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# FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S COMPLETE STORIES

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## FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S COMPLETE STORIES

Three quotations from F. O'Connor to give the tone of this reading of *The Complete Stories*:

*“The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic.”*

*“Art is never democratic; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it”*

*“We all write at our own level of understanding” (Mysteries and Manners)*

Hence, the thought-provoking consequence that we all read at our own level of understanding; the aim of these lectures is consequently to raise our own level...

### Books by Flannery O'Connor

*Wise Blood*, a novel 1952

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a collection of short-stories, 1955

*The Violent Bear It Away*, a novel, 1960

*Everything That Rises Must Converge*, a collection of short-stories published posthumously in 1965

*Mystery and Manners*, occasional prose, 1969

*The Complete Stories*, 1971

*The Habit of Being*, collected letters, 1979

*The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*, 1983

*F. O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1988.

## A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In spite of the author's warning : « *If you're studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life* » (126), we'll conform to tradition and follow the usual pattern in literary studies *i.e.* deal with OC's life in relation to her work, for the simple reason that, as in most cases, the person and the writer are inextricably entwined.

To sum up the gist of what is to follow: « *The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of **being Southern and being Catholic***. ». The two essential components of O'C's worldview and work are her Southernness and her Catholicism.

Mary Flannery – she dropped her 1<sup>st</sup> name Mary on the grounds that nobody “was likely to buy the stories of an Irish Washerwoman” – was born in Savannah, Georgia on 25 March 1925 ; she was the only child of Edward Francis and Regina Cline O'Connor, a Catholic family. Her father, a real estate broker who encountered business difficulties, encouraged her literary efforts ; her mother came from a prominent family in the State.

The region was part of the Christ-haunted Bible belt of the Southern States and the spiritual heritage of the section profoundly shaped OC's writing, as you all know by now.

Her first years of schooling took place in the the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, across from her home; she attended mass regularly

In 1938, after her father had fallen gravely ill, the family moved to Milledgeville, her mother's birthplace, and the place where she lived for the rest of her life. Her father died in 1941.

In 1945 graduated from the Georgia State College for Women with a major in social science. Later she went to the State University of Iowa and got a degree of Master of Fine Arts in Literature.

She attended the Iowa's writer workshop conducted by Paul Engle and Allan Tate, who was to become a lifelong friend.

She published her first story "The Geranium" while she was still a student. She won the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for the publication of 4 chapters of what was to become *Wise Blood*. Later on, she was to win several times first place in the O. Henry contest for the best short-story of the year.

After graduating, she spent the fall of 1947 as a teaching assistant while working on her first novel, *Wise Blood*, under the direction of Engle. In early 1948, she moved to Yadoo, an artist colony in upstate New York where she continued to work on her novel. There, she became acquainted with the prominent poet Robert Lowell and influential critic Alfred Kazin. She spent a year in New York with the Fitzgeralds from the spring of 1949 to the Christmas of 1950. Early in 1951 she was diagnosed with lupus erythematosus, a blood disease that had taken her father's life in 1941 ; she accepted the affliction with grace, viewing it as a necessary limitation that allowed her to develop her art. Consequently, she retreated permanently to the South ; for the next 13 years O'C lived as a semi-invalid with her mother at *Andalusia*, their farm house, a few miles outside Milledgeville, surrounded with her her famous peacocks and a whole array of animals (pheasants, swans, geese, ducks and chickens). She wrote each morning for three hours, wrote letters, and took trips with her mother into town for lunch. She read such thinkers as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, George Santayana and Hannah Arendt. She held no jobs, subsisting solely on grants (from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Ford Foundation for instance), fellowships and royalties from her writing.

Though her lupus confined her to home and she had to use crutches, she was able to travel to do interviews and lecture at a number of colleges throughout the 50's. In 1958, she even managed a trip to Lourdes and then to Rome for an audience with the Pope. An abdominal operation reactivated the lupus and O'C died on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1964, at the age of 39.

Although she managed to establish her reputation as a major writer by the end of the 50's, she was regarded as a master of the short-story, O'C grew increasingly disheartened in her attempt to make "the ultimate reality of the Incarnation real for an audience that has ceased to believe." This article of faith and her belief in Christ's resurrection account for her way of seeing the universe. However, her work is mostly concerned with Protestant, a paradox she explained in the

following way: “I can write about Protestant believers better than Catholic believers—because they express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action is obvious enough for me to catch. I can’t write about anything subtle.”

An important milestone in her literary career and reputation : the publication of *Mystery and Manners* edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in 1969. Through the 70s, this collection of essays became the chief lens for O’C interpretation.

In 1979, the same people edited a collection of O’C’s letters, *The Habit of Being*.

From beyond the grave, O’C herself became the chief influence on O’C criticism.

**To sum up:** O’C led a rather uneventful life that was focused almost exclusively on her vocation as a writer and devotion to her Catholic faith. All told, OC’s was a somewhat humble life yet quite in keeping with her literary credo : “*The fact is that the materials of the fiction writer are the humblest. Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn’t try to write fiction. It’s not a grand enough job for you*”.

**Influences:** The Bible ; St Augustine ; Greek tragedy ; G. Bernanos ; T.S Eliot ; W. Faulkner ; G. Greene ; N. Hawthorne ; Søren Kierkegaard ; Gabriel Marcel ; Jacques Maritain ; F. Mauriac ; E. A. Poe ; Nathaniel West.

## **THE SETTING OF F. O’CONNOR’S FICTION : THE SOUTH AND ITS LITERARY TRADITION**

A sketchy background aiming to place OC’s work in its appropriate context. But before doing that it is necessary to take up a preliminary problem, a rather complex one *i.e.* the question of the relationship between fiction and life or the world around us, which will lead us to raise 2 fundamental questions :

– the first bears on the **function and nature of literature** ;

– the second regards the **identification of a given novelist with the section** known as the South (in other words, is a novelist to be labelled a Southern writer on account of his geographical origin only ?).

### **A) Function and nature of literature**

A word of warning you against a possible misconception or fallacy (a mistaken belief), *i.e.* **the sociological approach to literature** which means that even if OC’s fiction is deeply anchored to a specific time and place, even if fiction-writing is according to OC herself “a plunge into reality” beware of interpreting her stories as documents on the South or Southern culture.

Such an approach – called the “sociological fallacy” – takes it for granted that literature is a **mirror of life**, that all art aims at the accurate representation or imitation of life (a function subsumed under the name of *mimesis*, a term derived from Aristotle). That may be the case, and OC’s fiction gives the reader a fairly accurate portrayal of the social structure and mores of the South but it

can't be reduced to the status of a document. Consequently, there is no need to embark upon a futile quest for exact parallels between the fictional world and the experiential world. A characteristic delusion exposed by critic J. B. Hubbell<sup>1</sup> :

Many Northern and European and, I fear, Southern readers make the mistake of identifying Faulkner's fictitious Yoknapatawpha County with the actual state of Mississippi. It is quite possible that an informed historian could parallel every character and incident in Faulkner's great cycle with some person or event in the history of the state ; and yet Faulkner's world is as dark a literary domain as Thomas Hardy's Wessex and, almost as remote from real life as the Poictesme of James Branch Cabell or the No Man's Land of Edgar Allan Poe.

This is the main danger: the sociological dimension somewhat blurs if not obliterates the literary nature and quality — the *literariness* — of Southern fiction.

As an antidote to the mistaken or illusory view that literature is a mirror of life, I'd like to advocate the view that the South also is a territory of the imagination. Just as one does not paint from nature but from painting, according to A. Malraux, one does not write books from actual life but from literature. Cf. also OC's statement that: "*The writer is initially set going by literature more than by life*" (*M&M*, 45). Moreover, there exists now a fictitious South, a composite literary entity that owes its being to all the novels that were written about or around it.

What was once raw about American life has now been dealt with so many times that the material we begin with is itself a fiction, one created by Twain, Eliot, or Fitzgerald. (Wright Morris in *The Territory Ahead* (in *Reality and Myth*, 316)

So, one has to take into account what French philosopher, G. Durand calls « *les puissances de transfiguration de l'écriture*<sup>2</sup> ». Literature may well express reality, but it also creates a form of reality that does not exist beside, outside, or before the text itself, but **in** and **through** the text. Literature does not re-create the world; it brings a new world into being. It is « *la nécessité du récit qui secrète son paysage [...] l'œuvre littéraire crée son espace, sa région, son paysage nourricier* » (G. Durand, 393). The most extreme inference one can deduce from such a premiss is that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Sartoris* and *Gone With the Wind*, etc., conjured up a referential, fictitious, legendary, and mythical South, a territory of the imagination.

Far from being a mere "transcript of life", literature aims in W. Faulkner's own words, at "sublimating the actual into the apocryphal" (an apocryphal story is well-known but probably not true), which is just another way of claiming that literature creates its own reality.

