy about how he had made

every attempt to lead his own sister to repentance, without success. While he was telling this to Tarwater, the old man would jump up and begin to shout and prophesy in the clearing the same way he had done in front of his sister's door:

With no one to hear but the boy, he would flail his arms and roar, 'Ignore the Lord Jesus as long as you can! Spit out the bread of life and sicken on honey. Whom work beckons, to work! Whom blood to blood! Whom lust to lust! Make haste, make haste. Fly faster and faster. Spin yourselves in a frenzy, the time is short! The Lord is preparing a prophet. The Lord is preparing a prophet with fire in his hand and eye and the prophet is moving toward the city with his warning. The prophet is coming with the Lord's message. 'Go warn the children of God,' saith the Lord, 'of the terrible speed of justice.' Who will be left? Who will be left when the Lord's mercy strikes?' (O'Connor 368).

Tarwater is learning about the fierce, persistent, and uncompromising witness of the prophets, who used extreme emotion, including what one writer called "anger unto violence," to insinuate truth into the human heart (Williamson 45). In O'Connor's fiction, true vision is vouchsafed only to the violent, because as P. Albert Duhamel explains, belief "in this greater reality implies sincere

commitment, and commitment implies a willingness to take a stand. It is the importance of coming to see that vision implies a commitment, getting out of the excluded middle, of acting out of passionate conviction which is suggested by the title of the novel"; "The Violent Bear It Away is a demonstration of that kind of vision, a Christian vision, intended to discipline others to an awareness of the richness of their heritage and to encourage them to witness, violently, for that heritage" (Duhamel 103, 105).

To put it into Aristotelian terms, although the goal, the old man's prophetic vision, beckons to young Tarwater from outside his mind, once achieved it becomes the built-in fulfillment of Tarwater's person, for it had been potentially present in him from his earliest state, as the flower is present in the seed. "The day may come," old Tarwater would say to him slowly, emphasizing every word, "when a pit opens up inside you and you know some things you never known before," and "he would give him such a prescient piercing look that the child would turn his face away, scowling fiercely" (O'Connor 373). As in mimesis, "the aim . . . is to cleave to the conception of what is true with such vigor and firmness that this conception will then arouse, lead, and channel the feelings and the imagination toward it" (Bate 205). Tarwater can feel the Word growing inside him: old Tarwater "might have been shouting to the silent woods that encircled them. While he was in his frenzy, the boy would take up the shotgun and hold it to his

eye and sight along the barrel, but sometimes as his uncle grew more and more wild, he would lift his face from the gun for a moment with a look of uneasy alertness, as if while he had been inattentive, the old man's words had been silently dropping one by one into him and now, silent, hidden in his bloodstream, were moving secretly toward some goal of their own" (O'Connor 368-369). It is as if Tarwater's consciousness is being turned toward an inner vision of Christ, with his great-uncle's passionate conviction acting on him as a catalyst. The old man's vision in catching up the boy's awareness is also calling forth his ability to convert insight or awareness into feeling, into felt persuasions and active response.



## Chapter Four: The Making of a Prophet

## i. The Formative Power of Evil

It is important to note that the opening sentence of chapter one in The Violent Bear It Away is the last time the reader is reminded that old Tarwater has been laid to rest according to his wishes, with the sign of his Savior over his head. Confounded by drink, the boy leaves Powderhead convinced that he has burned and not buried the corpse. When he goes to the city young Tarwater even convinces Rayber of this. His self-deception is so complete and convincing that even the reader is eventually taken in, and by the time Tarwater returns to the clearing (at the end of the book), the reader is as shocked and surprised as the boy is to find a grave, freshly mounded, with a dark rough cross at its head.

This process of encouraging self-deception in the reader is necessary, I believe, for the impact of the therapeutic or formative katharsis which The Violent Bear It Away provides. In the Poetics, Aristotle states that dramatic tragedy produces a healthful effect on the human character called a katharsis. W. J. Bate believes that a number of general points should be kept in mind when interpreting this theory. To begin with, a successful tragedy deals with the element of evil in human life, with what we least want and most fear to face, with what is

destructive to human life and values. In addition to this, tragedy draws out our ability to sympathize with others, so that we ourselves feel something of the impact and the extent of the evil befalling the tragic character. But tragedy does more than simply arouse sympathetic identification and a vivid sense of tragic evil or destructiveness, it offers a katharsis or "proper purgation" (Bate 17-19).

The katharsis that tragedy offers is not merely an outlet or escape for emotion. More than this, Aristotle believed that tragedy deliberately excites in the spectator the emotions which are then to undergo the "proper purgation." The process may be further described as the control, use, and purification of emotion. When the emotion is aroused and managed by poetic tragedy, what is personally disturbing and morbid is purged or shed, and the emotion, after undergoing this purgation, has been purified and lifted to a harmonious serenity. The morbid element purged from the emotion is the subjective, the purely personal and egoistic element. The emotion is caught up by sympathetic identification with the tragic character and the tragic situation; it is extended outward, that is, away from self-centered absorption. This enlarging of the soul through sympathy joins emotion to awareness, directing it outward to what is being conceived. Accordingly, the emotion of the spectator, after being drawn out and identified with the art work, is carried along and made a

part of the harmonious development and working out of the drama.

The Violent Bear It Away offers a therapeutic and formative katharsis which involves the reader in the action with a heightened intensity, merging him in the violent encounter with grace that it depicts, and raising the passions that are touched upon. But this terrifying katharsis, in which the experience of evil helps to develop human awareness of spiritual reality, is not something that takes place exclusively in the psyche of the reader: it grows from the dark and disruptive grace which is used to correct, purify, and instruct the novel's protagonist.

