



# A Southern Gothic Theology: Flannery O'Connor and Her Religious Conception of the Novel\*

Alfredo Ignacio Poggi<sup>a</sup>

University of North Georgia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9663-3504>

RECIBIDO: 30-07-19. APROBADO: 18-02-20

---

**ABSTRACT:** Mary Flannery O'Connor, often considered one of the greatest North American writers of the twentieth century, seems to have endorsed the existence of the "Catholic novel" as a special genre. This article explores O'Connor's characterization of such a genre while also demonstrating its vagueness and limitations. Notwithstanding what I will argue is the impossibility of defining such a term, this article also suggests that O'Connor's thought transcends the field of literature and demonstrates a distinctive and sophisticated "Southern Gothic" vision of the Christian faith and its theology. O'Connor's worldview begins with a realism that calls into question the modern Cartesian self; a sacramental sensibility that impregnates imminent reality; and a vision of the grotesque that interacts with the divine mystery. She points out that Christian beliefs rely on narratives, not on abstract concepts, and she grounds her own narrative in the particular cultural-historical context of the Southern United States, which waits with mysterious hope for the violent arrival of divine grace.

**Key Words:** Flannery O'Connor; Catholic Novel; Southern Gothic Theology; Literature of the American South.

*Una teología gótica sureña: Flannery O'Connor y su concepción religiosa de la novela*

**RESUMEN:** Mary Flannery O'Connor, a menudo considerada una de las mejores escritoras norteamericanas del siglo XX, parece haber respaldado la existencia de la "novela católica" como género particular. Este artículo muestra las características descritas por O'Connor sobre este género, puntualizando la constitución indefinida y problemática de dicha delimitación. Independientemente de la imposibilidad de definir el término, este artículo sostiene además que la explicación de O'Connor sobre el género trasciende el campo literario y muestra una visión distintiva de la fe cristiana y una teología sofisticada que denomino "gótico sureño". La teología de O'Connor comienza con un realismo que cuestiona el yo cartesiano moderno, sacramentalidad que impregna la realidad inmediata y lo grotesco que interactúa con el misterio divino. La teología de O'Connor señala que las creencias cristianas se basan en narraciones, no en conceptos abstractos, e interactúa específicamente con el Sur de Estados Unidos, mostrando el misterio que reside en lo grotesco y aguardando con esperanza la llegada violenta de la gracia divina.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Flannery O'Connor; novela católica; teología gótica sureña; literatura sureña de Estados Unidos.

**CÓMO CITAR:**

Poggi, Alfredo Ignacio. "A Southern Gothic Theology: Flannery O'Connor and Her Religious Conception of the Novel". *Theologica Xaveriana* (2020): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.11144/javeriana.tx70.sgtfoc>

\* Artículo de reflexión

<sup>a</sup> Autor de correspondencia. Correo electrónico: [alfredoignaciopoggi@gmail.com](mailto:alfredoignaciopoggi@gmail.com)

Mary Flannery O'Connor, often considered one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, was also an exponent of the so-called "Southern Gothic" mode or genre, which included such authors as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams.

O'Connor wrote two novels, thirty-two short stories, and numerous commentaries and articles throughout her relatively brief life.<sup>1</sup> Most of these writings depict life in the American South during the first half of the twentieth century, studding it with grotesque characters and events and narrating it in a tone of burlesque realism. O'Connor was also a devout Catholic living in a predominantly Protestant South, and her work displays an ongoing reflection on such theological concepts as grace, redemption, and sin, among others.

The relationship between O'Connor's stories and her Catholic faith was one of her primary concerns, and she endorsed—and took steps towards describing—the existence of the "Catholic novel" as a special literary genre. This article analyzes certain proposed characteristics of this genre while also demonstrating the impossibility of defining it. For one thing, certain elements that Flannery O'Connor identifies with the Catholic novel can be applied to other types of literature as well. Moreover, the work of novelists like J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, and Graham Greene did not display several of the characteristics O'Connor described, but they nonetheless identified their worldviews and writings with Catholicism.