By selecting and rearranging elements from reality and composing them into an imaginative pattern the artist gives them a meaningfulness and a coherence which they would otherwise not have possessed. As an imaginative recreation of experience the novel can thus, in and of itself,

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1. J. B. Hubbell, *Southern Life in Fiction*, Athens, U of Georgia Press, 1960, 14.

2. G. Durand, "Les Fondements de la création littéraire" in *Symposium* ("Les Enjeux"), *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Paris, 1993, 398.

become a revolt against a world which appears to have no logical pattern Another element bearing out the *literariness* of OC's short fiction is the play of intertextuality :

The referent of narrative discourse is never the crude fact, nor the dumb event, but other narratives, other stories, a great murmur of words preceding, provoking, accompanying and following the procession of wars, festivals, labours, time: And in fact we are always under the influence of some narrative, things have always been told us already, and we ourselves have always already been told. (V. Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 186).

OC's texts take shape as a mosaic of quotations ; they imitate, parody, transform other texts. Her stories reverberate with echoes from The Bible, or *The Pilgrim's Progress*, etc., which conclusively proves that one does not write from life or reality only but also from books :

[...] la création d'un livre ne relève ni de la topographie, ni du patchwork des petits faits psychologiques, ni des bornes déterminations chronologiques, ni même du jeu mécanique des mots et des syntaxes. Elle ne se laisse pas circonscire par l'étroite psychologie de l'auteur, champ de la psychanalyse, ni par son « milieu » ou par son « moment », que repère la sociologie ou l'histoire. L'œuvre ne dépend de rien, elle inaugure un monde. [...] La tâche de l'artiste n'est-elle pas de transfigurer, de transmuier — l'alchimiste est l'artiste par excellence — la matière grossière et confuse — *materia grossa et confusa* — en un métal étincelant ? Toute conclusion d'un poète doit-être celle de Baudelaire : « Tu m'as donné de la boue et j'en ai fait de l'or. » (Durand, 398)

Far from being a mere transcript of the social, economic, historical situation of the South, OC's work is essentially, like all form of literary creation a transmutation of anecdotal places and geographic areas into *topoi*\* : « une transmutation de lieux anecdotiques et de sites géographiques en *topoi* [...] toute œuvre est démiurgique : elle crée, par des mots et des phrases, une terre nouvelle et un ciel nouveau » (Durand, 395-392).

\**Topos, topoi* : from Greek, literally “place” but the term came to mean a traditional theme (topic) or formula in literature. Between life and literature there intervenes language and the imagination. Literature is basically a question of “*words, commas and semi-colons*” as S. Foote forcefully maintained.

## B) Identification of a given novelist with the section

As for the second question – the “*southernness*” of such and such novelist –, I'd like to quote the challenging opinion of a French specialist, M. Gresset, who rightly maintains that :

Il est à peu clair maintenant que le Sud est une province de l'esprit, c'est-à-dire non seulement qu'on peut-être “Sudiste” n'importe où, mais que le Sud en tant que province, se trouve à peu près où l'on voudra. [...] Être sudiste, ce serait donc non seulement être un minoritaire condamné par l'Histoire, mais être, comme on dit maintenant, un loser<sup>3</sup>. (Emphasis mine)

Consequently, one should be wary of enrolling under the banner of southern literature such and such a writer just because he was born in Mississippi, Tennessee or Georgia. F. O'Connor set

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3. M. Gresset, préface à P. Carmignani, *Les Portes du Delta : Introduction à la fiction sudiste et à l'œuvre romanesque de Shelby Foote*, Perpignan, PUP, 1994, 6-7.

all her books in the South, consequently she **is** a regionalist, but she managed *to endow her fiction with universality i.e. to turn the particular into the universal*.

As a Southerner born and bred, Flannery O'Connor is consistently labeled a regional writer, which in the eyes of many critics amounts to a limitation if not a liability. However, if Flannery O'Connor undoubtedly is **of** the South she is also **in** the South as one is **in the human condition** to share its greatness and baseness, its joys and sorrows, its aspirations and aberrations. In other words, her work and preoccupations transcend the limits of regionalism to become universal in their scope and appeal: "O'Connor writes about a South that resides in all of us. Her works force us toward parts of our personal and collective histories we thought we had shed long ago." (R. K. Johansen, 22)

### C) The South

This being said, let's now deal with the question of the setting of OC's fiction *viz.* the South. If you attended last year's course on *Jordan County*, you must know by now how difficult it is to answer the simple question "What is the South?", how difficult it is to merely say how many States comprise the section since their number range from 11 to 17 (the 11 States of the Confederacy; the 15 Slave states i.e. where slavery was legal; the 17 States below the Mason-Dixon line\*)

\***Mason-Dixon line** = a line of demarcation between **Pennsylvania** and **Maryland** deriving its name from those of the two topographers who determined that border, hence the nickname Dixie-land for the South .

– "**What made the South ?**" This essential question is no less complex than the former. Among the most often quoted "marks of distinctiveness" are to be found :

— **Geography**: but far from forming a homogeneous geographical region, a unit, the South can be divided into 7 regions → too much diversity for geography to be a suitable criterion. Consequently, specialists resorted to another factor :

— **Climate**: the weather is very often said to be the chief element that made the South distinctive. The South has long been noted for its mild winters, long growing seasons, hot summers and heavy rainfall. Climate has doubtless exerted a strong influence on the section, *e.g.* it slowed the tempo of living and of speech, promoted outdoor life, modified architecture and encouraged the employment of Negroes, etc. However, climate is a necessary but not a sufficient explanation.

— **Economy**: the South used to be an agricultural region but it underwent a radical process of urbanization and industrialization that led to the Americanization of Dixie: economically, the South is gradually aligning itself with the North.

— **History**: the South suffered evils unknown to the nation at large : slavery, poverty, military defeat, all of them un-American experiences: "*the South is the region history has happened to*" (R. Weaver, RANAM IX, 7)

**To sum up** → The South is a protean\* entity baffling analysis and definition : it can't be explained in terms of geography, climate or history, etc. yet it is all that and something more : “*An attitude of mind and a way of behaviour just as much as it is a territory*” (Simkins, IX).

\*having the ability to change continually in appearance or behaviour like the mythological character Proteus.

Nevertheless, if it can be said there are many Souths, the fact remains that there is also one South. That is to say, it is easy to trace throughout the region (roughly delimited by the boundaries of the former Confederate States of America, but shading over into some of the border states, notably Kentucky, also) a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern – a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas which, if it is not common strictly speaking to every group of white people in the South, is still common in one appreciable measure or another, and in some part or another, to all but relatively negligible ones (W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 1969).

Taking into account the literary history of the South and the fiction it gave rise to may help us to answer some of the question we've been dealing with.

#### **D) A Very Short Introduction to Southern Fiction**

A rough sketch of the literary history of a “writerly\* region”, focussing on the landmarks.

\**Writerly*: of or characteristic of a professional author; consciously literary.

The Southern literary scene was long dominated by *Local-color fiction or Regionalism* (a movement that emphasizes the local color or distinctive features of a region or section of the US). Local-color fiction was concerned with the detailed representation of the setting, dialect, customs, dress and ways of thinking and feeling which are characteristic of a particular region (the West, the Mississippi region, the South, the Midwest and New England).

This movement or literary school was illustrated by the works of/Among local-colorists four names stand out: **Joel Chandler Harris** (1848-1908) who recorded Negro folklore in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880); **George Washington Cable** (1844-1925), a native of New Orleans, was the depicter of the Creole civilization; **Thomas Nelson Page** (1832-1922); **Kate Chopin** (1851-1904), a woman writer of French descent who dealt with Louisiana in *The Awakening* (1899).

A period of paramount importance in the emergence of Southern literature was the debate over slavery and abolition just before Civil War (1861-1865). *The controversy over the peculiar institution gave rise to a genuine Southern literature:*

The South found itself unable to accept much of the new literature which emanated from the Northern states. It then began half-consciously building up a regional literature, modeled upon English writers, which was also in part a literature of defense [...] The South was more or less consciously building up a rival literary tradition. (Hubbell, 133)

Another fact for congratulation to the South is, that our people are beginning to write books – to build up a literature of our own. This is an essential prerequisite to the establishment of independence of thought amongst us. (G. Fitzhugh, 338)

The most influential work of those troubled years was the anti-slavery plea, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in 1852 by **Harriet Beecher Stowe** (1811-1896), the first American best-seller. The period gave rise to the plantation novel whose archetype is *Swallow Barn* by John Pendleton Kennedy (1851).

By the end of the “War between Brothers”, the South could boast a number of good writers, but one more half-century was needed for Southern literature to come of age and establish a new tradition. The most prominent voice in the post-war period was **M. Twain** (1835-1910). Importance of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) on the development of American prose: in a single step, *it made a literary medium of the American language*; its liberating effect on American writing was unique, so much so that both W. Faulkner and E. Hemingway made it the fountainhead of all American literature :

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. [...] All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since. (E. Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, 26).