In addition to merging the reader in a dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered experience of Christian mystery, The Violent Bear It Away also emphasizes the metaphysical and psychological development that goes on in human beings, and the methods God has chosen to bring this development about. O'Connor sees the experience of evil as a necessary part of the soul-making activity of God.

The idea of evil as therapy is very old, and it has been recently reintroduced into modern Christian thought (Miller 373-377). First of all, we must bear in mind what the notion of "therapy" involves: it means, literally, healing; a healing power applied to physical and psychological disabilities and disorders. To press the therapeutic character of evil is to argue that evil is the instrument by which God has determined to correct, purify,

and instruct His creatures; in a word, to bring them to spiritual health and maturity.

This way of approaching the problem of evil stands in contrast to the doctrine that the human race was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensibly destroyed its perfection and plunged into sin and misery. The doctrine of evil as therapy suggests something different: that human beings were created as imperfect, immature creatures who were to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for them by their Maker. And instead of the Fall of Adam being presented as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God's plan, the doctrine of evil as therapy pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of the race, an understandable lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice and pregnant with perpetual guilt.

The idea of evil as a means of growth is suggested throughout The Violent Bear It Away: it sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely-appointed environment for Francis Marion Tarwater's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's good purpose for him. Accordingly, O'Connor pictures God using young Tarwater's own potential for evil in a formative way, arousing it and then turning it against him in a manner intended to make him more open and receptive to the truth of his redemption by Jesus Christ.

The Violent Bear It Away succeeds in leading and persuading the reader to participate, in a heightened and sympathetic manner, in the false pride young Tarwater takes in his act of disobedience against God. Tarwater is very sure of himself and has great confidence in his own judgement. We exult in his desire not to be swallowed up in another's will and we identify with his refusal to submit to his vocation blindly. But, as Aristotle would say, when the peripeteia (sudden reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (the moment of recognition, when ignorance gives way to knowledge) do occur, and young Tarwater's confidence in his own judgement is destroyed, we are forced to participate in his humiliation and fall. The independence and self-confidence that make him an attractive character and worthy of our admiration and sympathy are shown to be negative qualities when they cause him to resist grace.

The Violent Bear It Away can thus be seen as a cleverly designed trap for pride: the trap operates by arousing and eliciting through sympathetic identification with the protagonist the propensity we have as fallen creatures for egoism and self-centeredness. It does this first thing in order to purge and purify us of these destructive emotions; pride and a narrow concern for one's own identity and feelings are seen in the book as things which blind us to spiritual reality and limit our spiritual, intellectual, and moral growth. Pride cuts us off from grace, impoverishing our imagination and limiting our capacity for prophetic insight.

## ii. The Lesson of Humility

In chapter one we are introduced to the boy's great-uncle, Mason Tarwater, and given information about his early life. It is here that we are introduced to the notions of evil as therapy and of katharsis. The old man taught the boy that prophets, as servants of the Lord Jesus, could expect the worst kind of treatment during their earthly lives; old Tarwater's experience is presented in parable form:

The old man, who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it. He had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean; for he himself had been burned clean and burned clean again. He had learned by fire (O'Connor 332).

In his youth, the backwoods prophet received violent disciplinary rebukes or correctives which came from the Lord. These acted upon him like a therapeutic katharsis, revealing to His then-immature servant his own capacity for sin, but also reinforcing his sense of dependence on grace. In other words, the prophet was found guilty of the sin of pride and received a needed attitude adjustment:

He had been called in his early youth and had set

out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour. He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire and while he raged and waited, it rose every morning, calm and contained in itself, as if not only the world, but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet's message. It rose and set, rose and set on a world that turned from green to white and green to white and green to white again. It rose and set and he despaired of the Lord's listening. Then one morning he saw to his joy a finger of fire coming out of it and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him and the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body. His own blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world (O'Connor 332).

This information about how the Lord disciplined His elect servant is important because it foreshadows the pattern of dark and disruptive grace which the old man's apprentice, Francis Marion Tarwater, will have to endure if he is to realize his vocation. Old Tarwater's earlier violent encounters with grace are put forward in the first part of the novel as the general form and controlling guide for understanding the boy's conduct later on.

In order to realize his vocation, young Tarwater, like

his mentor, has to learn how to dedicate his imagination and feelings to God. But before this can happen the Lord allows Tarwater to express the worst aspects of himself. God patiently waits for the boy to make mistakes according to his own will. Free will is a condition of personhood; it is a necessary precondition if human beings are to enter into an authentic relationship of love, trust, and faith with God. Free will and independence from the Creator are marks of a genuine humanity. But, of course, this makes for the possibility of disobedience, and that means sin. Sin and evil enter into the world through human free will. His prideful self-love leads young Tarwater into absurd behavior, into believing that he, the servant and creature, could do the Lord's thinking for Him. Only then is he chastened. But, as we shall see, the offense is pardonable, an understandable lapse stemming from personal weakness and a lack of knowing any better. Such behavior is corrected through a disciplining and healing and maturing environment of grace.

Tarwater becomes aware of his own personal weakness, moreover, only after he experiences punishment and suffering in his own brain and his own body. It is a pattern of therapeutic violence which the boy will have to endure if he is to grow in humility and truth. Because this exaggerated sense of his own identity had once afflicted his mentor, old Tarwater, the old man was in a position to warn the boy against acting in the same way: only by suffering can faith



and vision be deepened. O'Connor wrote about this subject, but in a different context, in a letter to Louis Abbot: "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened. A faith which just accepts is a child's faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do" (O'Connor 1110).