The impossibility of defining a Catholic novel based solely on recourse to literary works resides in the constitution of any narrative approach, since stories seek to live with complexity and mystery without explaining it away or reducing it to abstract concepts.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, then, this article—far from denigrating O'Connor—will

<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925 in Savannah, Georgia. After studying at the Georgia State College for Women and at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, her fragile health eventually forced her to return to her parents' farm in Milledgeville, GA, where she devoted herself to farming, to the practice of Catholicism, and to literature. Her output was not extensive, including only two novels (*Wise Blood*, published in 1952, and *The Violent Bear Aways*, published in 1960) and two collections of short stories (*A Good Man is Hard to Find*, published in 1955, and *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, published posthumously in 1965). Among the most famous short stories are "The Barber," "A Circle in the Fire," "The Crop," "The Displaced Person," "Enoch and the Gorilla," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "The Geranium," "Good Country People," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Judgement Day," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Parker's Back," "Revelation," "The River," "The Train," and "The Turkey." Her personal journals, letters, interviews, and unfinished stories were published in different collections after her August 3, 1964 death by lupus, a disease she endured for the last twelve years of her life.

<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor would evidently agree, having written, "Even if there were no Church to teach me this, writing two novels would do it. I think the more you write, the less inclined you will be to rely

point out the richness of her overall theological articulation, which transcends the “Catholic” literary field and displays an original religious vision that I will call a Southern Gothic theology.

## What is a “Catholic novel”?

Defining a “Catholic novel” is intrinsically problematic. On the one hand, many scholars and writers, like Bernard Bergonzi, believe that the very concept of a novel is loose, empty, and misleading.<sup>3</sup> Bergonzi explains that authors like James Joyce, a non-believer, could never escape the Irish Catholic influence of the late nineteenth century on his novels, while other writers who *were* practicing Catholics never displayed Catholic elements explicitly in their work.

In this sense, for many authors and critics,<sup>4</sup> the complicated relationship between culture and Catholicism makes it impossible to distinguish the boundary between them, and only raises more questions than it answers. What would make a novel “Catholic”? Its implicit themes and supposed message, or something as extra-textual as the religious beliefs of its author or the approval of church authorities? Moreover, there has undoubtedly been many a novelist like Graham Greene—a Catholic who never liked his works to be labeled as such—or Muriel Spark, who went even further: “I’m a Catholic and a novelist,” Spark said in a 2005 interview, “but there is no such thing as a Catholic novel unless it’s a piece of propaganda.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, many authors and critics do believe there to be such a particular genre in the history of world literature.<sup>6</sup> For example, according to Toby Garfitt, the origins of the Catholic novel can be located in the nineteenth century with authors like Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who served as a counterbalance to the anti-Catholic agenda of the libertine novel. Indeed, Garfitt gets even more specific: it was Chateaubriand’s *Atala* (1801), he proposes, that initiated this new genre.<sup>7</sup>

Flannery O’Connor was aware of the complexity of this debate, writing that “the very term ‘Catholic novel’ is, of course, suspect, and people who are conscious

on theories like determinism. Mystery isn’t something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge.” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 489).

<sup>3</sup> Bergonzi, “The Catholic Novel: Is There Any Such Thing?”, 10.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Mary Mc Carthy, David Lodge, and Shusako Endo.

<sup>5</sup> Bergonzi, “The Catholic Novel: Is There Any Such Thing?”, 10.

<sup>6</sup> In this field one might place Richard A. Rosengarten and Evelyn Waugh.

<sup>7</sup> Garfitt, “What Happened to the Catholic Novel?”, 222.

of its complications don't use it except in quotation marks.”<sup>8</sup> However, O'Connor dedicated her last lecture, entitled “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” to enumerating the challenges posed to Catholic novels in her time. At the core of that lecture delivered at Georgetown University, as well as in many of her posthumously published letters, O'Connor articulates a fundamental idea: there is something called the Catholic novel in literature, and it can be identified by certain particular characteristics.

## Two “Catholic novels”

Before engaging O'Connor's ideas about this particular literary mode or genre, it would be wise actually to describe her only two novels. Although different from one another on many counts, both approach similar themes and feature a similar narrative style. In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, published in 1952, Flannery O'Connor tells the story of a young man who returns from the Second World War and decides to settle in the fictional town of Taulkinham, Tennessee. After experiencing a crisis of faith haunted by the image of a frightening, foreboding Jesus instilled in his mind by his preacher grandfather, the young Hazel Motes creates a “Church without Christ”:

Haze repeated. “Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption. [...] Listen, you people, I'm going to take the truth with me wherever I go,” Haze called. “I'm going to preach it to whoever'll listen at whatever place. I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.”<sup>9</sup>

Early in the novel, Hazel meets Enoch Emery, a man driven by primal instincts in his unsuccessful search for social acceptance. Hazel also confronts a blind preacher named Asa Hawks and his daughter Sabbath Lily, with whom he becomes sexually involved. Once he is preaching in the city, Hazel rejects the proposal of Hoover Shoats, an entrepreneur who wants to take economic advantage of his ministry.