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> crucial period in the formation of Southern literature**, i.e. the two decades between 1925 and 1945 which were called “*The Southern Renaissance*”. It was the most extraordinary literary development of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, a regional development comparable to the flowering of New England literature one hundred years earlier. The inception of that impressive cultural phenomenon in the South coincided with W. Faulkner's arrival on the literary scene. The South that had the reputation of being an intellectual and literary desert produced in a short span of time an exceptional crop of good writers. Stress the role of female voices in that literary chorus:

– Katherine Anne Porter : a very successful short-story writer : *Flowering Judas* (1930), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). Her only published novel was *A Ship of Fools* (1962)

– Eudora Welty whose fame rests mainly on her collections of short stories also wrote of the Mississippi like Faulkner, but her picture of Southern life is removed from high tragedy ; it is the day-to-day existence of people in small towns and rural areas. *Delta Wedding* (1946), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970).

– Carson McCullers (1917-1967), another remarkable woman of letters : *Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951).

– Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) who found in her native South, in American fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and her conservative Catholic Christianity the three sources of all her work : *Wise Blood* (1952), *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960).

– Shirley Ann Grau : *The Hard Blue Sky* (1958), *The Keepers of the House* (1964), *The Condor Passes* (1971).

– Margaret Mitchell's bestseller, *Gone With the Wind* (1936), etc.

– Elizabeth Spencer *The Light in The Piazza*.

The Southern tradition is carried on nowadays by an impressive array of writers: the 4 Williams (William Faulkner; William Styron; William Goyen; William Humphrey); Shelby Foote; Walker Percy; Fred Chappell; Truman Capote and an impressive number of new voices (C. McCarthy, Robert Olen Butler, Madison Smart Bell, etc.)

The present-day popularity of Southern fiction can be accounted for by the fact that Americans have long been fascinated with the South as land of extremes, *the most innocent part* of America in one respect and *the guiltiest* in another; innocent, that is in being rustic or rural (there's in the latter observation an obvious hint of pastoralism: an idealized version of country life→the South seems to have embodied a certain ideal mixture of ruralism and aristocratic sophistication) yet guilty due to the taint of slavery and segregation.

Anyway, what makes the South a distinctive region is that the South was at one time in American history not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it. And it still retains some of the characteristics of that exceptional status. So does the fiction it/she gave rise to: "The Southern writer is marginal in being of a region whose history interpenetrates American moral history at crucial points". (F. J. Hoffman, *The Modern Novel in America*).

Importance of historical experience and consciousness in the Southern worldview ; when the South was colonized, it was meant to be a paradise on earth, a place immune from the evils that beset Europe, a sort of blessed *Arcadia* (a region of Greece which became idealized as the home of pastoral life and poetry), but the tragedy of the South lies in the fact that it "*is a region that history has happened to*". And afterwards myth took over from history in order to make up for the many disappointments history brought about:

The Old South emerges as an almost idyllic agricultural society of genteel people and aristocratic way of life now its history is transformed into the story of a fallen order, a ruined time of nobility and heroic achievements that was vanquished and irrevocably lost. In this way the actual facts of the old South have been translated by myth into a schemata of the birth, the flowering and the passing of what others in an earlier era might have called a Golden Age. (J. K. Davis)

## E) Southern literature

It is not easy to sum up in one simple formula the main features of Southern fiction ; this is besides a controversial question. As a starting-point→ a tentative definition from a study entitled *Three Modes of Southern Fiction* :

Among these characteristics [of Southern fiction] are a sense of evil, a pessimism about man's potential, a tragic sense of life, a deep-rooted sense of the interplay of past and present, a peculiar sensitivity to time as a complex element in narrative art, a sense of place as a dramatic dimension, and a thorough-going belief in the intrinsic value of art as an end in itself, with an attendant Aristotelian concern with forms and techniques (C. Hugh Holman, *Three Modes of Southern Fiction*)

Against this background, the features that are to be emphasized are the following :

— **A strong sense of place** (with its corollary: loyalty to place) ;

Sense of place or *the spirit of place* might be said to be the presiding genius of Southern fiction. Whereas much modern literature is a literature without place, one that does not identify itself with a specific region, Southern fiction is characterized by its dependence on place and a special quality of atmosphere, a specific idiom, etc. Novelist Thornton Wilder claims, rightly or wrongly, that: “Americans are abstract. They are disconnected. They have a relation but it is to everywhere, to everybody, and to always” (C. Vann Woodward, *The Search for Southern Identity*, 22). According to him “Americans can find in environment no confirmation of their identity, try as they might.” And again: “Americans are disconnected. They are exposed to all place and all time. No place nor group nor movement can say to them: we are waiting for you; it is right for you to be here.” Cf. Also “We don’t seem anchored to place [...] Our loyalties are to abstractions and constitutions, not to birthplace or homestead or inherited associations.” (C. Vann Woodward)

The insignificance of place, locality, and community for T. Wilder contrasts strikingly with the experience of E. Welty who claims that: “*Like a good many other regional writers, I am myself touched off by place. The place where I am and the place I know [...] are what set me to writing my stories.*” To her, “*place opens a door in the mind,*” and she speaks of “*the blessing of being located—contained.*” Consequently, “*place, environment, relations, repetitions are the breath of their [the Southern States’] being.*”

The Southern novel has always presupposed a strong identification with a place, a participation in its life, a sense of intense involvement in a fixed, defined society (involvement with a limited, bounded universe, *South*, 24)

Place is also linked to memory; it plays another important rôle as archives (or record) of the history of the community : one of the essential motifs of Southern fiction is the exploration of the link between place and memory and truth. Here a quotation from E. Welty is in order :

The truth in fiction depends for its life on place. Location is at the crossroads of circumstances, the proving ground of “What happened ? Who’s here ? Who’s coming ?” and that is the heart’s field (E. Welty, 118).

Place : it is a picture of what man has done and imagined, it is his visible past result (Welty, 129)

Is it the fact that place has a more lasting identity than we have and we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity ? (119)

— **A sense of Time**

The Southern novelist evinces a peculiar sensitivity to **time** as a complex element in narrative art (*Three Modes of Sn Fiction*); he/she shows a deep-rooted sense of the interplay of past and present. Southern fiction is in the words of Allen Tate “a literature conscious of the past in the present” (*Ibid.*, 37) and “Southern novelists are gifted with a kind of historical perspective enabling them to observe the South and its people in time”. Cf. W. Faulkner: “*To me no man is himself, he is*

*the sum of his past*" (171). Concerning *the importance of the past and of remembrance*, two other quotations from Allen Tate are in order:

After the war the South again knew the world... but with us, entering the world once more meant not the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it (South, 36)

The Southerners keep reminding us that we are not altogether free agents in the here and now, and that the past is part master" (South, 57)

— A "**cancerous religiosity**"\*

\*"*The South with its cancerous religiosity*" (W. Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness*)

Cf. OC's statement: "*I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted*" (*M&M*, 44). Existence of the Bible-Belt : an area of the USA, chiefly in the South, noted for religious fundamentalism.

— A **sense of evil**, a certain obsession with the problem of guilt (cf. Lilian Smith's opinion: "*Guilt was then and is today the biggest crop raised in Dixie*") and moral responsibility bound up, of course, with the race issue, the Civil War, etc. :

There is a special guilt in us, a seeking for something had – and lost. It is a consciousness of guilt not fully knowable, or communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right and just – when all along we knew it wasn't (McGill)

— Another distinctive feature: the **tradition of the folktale and story-telling** which is almost as old as the South itself ; I won't expand on this feature and limit myself to a few quotes:

I think there's a tradition of story-telling and story-listening in the South that has a good deal to do with our turning to writing as a natural means of pressing whatever it is we've got bubbling around inside us. (S. Foote)

The South is a story-telling section. The Southerner knows he can do more justice to reality by telling a story than he can by discussing problems or proposing abstraction. We live in a complex region and you have to tell stories if you want to be anyway truthful about it, (F. O'Connor)

Storytelling achieved its ultimate height just before the agricultural empire was broken down and the South became industrialized. That's where storytelling actually flowered (E. Caldwell)

In the world of Southern fiction people, places and things seem to be surrounded by a halo of memories and legends waiting to get told. People like to tell stories and this custom paves the way for would-be novelists. Hence too, the importance of **Voice**: not an exclusively Southern feature but most Southern novels are remarkable for the spoken or speech quality of their prose/style :

For us prose fiction has always been close to the way people talk – more Homeric than Virgilian. It presumes a speaker rather than a writer. It's that vernacular tone that is heard most often in contemporary Southern fiction.