Old Tarwater warned the boy not to be exclusive and self-willed in his temper, or to dominate by projecting his own identity. For example, after he learned of the existence of Bishop, the school teacher's child, Old Tarwater made several trips into town to try to baptize him, but each time he had come back unsuccessful. The old man believed that if by the time he himself died, Bishop was not baptized, it would be up to young Tarwater to do it; he predicted it would be the first mission on which the Lord sent the boy. The prediction infuriated Tarwater, arousing the narrow desires of his ego. Tarwater would prefer miraculous manifestations of grace in the grand and heroic manner of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He wants the ways of his prophecy to be remarkable and glamorous. Tarwater is still a boy; and as a boy the way he pictures his call is escapist. But this attitude is a form of subjectivism, as old Tarwater's crotchety response indicates:

The boy doubted very much that his first mission would be to baptize a dim-witted child. 'Oh no it won't be,' he said. "He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me.' And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit.

"It's no part of your job to think for the Lord,' his great-uncle said. 'Judgment may rack your bones' (O'Connor 335).

Tarwater's conception of prophecy is idealistic and thin, lacking the roughness and density of real life. He pictures the old man's acts of religious penance in a self-serving way:

At such times he would wander into the woods and leave Tarwater alone in the clearing, occasionally for days, while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord, and when he returned, bedraggled and hungry, he would look the way the boy thought a prophet ought to look. He would look as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe. These were the times when Tarwater knew that when he was called, he would say, 'Here I am, Lord, ready!' At other times when there was

no fire in his uncle's eye and he spoke only of the sweat and stink of the cross, of being born again to die, and of spending eternity eating the bread of life, the boy would let his mind wander off to other subjects (O'Connor 334).

The strange, apocalyptic visions Tarwater hopes to see for himself are the product of his own wish-fulfillment dreams, and have nothing to do with what the old man actually sees. The prophet dreams no dreams: his imagination is bound by the concrete and familiar images associated with the Cross and the mystery of salvation. In "The Church and the Fiction Writer" (1957), O'Connor wrote that the "Catholic writer, in so far as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge not narrow his field of vision" (O'Connor 808). The prophet's vision is tied to the fact that the Savior of the human race was himself human, that salvation took on the homeliest, and most concrete, and most unromanticizable of forms.

Even when he is preaching about an afterlife, the old Tarwater seems incapable of separating form and matter, spirit and flesh in his thinking. This is because his sense of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh operating in history, is deeply ingrained in his sensibility. Conscious of humanity's eternal transcendent destiny, the old man can

also appreciate with relish the earth as "charged with the grandeur of God." His optimism is derived from three things: his thorough sense of the pattern of redemption through the Incarnate God, his sense of its powers of renewal, and a sacramental view of the universe. Listening to the old man preach, Tarwater feels his awareness being caught up by the impassioned rhetoric.

'Here I sit. And there you sit. In freedom. Not inside anybody's head!' and his voice would run away from him as if it were the freest part of his free self and were straining ahead of his heavy body to be off. Something of his great-uncle's glee would take hold of Tarwater at that point and he would feel that he had escaped some mysterious prison. He even felt he could smell his freedom, pine-scented, coming out of the woods, until the old man would continue, 'You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the Lord, into the death of the Lord Jesus Christ' (O'Connor 342).

Tarwater is being told of the spiritual transformation that is required of those who would attain salvation, but he is disillusioned. With a weary cynicism, he wonders what is so remarkable about Jesus?

Then the child would feel a sullenness creeping over him, a slow warm rising resentment that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that

Jesus had to be the Lord. . . . The boy, disconcerted, would look off into the distance over the dark blue treeline where the world stretched out, hidden and at its ease. In the darkest, most private part of his soul, hanging upsidedown like a sleeping bat, was the certain, undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life. Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus? He felt a terrible disappointment in that conclusion, a dread that it was true (O'Connor 342).

Here were no secret doctrines, no talismans, nothing but a prosaic notion about rebirth. What is being revealed here is the morbid element that is to be purged from Tarwater's emotion, the subjective, the purely personal and egoistic element. Not surprisingly, the affliction occupies the darkest, most private or subjective part of his soul. He regards himself highly, and is willing to surrender his identification to an object he considers worthy of it; however, the image of the bread of life is too familiar, too beneath Tarwater to stimulate either sympathetic identification or admiration in him.

In spite of this temptation to sin, the old prophet's extreme appetite for the bread of life, and his "impossible vision of a world transfigured," still exert a hold on the

boy's imagination (O'Connor 401). And the old man didn't have to be present: the natural world itself has the power to generate a strange awe and wonder in young Tarwater. The boy fears that the things of this world and the old man's mysterious hunger for the bread of life might be connected:

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

Tarwater wants to separate spirit from flesh in his thinking: "When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts. He had expected this to happen as soon as his great-uncle died" (O'Connor 343). O'Connor says that this "would be in line with the Protestant temper--approaching

the spiritual directly instead of through matter" (O'Connor 1080). This attitude constitutes a denial of the Incarnation, of the regenerative power of the Word made flesh, and it also shows the boy's lack of imaginative vision. O'Connor believed "that the moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God," and that the artist must "render the highest possible justice to the visible universe. For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe" (O'Connor 980-981). It was through an act of unselfish love that God gave the boy his very breath, His Word, as a Sacrifice. By being compelled to name the things he sees, young Tarwater would be returning his talent to God, increased, as an offering of love. By avoiding this threatened intimacy of creation, he is refusing to love Jesus, which is why he tries to limit the things he sees, for they would ultimately remind him of the Logos, of the eternally creating Word. Tarwater secretly fears that he has been made in the image of the God who Creates.