An impostor preacher subsequently arrives in town, the “Prophet” Solace Layfield, who is more congenial to Shoats's proposal and founds the “Holy Church of Christ without Christ.” Enraged, Hazel runs over and kills Solace. He then decides to leave the city, but an unscrupulous policeman intercepts him and destroys

<sup>8</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 95.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 101.

his car. Burdened by his guilt over the murder and without any means of travel, Hazel decides to blind himself. One cold and rainy night, at the end of the novel, the police find Hazel on the point of death and take him back to the house of Mrs. Flood, a caregiver with whom he has taken up residence. Mrs. Flood does not realize that Hazel is already dead when he arrives “home.”

In her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), O’Connor describes a young man, Francis Marion Tarwater, who has been kidnapped by his great-uncle, Mason Tarwater, a religious fanatic who has declared himself a prophet. Mason has kept Francis isolated from the world in order to fulfill his own Christian destiny: to become a prophet as well. When Mason dies, Francis obeys an inner voice urging him to break his promise to give his great-uncle a Christian burial. The young man instead gets drunk and burns his great-uncle’s house to the ground.

Next he leaves for the city, where he meets Rayber, another uncle who escaped from Mason’s hands and has become a secular schoolteacher embittered against the church. Rayber has a mentally disabled child named Bishop, whom he wants to prevent Francis from baptizing. Rayber is continually trying to secularize Francis and help him start a new life: “I’m sorry, uncle (Mason Tarwater). You can’t live with me and ruin another child’s life (Francis’). This one is going to be brought up to live in the real world. He’s going to be his own saviour. He’s going to be free!”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Francis persists in his religiosity. One day, in a lake, Francis listens to the inner voice again and drowns his cousin Bishop. However, in doing so, he instinctively pronounces the words of baptism. His uncle Rayber faints when he heard the news—not because of sorrow, but because he realizes he’d felt nothing in the face of his child’s death.

When Francis returns to his great-uncle Mason’s house, he gets drunk and is raped by a man. Francis burns the place where the rape took place. Moreover, he learns that his great-uncle has received a Christian burial from a friend. In this sense, Francis’ destiny has unwittingly been fulfilled: to see his great-uncle given a Christian burial and his cousin baptized. From then on, Francis is ready to fulfill his call to prophesy: “His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited them but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.”<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that religious themes lie at the heart of both stories. O’Connor depicts her main characters incessantly struggling with their faith. All her characters

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

are complex, and their attachment to religion does not make them automatically good or evil; on the contrary, they inadvertently find grace and redemption through trouble, suffering, and the rejection of God. Hence, she presents the religious as a transcendent dimension of her characters' lives but does so paradoxically, juxtaposing the negligible agency of human beings with the inscrutable power and plan of the divine.

In these unconventional tales, grace enters violently into the narratives and shows up the grotesque reality of their world. For all this, it seems fair to say that the first characteristic O'Connor identifies in a Catholic novel is central to her own work: the presence of a relationship between its protagonists and God: "All my stories [...] are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it."<sup>12</sup>

Yet O'Connor warns that most Catholic fictions fail because they consider the church as a dominant culture; she clarifies that the cultural milieu of her fiction is, in fact, the Protestantism common to the American South.<sup>13</sup> Hence, she challenges the misconception that a novel must explicitly depict Catholic characters, events, or environments in order to be Catholic: "...the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply [...] is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as light to see the world by..."<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, the main themes of O'Connor's novels are religious but are manifested within a specific culture whose social structures and value systems are not coterminous with ecclesiastical or Roman Catholic realities.

## The unavoidable reality

For Flannery O'Connor, the source of inspiration even for a work of fiction must be reality. She did not develop a systematic theory about reality that might clarify the meaning of this injunction, but by identifying herself as a thirteenth-century woman by temperament, she in some sense eluded the modernist burden of doubt about the nature of reality.<sup>15</sup> O'Connor even criticized the modern perception of reality, arguing, "Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind."<sup>16</sup>

Epistemological questions concerning experience, reason, and language as channels between human beings and reality were not a problem for O'Connor, because she

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Elie, "What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for a Critical Age."