No wonder then all these factors should result in the fact that: "*The Southerner has a great sense of the complexities of human existence*" (H. Crews)

– He is endowed with a **sense of distinctiveness and prideful difference**. That sense stems from the conviction that the South is section apart from the rest of the United States. The History of the section shows that such a conviction is well-founded for it comprises many elements that seem to be atypical in American history at large, cf. C. Vann Woodward's opinion :

In that most optimistic of centuries in the most optimistic part of the world [*i.e.* the USA at large], the South remained basically pessimistic in its social outlook and its moral philosophy. The experience of evil and the experience of tragedy are parts of the Southern heritage that are as difficult to reconcile with the American legend of innocence and social felicity as the experience of poverty and defeat are to reconcile with the legends of abundance and success (*The Burden of Southern History*, Baton Rouge, LSU, 1974, 21.)

There are still numerous features that might be put forward to account for the distinctiveness or differentness of the South and Southern literature, but this is just a tentative approach. All these points would require qualification but they will do as general guidelines (cf. the bibliography if you wish to go into more detail).

## LECTURE SYMBOLIQUE, ALLEGORIQUE ET PARABOLIQUE

Dans *Le Livre à venir*, le philosophe M. Blanchot déclare que « la lecture symbolique est probablement la pire façon de lire un texte littéraire » (125). On peut souscrire à cet anathème si l'on a du symbole une conception réductrice qui en fait une simple *clé*, une *traduction*, alors qu'en réalité c'est un *travail* (Bellemin-Noël, 66) et qu'en outre, comme nous le verrons, « la symbolique se confond avec la démarche de la culture humaine tout entière ». Qu'entendons-nous par là ? Tout simplement que, selon la belle formule de G. Durand, « *L'anthropologie ne commence véritablement que lorsqu'on postule la profondeur dans les "objets" des sciences de l'homme* » (*Figures mythiques et visages de l'œuvre*, 60), profondeur que traduit précisément le symbolisme.

Chez les Grecs, le symbole était un morceau de bois ou un osselet qui avait été coupé en deux et dont deux familles amies conservaient chacune une moitié en la transmettant à leurs descendants. Lorsque, plus tard, ceux-ci rapprochaient les deux fractions complémentaires et parvenaient à reconstituer l'unité brisée dont elles étaient issues, ils redécouvraient ainsi une unité perdue mais retrouvée. (J. Brun, *L'Homme et le langage*, 81). Ainsi :

En grec (*sumbolon*) comme en hébreu (*mashal*) ou en allemand (*Sinnbild*), le terme qui signifie *symbole* implique toujours le rassemblement de deux moitiés : *signe* et *signifié*. Le symbole est une représentation qui fait *apparaître* un sens secret, il est l'épiphanie d'un mystère. (*L'Imagination symbolique*, 13).

Comme le précise le philosophe J. Brun :

Les véritables symboles ne sont pas des signes de reconnaissance, ce ne sont pas des messagers de la présence, mais bien des messagers de l'Absence et de la Distance. C'est pourquoi ce sont eux qui viennent à nous et non pas nous qui nous portons vers eux comme vers un but que nous aurions plus ou moins consciemment mis devant nous. Les symboles sont les témoins de ce que nous ne sommes pas ; si nous nous mettons à leur écoute, c'est parce qu'ils viennent irriguer nos paroles d'une eau dont nous serons à jamais incapables de faire jaillir la source. (81).

Les symboles nous redonnent aussi cet état d'innocence où, comme l'exprime magnifiquement P. Ricœur : « Nous entrons dans la symbolique lorsque nous avons notre mort derrière nous et notre enfance devant nous » (*Le Conflit des herméneutiques*).

Tout symbole authentique possède trois dimensions concrètes ; il est à la fois :

- “**cosmique**” (c'est-à-dire puise sa figuration dans le monde bien visible qui nous entoure) ;
- “**onirique**” (c'est-à-dire s'enracine dans les souvenirs, les gestes qui émergent dans nos rêves) ;
- “**poétique**”, c'est-à-dire que le symbole fait aussi appel au langage, et au langage le plus concret. (Signalons à ce propos qu'il n'est pas impossible de renverser la perspective traditionnelle et de considérer que le *sens propre* n'est qu'un cas particulier du sens figuré, c'est-à-dire n'est qu'un *symbole restreint*. La langue ne ferait donc que préciser le langage symbolique et ce, jusqu'au sens propre. En d'autres termes, la poésie serait première et non la prose utilitaire, le langage-outil, profondément lié à l'apparition parallèle de l'homme-outil...).

Mais l'autre moitié du symbole, « cette part d'invisible et d'indicible qui en fait un monde de représentations indirectes, de signes allégoriques à jamais inadéquats, constitue une espèce logique bien à part » . Les deux termes du symbole sont infiniment ouverts.

Précisons enfin que le domaine de prédilection du symbolisme, c'est le non-sensible sous toutes ses formes : inconscient, métaphysique, surnaturel et surréel, bref ces choses absentes ou impossibles à percevoir.

Dernier point, capital, la fonction symbolique est dans l'homme le lieu de passage, de réunion des contraires : le symbole dans son essence et presque dans son étymologie est “*unificateur de paires d'opposés*” (*Imag. symb.* 68).

De nombreux spécialistes ont essayé de mettre à jour ce qu'on pourrait appeler le soubassement de la faculté symbolique (du symbolisme imaginaire\*) qui habite l'homme et proposé divers systèmes de classification des symboles à partir de critères ou de principes tenus pour déterminants ; G. Bachelard, par exemple, adoptera comme axiomes classificateurs, les quatre éléments — Air, Eau, Feu, Terre — les “hormones de l'imagination” ou catégories motivantes des symboles.

G. Dumézil s'appuiera sur des données d'ordre social, à savoir que les systèmes de représentations mythiques dépendent dans les sociétés indo-européennes d'une tripartition fonctionnelle : la subdivision en trois castes ou *ordres* : sacerdotal, guerrier et producteur qui déterminerait tout le système de représentations et motiverait le symbolisme laïc aussi bien que religieux.

A. Piganiol a, lui, adopté une bipartition (constellations rituelles pastorales et agricoles) recoupant l'opposition archétypale entre le pâtre Abel et le laboureur Caïn : certaines peuplades pastorales élèvent des autels, rendent un culte au feu mâle, au soleil, à l'oiseau ou au ciel et tendent au

monothéisme, d'autres, menant une vie sédentaire de laboureurs, se contentent de pierres frottées de sang en guise d'autel et invoquent des divinités féminines et telluriques.

G. Durand, disciple de G. Bachelard, a dans un ouvrage devenu un classique (*Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris : Bordas, 1969), tenté de systématiser images et symboles autour de quelques grands *schèmes structuraux* (dimensions de notre perception qui apparaissent comme des universaux ; les schèmes sont des vecteurs ou “*symboles moteurs*” formant le squelette dynamique, le canevas fonctionnel de l'imagination : par exemple les schèmes ascensionnels s'accompagnent toujours de symboles lumineux, de symboles tels que l'auréole ou l'œil, 42) et *archétypes* (images primordiales, originelles, prototypes : la roue est le grand archétype du schème cyclique).

Partant de l'idée que « le corps entier collabore à la constitution de l'image » (50), Durand pose comme hypothèse qu'il existe d'une part un échange incessant entre l'homme et son environnement matériel ou social et d'autre part, une étroite concomitance entre les gestes du corps et les représentations symboliques : « Le symbole est toujours le produit des impératifs bio-psychiques par les intimations du milieu. [...] Le milieu élémentaire est révélateur de l'attitude adoptée devant la dureté, la fluidité ou la brûlure. » (39). Durand ancre ainsi le principe de sa classification des symboles dans les secteurs fondamentaux de l'activité humaine (perception, motricité, reproduction). Il retient ainsi trois dominantes essentielles :

- **posturale** (de position : verticalité et horizontalité) ;
- **digestive** (nutrition : succion labiale, déglutition) ;
- **copulative** (ou rythmique → cycles).

Ces trois grands gestes primordiaux orientent la représentation symbolique vers des matières de prédilection : ainsi la dominante posturale exige des matières lumineuses, visuelles et les techniques de séparation, de purification dont les armes sont les fréquents symboles.

Le second geste, lié à la descente digestive, appelle les matières de la profondeur : eau, caverne, suscite les ustensiles contenant (coupes, coffres) et incline aux rêveries techniques du breuvage ou de l'aliment.

Les gestes rythmiques (sexualité notamment) se projettent sur les rythmes saisonniers et annexent tous les substituts techniques du cycle : roue, rouet, baratte, briquet, etc. et surdéterminent tout frottement technologique par la rythmique sexuelle (55).

G. Durand articulera cette tripartition réflexologique sur une vaste bipartition entre deux *Régimes* (groupements de structures voisines) du symbolisme, l'un *diurne* et l'autre *nocturne* (58-59).