The nature of the prophet's vision is such that it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality. In The Violent Bear It Away the would-be prophet, Francis Marion Tarwater, must learn to be humble in the face of what-is, because it is part of the nature of his vocation to be able to look unselfishly outward on a world he did not create. O'Connor said something similar about the prophetic vision of the

novelist: that he comes to realize that the concrete is his medium, that the natural world contains the supernatural. In "The Church and the Fiction Writer" (1957), she says that the "writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them" (O'Connor 808).

In The Violent Bear It Away the boy is continually disappointed with the vision of salvation and human freedom presented by the old man: it is, above all, too much connected with the ordinary things of this world. He cannot see the Lord using using the imperfect, the merely human as a medium for Grace. Tarwater cannot see the power of God as having anything to do with this incomplete and changing world of becoming (to use Aristotle's term). When he arrives at the schoolteacher's door, he receives another stunning vision that helps to dismantle the devices and desires of his ego. The sight of Bishop, "dim and ancient, like a child who had been a child for centuries," stimulates a rage of vision in Tarwater, an instant shock of insight:

He stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child



he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf. The Lord out of dust had created him, had made him blood and nerve and mind, had made him to bleed and weep and think, and set in a world of loss and fire all to baptize one idiot child that He need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish. He tried to shout, 'NO!' but the sound was saturated in silence, lost (O'Connor 389).

Tarwater has not learned to feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. Life has no meaning or value for Tarwater as a result. About Bishop, O'Connor said that in "my novel I have a child--the school teacher's boy--whom I aim to have a kind of Christ image, though a better way to think of it is probably just as a kind of redemptive figure" (O'Connor 1015). Bishop is an instrument of divine love who can be used to enlarge Tarwater's field of vision because Bishop is tied to Christ's humility.

O'Connor believes that humility is a supernatural virtue which, through the knowledge of God and self it imparts, enables us to estimate ourselves at our true worth and to live accordingly, in complete submission to the will of God. Through it we are enabled to control that exaggerated sense of self-importance which is so deeply rooted in our fallen human nature. Humility bridles that innate tendency we all have to estimate ourselves as greater than we are. This is the vice of pride, the root of every sin.

Tarwater cannot yet conceive of this truth, so when he sees Bishop for the very first time (when the old man was alive), "Suddenly a tremendous indignation seized" him and he "searched his mind fiercely for the right word to hurl at it. Finally he said in a slow emphatic voice, 'Before you was here, I was here" (O'Connor 350). But to the old man Bishop constituted "an unspeakable mystery," something holy and worthy of contemplation (O'Connor 350). The old man emphasized Bishop's worth to Tarwater, who cannot believe it: "That boy cries out for his baptism," the old man said. "Precious in the sight of the Lord even an idiot!" (O'Connor 350).

Humility, rooted in justice and truth, keeps us in our place. It keeps us clearly aware of the limited nature of our human freedom in Christ, and of the all-embracing right of God over all He has created. By tying his destiny to Bishop, the Lord is emphasizing this quality to Tarwater,

who believes he was created for something remarkable. Humility is a truth God wished to impress on humanity by the Incarnation, when He "emptied himself, taking on the nature of a slave . . . humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8). This uniquely Christian virtue was quite unknown to pagans (as it is to Tarwater), for whom the term connotes something weak, vile, and abject. Tarwater prizes in himself his distinctly American qualities of rugged individualism and self-reliance, so he tends to misunderstand the virtue he sees reflected in Bishop, and in the bleeding stinking unremarkable figure of Jesus.

Tarwater's vainly romantic conception of prophecy is at fault, an unreal abstraction which needs to be anchored as much as possible in concrete reality. Through Bishop Tarwater is learning to be humble in the face of the truth of his redemption, an emotion he is unfamiliar with. The sad, helpless figure of Bishop is a reproach to the pride in Tarwater, who fears or hesitates to imitate Christ's humility. His anti-incarnational attitude is being aroused and challenged. Tarwater lacks the vision to conceive of nature as an environment for human redemption and as a vestibule or conductor of God's healing power. He is recognizing God only in his divine nature, the Incarnation being implicitly rejected or ignored.

For Tarwater this world of loss and fire, this imperfect world of becoming, with its horrors and mistakes,

cannot be heading toward a unified meaning and completeness. He wonders how a genetic failure can represent the Good News. Bishop exists to make him "realize that genetic failures are actually heavenly messengers, with a special role in the world to make outward and visible the physical and mental distortions which we all have inwardly and invisibly. Without dwarfs, we should suppose that all humans were giants, and vice versa" (Muggeridge 11-12). And without idiot children, we should all believe that our minds were capable of displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world.

Bishop is, therefore, an interesting and imaginatively stimulating fault in creation: a freak of nature who can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement. The schoolteacher's child is a constant reminder to Tarwater that the good in him is under construction. The redemptive figure of Bishop opens up a new perspective on the way O'Connor uses the grotesque in The Violent Bear It Away, something the author herself discussed (though in a different context) in the "Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann" (1961):

Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is

something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look (O'Connor 830).

And when we look into the face of good, "we are liable to see a face like" Bishop's, "full of promise" (O'Connor 830). O'Connor believed that human imperfection and evil were a scandal to modern, secular thinking: natural and moral evil were simply problems to be solved. For O'Connor, evil is a mystery to be endured, and human imperfection represents the raw material of good in all of us, which is waiting to be given determination and stability by grace. She discussed these themes in the "Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann" (1961):

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. The Aymers whom Hawthorne saw as a menace have multiplied. Busy cutting down on human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good. 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, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory (O'Connor 830).

Seeing Bishop in his father's arms, "the boy had a vision of the schoolteacher and his child as inseparably joined. The schoolteacher's face was pained. The child might have been a deformed part of himself that had been accidentally revealed" (O'Connor 390). That is, the child is revealing to Tarwater the evolutionary process that is bringing humanity to spiritual health and maturity. Rayber himself senses this by observing how Tarwater reacts in the presence of Bishop: "Nothing gave him pause--except Bishop, and Rayber knew that the reason Bishop gave him pause was because the child reminded him of the old man. Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence" (O'Connor 400).

Like Mason Tarwater, Bishop is a distorted image of Christ who provokes strange emotional responses from those who see him. For example, Rayber's "normal way of looking on Bishop was as an x signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt" (O'Connor 401). At the Cherokee Lodge, Bishop's

presence elicits a strong reaction from a group of strangers in the restaurant: "As soon as the dancers saw him, he stopped making the noise and stood still, devouring them with his gape. An angry silence fell over them. Their look was shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it" (O'Connor 448). Those who respond to Bishop in a negative way are themselves spiritually blind. They lack the capacity for prophetic insight and cannot bring themselves to accept what they see. Like Rayber, these people are unconsciously afraid that they may have been formed in the image and likeness of the God who humbled Himself, and who took on the simplest and most unromanticizable of forms. Bishop, "with his fallen smile," has a special role to make outward and visible the spiritual defects and corruptions which afflict O'Connor's characters inwardly and invisibly (O'Connor 444).

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that the Lord had set a special trap for Tarwater's pride. The boy can sense the trap laid about all around him, but he believes it is the dead old man who is trying to get the living boy to do his bidding: "His mind was entirely occupied with saving himself from the larger grander trap that he felt set all about him. Ever since his first night in the city when he had seen once and for all that the schoolteacher was of no significance--nothing but a piece of bait, an insult to his intelligence--his mind had been engaged in a continual

struggle with the silence that confronted him, that demanded he baptize the child and begin at once the life the old man had prepared him for" (O'Connor 429). The trap for his pride had been set into motion by the old man's death: "Since the breakfast he had finished sitting in the presence of his uncle's corpse, he had not been satisfied by food, and his hunger had become like an insistent silent force inside him, a silence inside akin to the silence outside, as if the grand trap left him barely an inch to move in, barely an inch in which to keep himself inviolate" (O'Connor 430).

The language of psychotherapy used by Rayber ingeniously foreshadows the formative katharsis that Tarwater ultimately experiences. This way Rayber helps prepare the reader to participate in Tarwater's humiliating fall, providing subtle ironic clues as to the nature of the trap itself. Rayber is a trained psychologist who believes that the boy suffers from a mental delusion that he can diagnose and cure. Rayber detects Tarwater's inner conflict but is kept from understanding the whole truth about it. The reader is also kept in the dark until it is too late for both of them.

The truth about Tarwater's affliction can be seen in the violent and sinful circumstances of his birth. The old man said the devil had "a heavy role in his beginning" (O'Connor 366-367). Tarwater's own mother (a whore, according to the old man) had been killed in an automobile crash, which left Tarwater alive, for his mother had lived



just long enough after the crash for him to be born. He had been born at the scene of the wreck. It was O'Connor's belief that every member of the humanity was, in a cosmic sense, born at the scene of a great accident or wreck (the Fall), which caused damage to the human personality (Original Sin). We are alerted to the fact that Tarwater's affliction is pride:

The boy was very proud that he had been born in a wreck. He had always felt that it set his existence apart from the ordinary one and he had understood from it that the plans of God for him were special, even though nothing of consequence had happened to him so far. Often when he walked in the woods and came upon some bush a little removed from the rest, his breath would catch in his throat and he would stop and wait for the bush to burst into flame. It had not done it yet (O'Connor 353).

O'Connor wants us to be aware of more than just the effects of the Fall on Tarwater's character. The Violent Bear It Away focuses on his redemption. That is why the next paragraph begins: "His uncle had never seemed to be aware of the importance of the way he had been born, only of how he had been born again" (O'Connor 355-356).

Original sin planted in Tarwater the exaggerated sense of self-importance which O'Connor dryly mocks in the paragraph quoted above. The mockery is beautifully picked

up again by Rayber, soon after Tarwater arrives at the schoolteacher's house: "It had taken him barely half a day to find out that the old man had made a wreck of the boy and that what was called for was a monumental job of reconstruction" (O'Connor 391).

It was not for Rayber, of course, to repair the damage. But with acute perception, he manages to diagnose the conflicting wills in Tarwater: God's will and his own. When Rayber had first opened the door in the middle of the night, he had seen Tarwater's face, "white, drawn by some unfathomable hunger and pride" (O'Connor 392). Then he develops his plan to cure the boy, which is to take him back to Powderhead and make him face what he had done. "What he hoped was that if seeing and feeling the place again were a real shock, the boy's trauma might suddenly burst out" (O'Connor 423).