Le **régime diurne** concerne :

- la dominante posturale,
- la technologie des armes,

- la sociologie du souverain mage et guerrier,
- les rituels de l'élévation et de la purification ;

Le **régime nocturne** se subdivise en *dominantes* :

- **digestive** (techniques du contenant et de l'habitat, valeurs alimentaires et digestives, sociologie matriarcale et nourricière ) et
- **cyclique** (techniques du cycle, du calendrier agricole comme de l'industrie textile, symboles naturels ou artificiels du retour, mythes et drames astrobiologiques, 59).

**Trois types de structures :**

**Structures schizomorphes** (hétérogénéisantes) : principes d'exclusion, de contradiction, d'identité → distinguer

**Structures mystiques** (homogénéisantes) : principes d'analogies, de similitudes → confondre

**Structures synthétiques** : antagonismes se dialectisant, les contradictions disparaissent : relier → voie oxymorique de la *coincidentia oppositorum*.

## ALLEGORIE ET PARABOLE

Une parabole – étymologiquement “comparaison” ; “rapprochement”, mais aussi “rencontre/choc” – est un récit exemplaire racontant une histoire, « telle que cette histoire suscite une interprétation univoque et une injonction<sup>4</sup> ».

Une allégorie (à l'origine, « parler autrement », c'est-à-dire par métaphores) implique une dualité de sens et d'intention de sorte que dans l'allégorie, qui est fondamentalement traduction concrète d'une idée abstraite, éléments du décor, personnages et actions, tout en ayant un sens propre, connotent également un second niveau de signification.

Malgré leurs différences, ces deux genres littéraires ont en commun de « vivre d'antagonismes schématiques : le bien et le mal, la pureté et la souillure » etc., et d'imposer au réel des « super-structures symboliques<sup>5</sup> ». La réalité est de la sorte transmuée en récit où « bêtes, plantes et gens font l'objet d'une stylisation morale<sup>6</sup> ».

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4. J. Normand, *Nathaniel Hawthorne : Esquisse d'une analyse de la création artistique* (Paris : PUF, 1964), 202 & 209.

5. S. Suleiman, “Le Récit exemplaire : Parabole, fable, roman à thèse” in *Poétique*, 32 (novembre 1977), 476.

6. *Tales*, 104.

## FROM WORDS TO THE WORD (*i.e.* GOD'S WORD) : FICTION–INTERTEXTUALITY–VARIATIONS ON INITIATION

By way of introduction to OC's fictional universe, I'd like to discuss three statements : the first 2 by the author herself :

*All my stories are about the action of grace<sup>7</sup> on a character who is not very willing to support it (M&M, 25) : hence the reference to initiation*

*We have to have stories in our background. It takes a story to make a story (Ibid., 202 ) : hence the reference to intertextuality*

and the third from a critic, R. Drake, who pointed out that : *“Her range was narrow, and perhaps she had only one story to tell. [...] But each time she told it, she told it with renewed imagination and cogency”* : hence the reference to variations on the same theme.

Those three observations will lead us to focus on the fundamental and interrelated questions or notions – interrelated that is in O'C's work – those of fiction-writing and intertextuality, initiation.

### I. Function & Aim of fiction according to OC

*“No prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4 : 24)*

*“Writing fiction is a moral occupation” (H. Crews)*

*“Writing fiction is primarily a missionary activity” (O'Connor)*

**Fiction with a religious purpose** (“My subject in fiction is the action of grace in a territory held largely by the devil” *M&M*, 118) based on the use of parables in the Bible : *“Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matt. 13 : 13)*. OC's short-stories = variations on two key parables :

1. “Behold, a sower went forth to sow ;

And when he sowed, some *seeds* fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up :  
Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth : and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth :

And when the sun was up, they were scorched ; and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns ; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them :

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables ?

He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matt. 13 : 3-11)

2. “The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field :

But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.

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7. The free and unmerited favour of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings

So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field ? from whence then hath it tares ?  
 He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up ?  
 But he said, Nay ; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.  
 Let both grow together until the harvest : and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.” (Matt. 13 : 24-30)

## II. Initiation

“*Every hierophany is an attempt to reveal the Mystery of the coming together of God and man*”.

All the narratives by OC are *stories of initiation* (“The bestowal of grace upon an unwilling or unsuspecting character” : a process, an operation, a pattern corresponding to what is called initiation) → an investigation into the constituents and characteristics of stories of initiation but first, what is initiation ?

Origins of the term : *initium* : starting off on the way ; *inire* : enter upon, begin. Initiation as an anthropologic term means “the passage from childhood or adolescence to maturity and full membership in adult society“ (Marcus, 189), which usually involves some kind of symbolic rite. “The Artificial Nigger” is a good example thereof.

Held to be one of the most ancient of rites, an initiation marks *the psychological crossing of a threshold into new territories, knowledge and abilities*. The major themes of the initiation are *suffering, death and rebirth*. The initiate undergoes *an ordeal* that is symbolic of physically dying, and is symbolically reborn as a new person possessing new knowledge.

In pagan societies, the initiation marks the entrance of the initiate into a closed and traditionally secret society; opens the door to the learning of ritual secrets, magic, and the development and use of psychic powers; marks a *spiritual transformation*, in which the initiate begins *a journey into Self and toward the Divine Force*; and marks the beginning of a new religious faith. Many traditional initiations exist so that the spiritual threshold may be crossed in many alternate ways; and, all are valid: the ritual may be formal or informal; may be old or new; may occur as a spontaneous spiritual awakening, or may even happen at a festival.

2. What is a story of initiation? In general, one can say that there is no single precise and universally applicable definition of stories of initiation in literary theory. There are some attempts to build a concise theory of *the initiation-theme in literature* : several aspects of initiation can be found in literature.

First of all, initiation as a process in literary descriptions denotes *the disillusioning process of the discovery of the existence of evil*, which is depicted as a confrontation of the innocent protagonist with guilt and atonement and often has the notion of a shocking experience. This confrontation usually includes *a progress in the protagonist's character or marks a step towards self-under-*

*standing*. Thus, this type describes an episode which leads the protagonist to gaining insight and gaining in experience, in which this experience is generally regarded as an important stage towards maturity.

The second type differs from the first in focusing on *the result of the initiatory experience*. This includes the *loss of original innocence* concerning the protagonist and is often compared to the biblical Fall of Man. Furthermore, this approach generally stresses the aspect of duality in the initiation process, which is the aspect of *loss of innocence* as a hurtful but necessary experience as well as the *aspect of profit in gaining identity*.

The next aspect centers on the story of initiation as describing *the process of self-discovery and self-realization, which basically means the process of individuation* (the passage to maturity). From that point of view, an initiation story may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world. It may or may not contain some form of ritual, but it should give some evidence that the change is at least likely to have permanent effects.

The *aspect of movement* in stories of initiation : it plays an important role in many stories dealing with the initiation theme. Often, the inner process of initiation, the gaining of experience and insight, is depicted as *a physical movement, a journey*. This symbolic trip of the protagonist additionally supports the three-part structure, which is usually found in initiation stories. The three-part structure of initiation can shortly be described as the three stages of innocence – experience – maturity. The motive of the journey reflects this structure, as the innocent protagonist leaves home (*i.e.* the secure place of childhood), is confronted with new situations, places and people on his journey and returns back home as a 'new man' himself, in a more mature state of mind.

Also to be taken into account, the *aspect of effect* in stories of initiation which may be categorized according to their power and effect. Three types of initiation which help to analyze stories dealing with this topic:

– First, some initiations lead only to *the threshold of maturity and understanding*, but do not definitely cross it. Such stories emphasize the shocking effect of experience, and their protagonists tend to be distinctly young.

– Second, some initiations take their protagonists *across a threshold of maturity and understanding but leave them enmeshed in a struggle for certainty*. These initiations sometimes involve self-discovery.

– Third, the most decisive initiations carry their protagonists firmly into maturity and understanding, or at least show them decisively embarked toward maturity. These initiations usually center on self-discovery. For convenience's sake, these types may be called *tentative, uncompleted, and decisive initiations*.

As one can see, the change in the protagonist's state of mind plays an important role for his definition. To analyze the dimension of effect usually also involves a consideration of the aspect of *willfulness of the initiatory experience*, as voluntary initiation experiences are more likely to have direct, permanent effect on the protagonist, whereas *forced initiations* may be rejected, or rather suppressed so that the effect may be not clearly distinguishable at first. Crucial, however, is the aspect of permanency of effect ("one may demand evidence of permanent effect on the protagonist before ascribing initiation to a story"), as it may prove difficult to provide evidence of this permanency.