After watching Tarwater's abortive attempt to baptize Bishop in the park fountain, Rayber "realized now the magnitude of the boy's affliction": "He saw no way of curing him except perhaps through some shock, some concrete confrontation with the futility, the ridiculous absurdity of performing the empty rite" (O'Connor 421). Rayber's prophecies do come to pass, including Tarwater's humiliation and defeat. After warning the boy that "Experience is a terrible teacher," he watches helplessly as Tarwater, with Bishop, leaves for the lake. Rayber observes the scene as if it were a trap laid out for Tarwater, and his prediction

of the boy's comeuppance is linked beautifully, organically, to a vision of cosmic regeneration:

The sky was a bright pink, casting such a weird light that every color was intensified. Each weed that grew out of the gravel looked like a live green nerve. The world might have been shedding its skin. The two were in front of him half way down the dock, walking slowly, Tarwater's hand still resting just under Bishop's hat; but it seemed to Rayber that it was Bishop who was doing the leading, that the child had made the capture. He thought with a grim pleasure that sooner or later the boy's confidence in his own judgement would be brought low (O'Connor 452).

Through the scrap of prophetic vision he still possesses, Rayber can see the course Tarwater must take. He can see the destruction that must fall in the boy's own brain and body: "He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for, that he moved off now through the black forest toward a violent encounter with his fate" (O'Connor 456).

### iii. Final Vision

But it would not be Rayber who would be administering the shock of self-knowledge that would clear the way for the

reception of grace in Tarwater. Rather, it would be the devil who would teach the boy the hard lessons that lead to self-knowledge. Tarwater must turn inward toward an inner vision of Christ and away from his own egocentricity, but first he must see this selfish side in himself in order to turn away from it. And who better qualified than the devil to assist in acquainting him with his own pride?

O'Connor sees the devil as a piercer of human pretensions. In a letter to A. in 1961, O'Connor described the process of religious conversion as a gradual process of self-discovery leading to knowledge of sin: "I don't think of conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it" (O'Connor 1144). Tarwater is being gradually brought face to face with his own evil so that he may turn away from it. In this he has the assistance of the devil, who begins to tempt him as soon as the old man dies. The devil attacks the old prophet's belief in the resurrection of the body, and persuades Tarwater to burn the corpse:

He didn't search out the stranger's face but he knew by now that it was sharp and friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat that obscured the color of his eyes. He had lost his dislike for the thought of the voice.

Only every now and then it sounded like a stranger's voice to him. He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance. I ain't denying the old man was a good one, his new friend said, but like you said: you can't be any poorer than dead. They have to take what they can get. His soul is off this mortal earth now and his body is not going to feel the pinch, of fire or anything else (O'Connor 352).

O'Connor wrote to John Hawkes in 1959 that in "general the Devil can always be a subject for my kind of comedy one way or another. I suppose this is because he is always accomplishing ends other than his own" (O'Connor 1119). For O'Connor it is the devil who "teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge" (O'Connor 1150).

The baptism and murder of Bishop are experienced by the reader through Tarwater's dream of it. After he does the deed, Tarwater heads for the highway. Hitching a ride in the direction of Powderhead, Tarwater falls asleep in the cab of the truck. In a dream Tarwater wrestles with images of death, as if he were thrashing out his peace with the Lord Jesus in a metaphorically mediated fashion:

He felt bodiless as if he were nothing but a head full of air, about to tackle all the dead. . . .  
Sitting upright and rigid in the cab of the truck,

his muscles began to jerk, his arms flailed, his mouth opened to make way for cries that would not come. His pale face twitched and grimaced. He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue . . . . as he struggled to extricate himself from the monstrous enclosing darkness. . . . He grappled with the air as if he had been flung like a fish on the shores of the dead without lungs to breathe there. . . . Suddenly in a high raw voice the defeated boy cried out the words of the baptism, shuddered, and opened his eyes. . . . With his eyes open, his face began to look less alert. Deliberately, forcefully, he closed the inner eye that had witnessed the dream (O'Connor 462-463).

Tarwater has participated in a symbolic death and resurrection experience which helps to deepen his ongoing baptism or conversion into a Christian vision of reality. In the dream he received the concrete signs of his prophetic mission which the devil predicted he should receive: "What you want is a sign, suitable to a prophet. If you are a prophet, it's only right you should be treated like one. When Jonah dallied, he was cast three days in the belly of darkness and vomited up in the place of his mission. That was a sign; it wasn't no sensation" (O'Connor 431). The devil therefore planted the image of resurrection in Tarwater's mind where it would grow and bear fruit. Christ

himself refers to the preaching of the prophet Jonah (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32), and makes Jonah's stay in the belly of the fish a type of His own burial and resurrection (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29-31). In early Christian art, the figure of the fish represented a Christian, in allusion to the invitation given by Christ to His first disciples, who were fishermen, to follow Him, with the promise that He would make them "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). It is also likely that Tarwater's dream is making a further reference to the sacrament of Baptism, by reason of the fact that water is the element in which fish live, just as the water of baptism is the means whereby a Christian begins to live the life of grace.

After struggling with death in his dream, Tarwater calls out for grace to rescue him, using the words of the baptism. He then awakes to a phoenix-like image of resurrection: "The plateau had widened and was broken by the sun which rose through it majestically with a long red wingspread" (O'Connor 463). It is as if Tarwater had called out to Jesus to rescue his imagination from a figurative death. The vision of the risen sun/Son is meant to suggest the sudden, personal intervention of Christ into Tarwater's internal struggle.

But the process is not complete. He must complete the action by dedicating his vision to Christ, inserting himself into the mystery of salvation. On his way home to Powderhead, Tarwater stops at a filling-station to get a

drink and there he encounters the large woman who owns the place. By virtue of her imposing and impressive physical stature, the woman makes us conscious of old Tarwater's spiritual presence: "She was leaning against the frame, her arms folded, and she filled almost the whole entrance. She was a black-eyed woman with a granite-like face and a tongue persistent to question. He and his great-uncle had traded at this place on occasion and when the woman was there, the old man had liked to linger and discourse, for he found her as pleasant as a shade tree" (O'Connor 467).

It is apparent that the woman is an agent of grace, one who will help Tarwater ferret out the center of his emotional infection, the corruption that occupied the darkest, most private part of his soul: "There was all knowledge in her stony face and the fold of her arms indicated a judgment fixed from the foundations of time. Huge wings might of been folded behind her without seeming strange" (O'Connor 467). Her eyes immediately grab at Tarwater, "She spotted him across the highway and although she did not move or raise her hand, he could feel her eyes reeling him in" (O'Connor 467). He feels himself caught up in her look, held there before the judgement seat of her eyes:

'The niggers told me how you done,' she said. 'It shames the dead.'

The boy pulled himself together to speak. He was conscious that no sass would do, that he was called upon by some force outside them both to



answer for his freedom and make bold his acts. A tremor went through him. His soul plunged deep within itself to hear the voice of his mentor at its most profound depths. He opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair. Shocked, he saw the moment lost (O'Connor 467-468).

Tarwater's confidence in his own judgement has been brought low. After being baptized into the freedom of the death of the Lord Jesus, Tarwater is realizing that this freedom must cost him in terms of spiritual humiliation. The wrong words had stained his thought:

The obscenity echoed sullenly in his head. The boy's mind was too fierce to brook impurities of such a nature. He was intolerant of unspiritual evils and with those of the flesh he had never truckled. He felt his victory sullied by the remark that had come from his mouth. He thought of turning and going back and flinging the right words at her but he had still not found them. He tried to think of what the schoolteacher would have said to her but no words of his uncle's would rise to his mind (O'Connor 468).

Tarwater cannot recall the schoolteacher's words because after being tried in the fires of his own pride,

Rayber's fancies have been burnt out of him, smothered for good, so that there was never any chance they would break out in him.

The stage is now set for his physical violation in the woods by the man in the automobile. The man in the automobile is an actualization of Tarwater's friend and counselor, the devil. O'Connor gave her own gloss on the incident in a 1959 letter to John Hawkes:

More than in the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted--such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children. These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances. It is the violation in the woods that brings home to Tarwater the real nature of his rejection. I couldn't have brought off the final vision without it (O'Connor 1119).

The significance of his violation in the motor car is that it leaves him with a vivid, inburnt sense of his own sin, a sense of human limitations, and a sense of the mystery of evil which he could not have developed in his first state of innocence. Tarwater's imitation of Christ's physical humiliation on the Cross has to be made complete in every way. It must be experienced in his own flesh in an intensely personal manner if it is to have any meaning for him.

By refusing to bury the old man's corpse, Tarwater committed an offense against the body of Christ, of which the boy is now a member. As a member of that spiritual body, he now has a sense of the horror at human injustice that Jesus felt when he was put on trial. The sad figure of Jesus had once implied defeat and failure to the boy. He was too much in love with himself to identify sympathetically with a figure of scorn and derision. Failure and suffering for him could not accomplish anything. He could not conceive of the paradox that the world would be saved by a failure. The boy had not yet experienced these things in himself.

The burden is on him to participate in Jesus's misery and to build upon the identity that he has been given by Christ's history of defeat and violation on the Cross, a history which is being grafted onto his own personal history: Tarwater "leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied" (O'Connor 478). After being "tried in the fire of his refusal," there is only room in Tarwater's imagination for the Word (O'Connor 464). Christ fills all corners of his consciousness: "He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the

world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth" (O'Connor 478). In other words, Tarwater has within himself the truth that the prophet Mason Tarwater believed was emerging in external nature or reality.

As a direct consequence of his newly-acquired vision, the ground he walks on is important to him now because of the sleeping truth it contains:

As he looked, his hunger constricted him anew. It appeared to be outside him, surrounding him, almost as if it were visible before him, something he could reach out for and not quite touch. He sensed a strangeness about the place as if there might already be an occupant. . . . A deep filled quiet pervaded everything. The encroaching dusk seemed to come softly in deference to some mystery that resided here. . . . He became conscious of the very breath he drew. Even the air seemed to belong to another (O'Connor 476).

Tarwater had to be saved from himself, from the egoistic proclivities rooted in fallen human nature. Something selfish prevented him from clearly discerning the will of God. The would-be prophet had to be made aware of the deposit of evil in himself before he could be free to interpret the ways of God to the world. Before he was burned clean Tarwater was capable only of subjective emotion directed inward on his own feelings and could identify only

with his own consciousness. Tarwater had to rely on an external grace to lift him above his egocentric state before he could genuinely enter into the feelings of others.

"Greatness in art, philosophy, or moral action," writes W. J. Bate, "--the 'heroic' in any sense--all involve losing the sense 'of our personal identity in some object dearer to us than ourselves'" (Bate 284). Also, "Self-centeredness in an adult results from a long, habitual narrowing of the mind to one's own feelings and interests" (Bate 284). In this case, Tarwater was incapable of sympathetic identification with anything greater than his own being and therefore would always lack the objective understanding of reality which that identification brings. The prophet must be free to surrender his awareness and take on the character of what is outside himself; he must adopt an attitude of humility and openness toward the meaningful world beyond his ego. Tarwater is one of those immature and fallen characters that O'Connor described in her essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960). These are characters "who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves--whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (O'Connor 816). That is, they must be forced out of themselves, and taught by grace that there is a world of meaning beyond what Malcolm Muggeridge called the devices and desires of the ego. God answers Tarwater with the vision He promised, and answers him through his own mind, imagination, and feelings, but only

after he relies on and worships Him as being above and beyond them.