**To sum up:**

Initiation → involves an ontological (dealing with the nature of being) mutation/*metanoia* : « *Expérience d'ordre existentiel qui comporte généralement une triple révélation : celle du sacré, celle de la mort, et celle de la sexualité* » (Thèse sur O'Connor, 14).

R. Guénon distingue l'initiation virtuelle qui signifie une entrée ou un commencement dans la voie, au sens du latin *initium*, de l'initiation effective, qui correspond à suivre la voie, cheminer véritablement dans la voie, ce qui est le fait d'un petit nombre d'adeptes alors que beaucoup restent sur le seuil (*Aperçus sur l'initiation*, 198)

« L'initiation équivaut à la maturation spirituelle de l'individu : l'initié, celui qui a connu les mystères, est *celui qui sait* » (M. Eliade, 15)

**Sacré**→*secernere* : mettre à part→parenté des termes *muthos* et *mustêrion* qui présentent la même racine *mu* (bouche fermée), *muô* : se taire et *mueô* : initier.

**Characteristics of initiation in O'C**

Almost systematically involves a journey or a trip→a journey of enlightenment (cf. "A Good Man is Hard to Find")

The *Initiate* may be : an adolescent, an old man/woman ; an intellectual, etc.

Key figure: initiation always involves an *agent* → the messenger, the agent of the change (Negro, preacher, stranger, kids, a plaster figure, etc.) → In most of the stories, a visitor or a visit irrevocably alters the home scene and whatever prevailing view had existed. These visitors take various shapes: a one-armed tramp, three juvenile arsonists (visitors/messengers often go in threes), a deranged escaped convict, etc.

*Place of initiation*: river, woods, staircase. Landscape often fulfills the function of an actant; it isn't just a decor but it exerts an influence on what happens, on the character's fate, etc. (cf. role of the moon and the sun/son)

*Catalyst* of the initiatory experience : violence (Only when that moment of ultimate violence is reached, *i.e.* just before death, are people their best selves UOC, 38)→assumes many forms: a stroke, a fit, a fall, an attack, a bout, a physical assault, etc.

Violences triggers off the change: *This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring* (109)

“The Word of God is a burning Word to burn you clean” (Th. 320)

*Participation of evil* in initiation to the divine: « I suppose the devil teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge » (Th, 79) A case in point : “A good Man is Hard to Find”

Necessary to ponder the paradox of blasphemy as the way to salvation (Th. 343)

### **Paradox**

The interweaving of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure, sanctity and taint/corruption :

Il résulte que la souillure et la sainteté, même dûment identifiées [...] représentent, en face du monde de l'usage commun, les deux pôles d'un domaine redoutable. C'est pourquoi un terme unique les désigne si souvent jusque dans les civilisations les plus avancées. Le mot grec *αγος* "souillure" signifie aussi "le sacrifice qui efface la souillure". Le terme *agios* "saint" signifiait en même temps "souillé" à date ancienne, au dire des lexicographes. La distinction est faite plus tard à l'aide de deux mots symétriques *agès* "pur" et *euagès* "maudit", dont la composition transparente marque l'ambiguïté du mot originel. Le latin, *expiare* "expier" s'interprète étymologiquement comme "faire sortir (de soi) l'élément sacré que la souillure contractée avait introduit". (R. Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, pp. 39-40)

Il y a là la révélation d'une intuition fondamentale, masquée par la religion établie, à savoir que sacré et interdit ne font qu'un et que « l'ensemble de la sphère sacrée se compose du pur et de l'impur » (G. Bataille). Cette double valence se retrouve également dans la sexualité. En effet si, en bonne théologie chrétienne, le spirituel s'oppose au charnel, il est des cas où la chair peut représenter une des voies d'accès au divin :

Dieu le père, l'impénétrable, l'inconnaissable, nous le portons dans la chair, dans la femme. Elle est la porte par laquelle nous entrons et nous sortons. En elle, nous retournons au Père, mais comme ceux qui assistèrent aveugles et inconscients à la transfiguration (D. H. Lawrence)

### **Outer vs. inner dimensions**

The outward trip also is an inner journey, a descent into oneself → processus de l'*introrsum ascendere* des mystiques médiévaux : « la montée spirituelle passe par une “*enstase*”, un voyage intérieur qui s'ouvre sur un espace élargi, au terme de la rencontre de ce qui est en nous et de ce qui est hors de nous » (J. Thomas, 85) → « *l'homme s'élève en lui-même, en partant de l'extérieur, qui est ténèbres, vers l'intérieur, qui est l'univers des lumières, et de l'intérieur vers le Créateur* » (Rûmi, 99)

### **III. Intertextuality**

*We have to have stories in our background. It takes a story to make a story* (Ibid., 202 )

By way of transition→ point out/up the kinship between the two notions of initiate and narrator since both have to do with knowledge: the “initiate” means “he who knows”, so does the term “narrator” which comes from the Latin *narus* : he who knows. Narrator bears a certain relationship to the notions of secret/sacred/mystery/mysticism.

## A writer doesn't start from scratch → intertextuality

*Textuality or textness*: the quality or use of language characteristic of written works as opposed to spoken usage.

What is a text ? The term goes back to the root *teks*, meaning to weave/fabricate. Text means a fabric, a material: not just a gathering of signs on a page. R. Barthes was the originator of this textual and textile conjunction. We know that a text is not a succession of words releasing a single meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and sometimes clash: "Every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts" (J. Kristeva).

The text is a tissue of quotations (cf. a tissue of lies)... (N. 122). A literary work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured. Hence, R. Barthes's contention that "*The I which approaches the text is itself already a plurality of texts*".

**Intertextuality** : refers to the relations obtaining between a given book and other texts which it cites, rewrites, absorbs, prolongs, or generally transforms and in terms of which it is intelligible.

The notion was formulated and developed by J. Kristeva who stated for instance that "books imitate, parody other books".

A reminder of the essential observation that "*learning to write may be a part of learning to read [...] that writing comes out of a superior devotion to reading*": this, by the way, was a profession of faith by Eudora Welty in *The Eye of the Story*. As another Southern novelist, S. Foote, put it: "Reading good writers is one's university". What are the literary works *FMD* is brought into relation with ?

In the case of O'C the fundamental proto-texts are : the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Teilhard de Chardin, other religions (Buddhism/Vedanta), classical mythology, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This topic is discussed in the Ellipses volume, so I'll refer you to it.

### ***The Pilgrim's Progress***

A famous novel – the most popular after the Bible in U.K. –, published by John Bunyan, a village tinker and preacher in 1678. Bunyan's book unfolds the universal theme of pilgrimage as a metaphor/image of human life and the human quest for personal salvation. Bunyan describes the road followed by Christian and the mishaps he has to endure to reach the Celestial City: e.g. he passes through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Enchanted Ground, the Delectable Mountains, and enters the "*the Country of Beulah*" ("la Terre épouse") cf. novel :

In this land also the contract between the bride and the bridegroom was renewed : Yea here, as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so did their god rejoice over them. Here they had no want of corn and wine ; for in this place they met with abundance of what they had sought for in all their pilgrimage. (pp. 195-196)

Then Christian crosses the River, etc., and on his way he comes across various people assuming allegoric and symbolic functions *e.g.* Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, Faithful, Saveall, Legality who is:

a very judicious man [...] that has skill to help men off with such burdens as thine are from their shoulders and besides, hath skill to cure those that are somewhat crazed in their wits with their burdens. (p. 50).

Christian is brought to trial in vanity fair (a trial takes place in Vanity Fair: Faithful, Christian's fellow-traveller is martyred but Christian escapes death. Christian realizes that "there was a way to Hell, even from the gates of heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction" (205).

### ***The Bible***

*"It is the nature of American scriptures to be vulgarizations of holy texts from which they take their cues..."* (Fiedler, 97).

The Bible plays so important a rôle that it may be considered as one of the *dramatis personae*; the Book forms a constant counterpoint to OC's narratives. Its influence is to be found in *Names*:

*Motes* → Matthew 7 : 3-5 : "And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but seest not the beam that is in thy own eye ? Or how sayest thou to thy brother : Let me cast the mote out of thy eye ; and behold a beam is in thy own eye ? thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thy own eye ; and then shalt thou see to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye".

*Hazel* → Hazael : God has seen → Haze : a reference to a glazed, impaired way of seeing

*Enoch* a character from the Old Testament; was taken up to heaven without dying

*Asa* : king of Syria

*Thomas* : meaning "twin"

Parker (*Christophoros*) moves from the world of the inanimate to the animal kingdom to humans, to religious symbols and deities, and, ultimately to Christ.