As a final token of his acceptance of his vocation, Tarwater stoops and picks up a handful of dirt off the old man's grave and smears it on his forehead: "He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grave, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood" (O'Connor 478). Tarwater has consciously consecrated his mind to God. He is affirming, in a sacramental way, his loyalty to the world that God loved so much that He died for it.

### Conclusion

Literature from classical antiquity to the end of the eighteenth century was predominantly mimetic: that is, the general function of literature was to present a heightened and harmonious imitation of nature or reality, and, in particular those aspects of nature that touch most closely upon human life and destiny.

Although Flannery O'Connor does not use the term "imitation," her carefully formulated aesthetics bear witness to this basic orientation. More than her comments upon the art of fiction-writing, her literary achievement, specifically The Violent Bear It Away, reveals a mind that has a firm sense of the demands of mimesis, and is constantly and intuitively close to the principles and values of this tradition. I also believe that O'Connor's religious and moral concerns (which she derived from her Roman Catholicism) fortify her work in a way that makes it a deepening of Aristotle's classical principles: one truth sustaining the other. I believe O'Connor's is a unique mimesis, one in which she has, in a sense, "baptized" Aristotle.

Through an explication of The Violent Bear It Away I have attempted to show how it is mimetic--how it represents a heightened and harmonious imitation of nature in the sense theoretically outlined by Aristotle. In the process I hoped

to discover a plausible critical basis upon which O'Connor's fiction might be understood and evaluated. And while I acknowledge that O'Connor's reputation is as a writer of short stories, and not primarily as a novelist, I also believe that as one of her mature works this novel is representative of her fictional approach: most of her fiction tends to fall within a closely circumscribed thematic, social, and emotional range. If this is true, then perhaps my approach to the novel can be applied to other individual works.

O'Connor had worked on the novel a long time: it was published in 1960, but a version of the first chapter appeared as a short story in 1955 (O'Connor 1258). She wrote some of her best short stories during the period she worked on The Violent Bear It Away. When viewed "reflexively," The Violent Bear It Away appears to comment upon O'Connor's fictional art: and as I have made clear, the attitudes in the novel correspond to the classical ideals surrounding mimesis. For example, an important premise of mimesis is its stress on objectivity: this stress is not merely a truism, but an important point-of-departure for this kind of art. The mimetic writer is attuned or oriented toward an essential reality which exists outside the mind. The very fact that an external world exists for the writer to contemplate is something which colors his thought processes and is thus an important impetus to the creative act.



The mimetic poet and O'Connor's prophet-poet achieve worthwhile vision by maintaining their loyalty to the object-centered world. This world is the source of their inspiration because it provides the necessary context for the on-going drama of human achievement and perfection which so fascinate the mind. For both mimetic philosopher and Christian poet, the world is a place of pilgrimage.

Speaking about her friend, the novelist Caroline Tate, O'Connor said: "Mrs. Tate told me that after she became a Catholic, she felt she could use her eyes and accept what she saw for the first time, she didn't have to make a new universe for each book but could take the one she found" (O'Connor 966). And as for herself, "I have always been free to do nothing but look, though I haven't always had sense enough to" (O'Connor 930). There is a belief implied in O'Connor's fiction that we must accept, with passion, the meaningful universe we are given by God, instead of trying to fabricate a new one, or to impose a private or subjective meaning on the one we already have.

W. J. Bate tells us that the classical view underlying Aristotle's mimesis emphasizes that "man's end is to complete himself: to carry out, to the fullest extent, what is best and most distinctive in him. And what is best in him, as an aware creature, is the capacity to realize what is without, to profit and grow by means of this knowledge, and to react and desire in accordance with the awareness that has informed him" (Bate 6). O'Connor also believed in

the power of art to lead the mind back to essential truths: on an aesthetic level she believed that she could complete human potentiality in light of what was for her the highest standard of spiritual and moral excellence: the Incarnation. She felt that the great and permanent theme of humanity's Redemption was being displaced in modern literature in favor of more limited naturalistic concerns: "Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end" she wrote in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (O'Connor 814).

Thomas Merton once observed that the magnitude or depth of focus he found in her writing reminded him not of a Hemingway or a Sartre, but more of a writer like Sophocles. Like the characters in a Sophoclean tragedy, the backwoods prophets in The Violent Bear It Away are human beings who are forced to deal with truths or realities which come from outside the realm of human events. One writer said that tragedy "occurs when a human soul awakes and seeks, in suffering and pain, to free itself from crime, violence, infamy, even at the cost of life. The struggle is the tragedy--not defeat or death. That is why the spectacle of tragedy has always filled men, not with despair, but with a sense of hope and exaltation" (Chambers 4-5). In Sophocles the external agency was Fate; in The Violent Bear It Away

Tarwater must fiercely struggle to respond to a call that comes from outside the realm of human events, but at the same time he must rely on grace that works through nature and operates surrounded by human imperfection and evil.

The attitude underlying Aristotle's mimesis implies an unselfish quality of mind: an intellectual humility and common sense. By contemplating the prophetic vision of human life in The Violent Bear It Away, the reader can acquire this healthful quality. Humility is a good word here: it implies a closeness to the ground and reminds us of the raw red clay soil, the dirt at the foot of the prophet's grave, embedded in which is a Cross. Tarwater's return trip to Powderhead, and to the cross at his great-uncle's grave, symbolizes the completion of awareness for O'Connor's readers: the circuit is complete, and the rich joy we feel in this knowledge is like "the light that is lit" for the Redemption-centered imagination (Boyd 30).

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