*Obadiah* : servant of the Lord→the pride of the eagle // *Elihue* : God is He→a symbolic transformation of Parker to God

*Ruth* is an ironic inversion of her biblical counterpart

### *Symbols/Images*

Jesus' removing the demonic spirit from the people to the herd of swine which then ran violently down a steep place into the sea (Mark 5 : 13)

The River→ (Luke 8 : 32) Jesus drives the demons out of one man called legion into the herd of swine and then sends the entire herd over the bank to drown in a lake 51

### *Themes and notions*

"The True country" in "The Displaced Person"→St Raphael: The prayer asks St. Raphael to guide us to the province of joy so that we may not be ignorant of the concerns of the true country 80

The Rheims-Douai Version of the Bible→ the Kingdom is not to be obtained but by main force, by using violence upon ourselves, by mortification and penance and resisting our evil inclinations...(88)

### ***P. Teilhard de Chardin***

P. Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the "Omega Point" as that particular nexus where all vital indicators come to a convergence in God becomes in OC's fiction a moment where a character sees or comes to know the world in a way that possesses a touch of ultimate insight. Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* was "a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do : penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it" (110). Teilhard's concept of the Omega Point, a scientific explanation of human evolution as an ascent towards consciousness that would culminate forwards in some sort of supreme consciousness [...] To be human is to be continually evolving toward a point that is simultaneously autonomous, actual, irreversible, and transcendent:

"Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love ! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. *For everything that rises must converge*" (111)

### ***Other denominations***

Passing references in "The Enduring Chill" to Buddhism & Vedanta. In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who has arrived at perfect knowledge and acts as a guide for others toward nirvana, the attainment of disinterested wisdom and compassion.

Vedanta is an Hindu philosophy that affirms the identity of the individual human soul, *atman*, with *Brahman*, the holy power that is the source and sustainer of the universe.

Note that in the short-story, it is a cow, a sacred animal to the Hindu, which is the source of Asbury's undulant fever.

### ***Classical mythology***

Peacock → "Io"/"Argus" cf. *Who's who in the ancient world*→ Short-story : "Greenleaf"

## **IV. The play upon sameness and difference**

« L'écrivain est un expérimentateur public : il varie ce qu'il recommence ; obstiné et infidèle, il ne connaît qu'un art : celui du thème et des variations. » (R. Barthes, *Essais critiques*, 10)→ Variations of the same pattern hence the keys to the interpretation of any given narrative will serve for all the others: "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it" (*M&M*, 25).

## **REALISM + "AN ADDED DIMENSION"**

Even if the author emphatically stated that "[A] writer is initially set going by literature more than by life" (*M&M*, 45), life, in the sense of "the texture of existence that surrounds one" is

far from being a negligible factor in the process of literary creation ; on the contrary, it plays a fundamental role as witness the following quotation which, in a way, offsets the former :

There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you. The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners ; bad or good, we've got them in abundance. We in the South live in a society that is rich in contradiction, rich in irony, rich in contrast, and particularly rich in its speech. (*MM*, 103)

It is fundamentally a question of degree : the writer [...] is initially inspired less by life than by the work of his predecessors (*MM*, 208)

OC's contention → "The natural world contains the supernatural" (*MM*, 175) → « This means for the novelist that if he is going to show the supernatural taking place, he has nowhere to do it except *on the literal level of natural events* » (176). In other words :

What-is [ce qui est, le réel] 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 (146)

The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality (157)

## **Reality**

The basis of fiction, the point of departure of the novelist :

The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched 91

Writing fiction is [not] an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system. If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation 78

## **Realism**

"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" (40)

"The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets. When Hawthorne said that he wrote romances, he was attempting, in effect, to keep for fiction some of its freedom from social determinisms, and to steer it in the direction of poetry". (46)

"The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth" (179)

## **What is Realism ? (Realism/regionalism, and naturalism)**

Cf. S. Crane → "that misunderstood and abused word, realism." What is realism ? It is a special literary manner (actually a set of conventions and devices) aiming at giving:

The illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader. [...] The realist, in other words, is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene.

One cannot read far into OC's fiction without discovering numerous realistic touches *e.g.* in the depiction of life in the South: way of life, manner of speech (with its numerous elisions and colloquial or even corrupt expressions), turns of phrase, customs, habits, etc. So OC's work evinces the extended and massive specification of detail with which the realist seeks to impose upon the reader an illusion of life. Such an "*effet de réalité*" is heightened by the consistent use of details or features pertaining to a specific section of the US, which resulted in OC being labelled a regional writer *i.e.* one whose work is anchored, rooted in the fabric, the actualities or *the concrete particulars of life* in a specific area or section of the USA *i.e.* the South.

OC clearly objects to those writers who "feel that the first thing they must do in order to write well is to shake off the clutch of the region [...] the writer must wrestle with it [the image of the South], like Jacob with the angel, until he has extracted a blessing" (*M&M*, 197-198)

### **Naturalism**

What about Naturalism? It is "a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a special philosophical thesis. This thesis, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the mid-nineteenth century, held that man belongs entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul or any other connection with a religious or spiritual world beyond nature ; that man is therefore merely a higher-order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of natural forces, heredity and environment." (Abrams).

OC rejected naturalism since, from her point of view, naturalism ran counter to one of her most essential tenets:

I don't think any genuine novelist is interested in writing about a world of people who are strictly determined. Even if he writes about characters who are mostly unfree, it is the sudden free action, the open possibility, which he knows is the only thing capable of illuminating the picture and giving it life (*The Added Dimension*, 229)

True, OC occasionally makes use of animal imagery but she ignores the last two factors mentioned in the above definition. The only naturalistic element studied by OC is aggressive behaviour and a certain form of primitiveness but her utilization of such material is quite different from Zola's, OC's naturalism is more descriptive than illustrative and conjures up a moral landscape where the preternatural prevails.

A consequence of OC's choice of realism →Importance of the senses and sensory experience : "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses" (*MM*, 42)

The novelist begins his work where human knowledge begins—with the sense ; he works through the limitations of matter, and unless he is writing fantasy, he has to stay within the concrete possibilities of his culture. He is bound by his particular past and those institutions and traditions that this past has left to his society. The Judaeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west ; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. (155)

BUT what distinguishes OC from other realists is that for her "*The natural world contains the supernatural*" (*M&M* 175). The aim of OC's particular realism is to lead the reader to the per-

ception of a second, superior plane or level of reality: “*the supernatural, what I called the added dimension.*”

2<sup>nd</sup> characteristic: OC’s originality lies in the fact that she *held realism to be a matter of seeing*, a question of vision. The novelist, she wrote, “must be true to himself and to things as he sees them.” → Vision or rather anagogical vision is what throws a bridge over the gap between the natural and the supernatural; it is the link, the connection between the two universes.

### **Anagogical Vision**

Starting-point → OC’s statement :

The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called **anagogical vision**, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. (*M&M*, 72)

Three preliminary observations or reminders

### **Visible ↔ Invisible/Mystery**

« Le monde sensible tout entier est, pour ainsi dire, un livre écrit par le doigt de Dieu... Toutes les choses visibles, présentées à nous visiblement pour une instruction symbolique – c’est-à-dire figurée –, sont proposées en tant que déclaration et signification des invisibles<sup>8</sup>. »

→ God as first and ultimate author. We find an echo of this worldview and faith in OC’S statement : “What [the writer] sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself” (*M&M*, 41)

### **Judgment ↔ Vision**

For the novelist, judgment is implicit in the act of seeing. His vision cannot be detached from his moral sense (*M&M*, 130)

In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing (*Ibid.*, 31)

### **The question of anagogical vision is connected with biblical interpretation**

The epithet anagogical refers to one of the four traditional modes of interpretation of the Holy Bible (*Exegesis*: critical explanation or interpretation *vs.* *Hermeneutics*: interpretation) *i.e.*: 1. literal; 2. typological; 3. tropological; 4. anagogical.

– **literal**: applied to taking the words of a text in their natural and customary meaning ;

– **typology**: the study of symbolic representation esp. of the origin and meaning of Scripture types (a type: that by which sth is symbolized or figured [symbol, emblem] in Theology a person, object or event of Old Testament history prefiguring some person or thing revealed in the new dispensation ;

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8. Hugues de Saint-Victor (Eco, *Sém et phil.*, 162)

– **tropology**: (a speaking by tropes); a moral discourse; a secondary sense or interpretation of Scripture relating to moral. Tropological: an interpretation of Scripture applied to conduct or morals → *sens moral ou psychique*

– **anagogical** (*ana* : up in place or time) ← *anagoge*: spiritual elevation esp. to understand mysteries → Anagogy: a spiritual or mystical interpretation. Anagogical: of words: mystical, spiritual, allegorical. In French sometimes called « *sens mystique ou pneumatique* ».

### **Prophecy ↔ Vision**

In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque (44)

“The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth” (179)

### **Vision/Anagogical vision (a few statements by way of illustration)**

“The novelist must be characterized not by his function but by his vision” (47)

“For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality and as much of the world that can be got into it” (91)

“Anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn't require his attention. [...] The writer's business is to contemplate experience, not to be merged in it”. (84)

Conrad said that his aim as a fiction writer was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe [...] because it suggested and invisible one. « *My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything* ». (80)

“He's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points ; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees. It's not necessary to point out that the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine” (42)

“Now learning to see is the basis for leaning all the arts except music... ***Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things*** (93) [telling vs. showing]

“The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it ; and it's well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene” (77)

Even when OC seems to be concerned with the relative, the world around us, daily life, and the little disturbances of man, it is always: “***A view taken in the light of the absolute***” (134).

The anagogical level is that level in which the reader becomes aware that the surface antics and the bizarre twists of the lunatic fringe are much more deeply intertwined with a mystery that is of eternal consequence (UOC, 173)

### Indexes

Simple objects endowed with symbolical meaning, hence beware of hats, spectacles, wooden objects, stairwell, things or people going in threes, etc. :

the woods = a Christ figure, they appear to walk on water;

glasses removed → outward physical sight is replaced by inward spiritual clarity;

The 3 arsonists have their biblical counterparts in Daniel;

Hulga's wooden leg → woodenness: impervious to the action of grace;

A car may be a means of salvation, a vehicle for the Spirit: cf. Tom Shiftlet, the preacher in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own": "*Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit... The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like an automobile, always on the move, always...*" Car = pulpit, coffin, means of escape...

So be on the look out for all details, however insignificant or trivial they may seem, because they often trigger off a symbolical reading of the text in which they appear → "Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose" (*M&M*, 93): in OC's world the most concrete or material or trivial thing, detail may point to or give access to the most abstract and immaterial dimension, spirituality, the divine.

## **DISTORTION(S): GOTHIC, GROTESQUE, PROSTHETIC GROTESQUE, FREAKS (= AMERICAN GARGOYLES)**

Point of departure → "The prophet is *a realist of distances*, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. **It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth**" (*MM*, 179). According to OC, distortion is a key device in literary creation as witness the following quotations from *Mystery and Manners* :

"The problem for such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying "

"His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion" (42)

"The truth is not distorted here, but rather, a certain distortion is used to get at the truth" (97)

→ Why is it so ?

**1° Distortion as a strategy :**

« When you have to assume that your audience does not hold the same beliefs you do, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures » (*M&M*, 34).

OC quotes a very convincing example on p. 162 :

“When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel [...] Distortion in this case is the instrument” (162)

## 2° Physical and moral distortion

Distortion isn't just a narrative or stylistic device serving a pedagogical purpose, and another remote avatar or embodiment of it is to be found in the striking number of physically abnormal characters *i.e* freaks, cripples, handicapped persons peopling OC's fiction, which has been described as “an insane world peopled by monsters and submen” (UOC, 15). She accounted for it by stating – among other things–, that :

“My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable” (33)

### *Rôle of mutilation and physical imperfection*

In OC's world, a man physically bereft always indicates a corresponding spiritual deficiency. Mutilations and physical imperfections may serve as a clue to or index of a character's function as initiator or initiate; may be a sign of election marking the character as one of the knowing few. Cf. G. Durand: « *Le sacrifice oblatif de l'œil est surdétermination de la vision en voyance* ». So, we have our work cut out→dealing with all types of distortions made use of in OC's fiction, which will lead us to an examination of the cognate notions listed above in the title. Before going into details, some general information :

**Freak** (O. E. ?) *frician*, to dance) sudden change of fortune, capricious notion ; product of sportive fancy→monstrous individual→Southern themes of alienation, degeneracy, mutilation, dehumanization→staples of Southern fiction which resulted in the coining of the label of “The School of Southern Degeneracy”.

**Gothic** → the *Gothic novel* : that type of fiction made plentiful use of all the trappings of the medieval period: gloomy castles, ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences. Later on, the term denoted a type of fiction which does not resort to the medieval setting but develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom or terror and often deals with aberrant psychological states. OC's work is a convincing illustration of Poe's dictum that “*The Gothic is not of Germany but of the soul*”

**Grotesque**: Etymologically, *grotesque* comes from the Greek “*kraptos*” meaning “hidden, secret”. In the late XV<sup>th</sup> century, grotesque referred to those ornamental and decorative elements

found in Roman ruins and representing motifs in which the human, the animal and the vegetable kingdoms inter-mingled/twined. Later on, the term was carried over into literature, but the term has taken on specific connotations in American fiction; it became popular thanks to S. Anderson's work, *Winesburg, Ohio*, in which "freakiness" also means an *attitude to truth*, a crippling appropriation of truth as S. Anderson pointed out :

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood (S. Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*)

The grotesques are characterized by various types of *psychic unfulfilment or limitation* owing in part to the failure of their environment to provide them with opportunities for a rich variety of experience and in part to their own inability or reluctance to accept or understand the facts of isolation and loneliness. The grotesques have become isolated from others and thus closed off from the full range of human experience; they are also the socially defeated, human fragments... (Cf. W. Styron in *Lie Down in Darkness*: "Didn't that show you that the wages of sin is not death, but isolation?"). Cf. the connection between the gothic and the grotesque in the following excerpt:

If, as has been suggested, the tendency of works in the [Gothic] tradition has been not to portray with mimetic fidelity the manners and social surface of everyday life but, rather, to uncover at the heart of reality a sense of mystery, then the grotesque figure becomes the Ulysses of this terra incognita. He is a figure who is in some way distorted from the shape of normality — whether by a physical deformity (Ahab) or by a consuming intellectual (Usher), metaphysical (Pierre), moral (Ethan Brand, the veiled minister), or emotional (Bartleby) passion; and his discovery often takes a violent shape — destructive of himself or of others" (M. Orvell, *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*)

The grotesque paves the way for the realization of "that *disquieting strangeness* apt to arise at every turn out of the most intimately familiar, and through which our everyday sense of reality is made to yield to the troubling awareness of the world's otherness" (A. Bleikasten, "Writing on the flesh")

"The grotesque is a literature of extreme situation, and indeed mayhem, chaos, and violence seem to predominate in the genre" (G. Muller)

Why are there so many freaks, grotesques or handicapped people in OC's fiction ?

For one thing, they seem to be a feature of southern country life cf. H. Crews → The South as the country of nine-fingered people:

Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue [the Sears, Roebuck mailorder catalogue] had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were not bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces of the people around me.

Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world (H. Crews, *A Childhood*, 54)

But this sociological factor is far from being the only reason, as two key statements by OC will show :

To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. (44)

“The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state” (*MM*, 133)

Freaks or partial people (as W. Schaffer, a critic, put it → “partial people seeking spiritual completion point up the sorry state of the human condition. A kind of touchstone of our human condition”):

We can say we are normal because a psychological, sexual, or even spiritual abnormality can – with a little luck – be safely hidden from the rest of the world (Crews, 105)

Freaks were born with their traumas. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats (H. Crews, 87)

The freak, through acceptance, can be viewed not as the deviation, the perversion of humanity, but the ideal (107)

We all eventually come to our trauma in life, nobody escapes this. A freak is born with his trauma (113) → « Son humanité ne fait pas de doute et pourtant il déroge à l’idée habituelle de l’humain » (a French critic, Th. 114)

### **Grotesque**

The same holds true of the grotesque i.e. a reminder of human imperfection. OC uses grotesque characters to usher in the mysterious and the unexpected :

Their [grotesque characters’] fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected (40)

The Communion of Saints : a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state (228)

### **Prosthetic grotesque (*le grotesque prothétique*)**

A variant : *prosthesis* : an artificial body part such as a leg, an arm, a heart or breast. “The horror of prosthesis (which is more than an object, unassimilable either to other objects or to the body itself)” (Crews, 171). A case in point: Hulga’s wooden leg.

According to Russian critic, Bakhtine : « *Le grotesque s’intéresse à tout ce qui sort, fait saillie, dépasse du corps, tout ce qui cherche à lui échapper* » (Crews, 122)

### **A possible conclusion ?**

« Explorer le grotesque c’est explorer le corps » (Crews 118) → in the same way as meaning seems to be body-centered, grounded in the tactile and the tangible, so is salvation a process involving the body → Transcendence is in physicality (A. Di Renzo). OC’s fiction is « *Un univers*

*où le spirituel ne peut être atteint qu'à travers le corps, la matière, le sensoriel* » (Thèse sur Crews 31)

Bear in mind that God, the Spirit, underwent the mystery of the incarnation (the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh as Jesus Christ); the body houses the soul, the Spirit, and as such partakes in the Resurrection of the Flesh.

As to monsters: « *Le monstre n'obéit pas à la loi du genre ; il est au sens propre, dégénéré* » (D. Hollier). Let's say that the monster is both degenerate and a reminder of what constitutes the "genus" of man, mankind, *i.e.* our fallen state, our incompleteness and corresponding yearning for wholeness.