<sup>14</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Bosco, "Flannery O'Connor as Baroque Artist: Theological and Literary Strategies," 41.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 68.

assumed their transparency and objectivity. She presumed a single reality outside the mind which novelists might grasp in their novels. In her own words, she professed, “I believe [...] that there is only one Reality.”<sup>17</sup>

For example, her novel *Wise Blood* is rooted in a semblance of socio-historical “reality.” Although Taulkinham is a fictional setting, its characteristics could be found in many Southern cities and towns in the United States, specifically in Georgia, where O’Connor spent most of her life. The same can be said for *The Violent Bear It Away*. The characters are involved in a realistic environment and, moreover, do not doubt the existence of the world.

It is no mere coincidence that Flannery O’Connor admired Thomas Aquinas and the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain<sup>18</sup> and Etienne Gilson,<sup>19</sup> each of whom believed in reality as a place in which the mystery of God might be incarnated and accessed. These authors defend Thomistic realism not only against the modern turn to the subject begun by Descartes, Kant, and the European epistemological tradition, but also against the transcendental Thomism articulated by authors such as Joseph Maréchal, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan.<sup>20</sup>

For Gilson, the mere fact of doubting and having to justify the existence of the empirical world is problematic, even if it could be achieved with sophisticated arguments such as that of transcendental Thomists.<sup>21</sup> Both Maritain and Gilson, following Aquinas, defend the primacy of the senses in the cognitive process and knowledge as an *a posteriori* step.

Still, however sanguine O’Connor is about the possibility of grasping “reality” as it “is” —that is, of encountering the source of the universe’s inspiration and mystery in the phenomenological experience of God’s creation—she also

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*; Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, and Maritain, *The Range of Reason*. Flannery wrote about Maritain: “He is a philosopher and not an artist, but he does have great understanding of the nature of art, which he gets from St. Thomas” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 216).

<sup>19</sup> Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists and Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*. In one of her letters, O’Connor states: “I am currently reading Etienne Gilson’s *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* and I am surprised [...] Gilson is a vigorous writer, more so than Maritain; the other thing I have read of his is *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, which I am an admirer of” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 107).

<sup>20</sup> Chamberlain, “The Dispute between Gilson and Maritain over Thomist Realism,” 177. Cfr. Maréchal, *A Maréchal Reader*; Rahner, *Spirit in the World*; and Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 180-182. Cfr. Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*.

criticizes the majority of Catholic fictions for depicting a reality in which everything is pleasant, shallow, and safe.<sup>22</sup>

For O'Connor, this trite reality does not exist; it evokes a kind of aesthetic idealism as pernicious as the technical sense of that term in modern philosophy. Catholic novels must show reality in all its dimensions, including the painful or grotesque; it is only in this way that they can credibly proclaim, and in good faith, that in the end everything points to the mystery of God. She claimed:

[A] Christian novelist [...] believes that the natural world contains the supernatural [...] The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look. If what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look. Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees.<sup>23</sup>

O'Connor seems to have thought that a novel is Catholic when its author's optimism is channeled into an "eschatology" (that is, a vision of end times or final things) that shines through the "unedifying" dimensions of this-worldly reality. The source of such a belief can only be the encounter with God in reality: "I could only say that [a Catholic novel] is one that represents reality adequately [...] Only in and by these sense experiences does the fiction writer approach a contemplative knowledge of the mystery they embody."<sup>24</sup> Flannery writes about her optimistic eschatology in one of her own novels:

People are depressed by the ending of *The Violent Bear It Away* because they think: poor Tarwater, his mind has been warped by that old man and he's off to make a fool or a martyr of himself. They forget that the old man has taught him the truth and that now he's doing what is right, however crazy. I haven't suffered to speak of in my life and I don't know any more about redemption than anybody else. All I do is follow it through literally in the lives of my characters.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, it is worth noting that the neo-Thomist Maritain based his whole philosophy on the notion that reason and faith, like nature and grace, converge at some point. The French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called such a moment or place the Omega-point, wherein all things converge in God.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one of

<sup>22</sup> Niederauer, "Flannery O'Connor's Religious Vision," 9.

<sup>23</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>25</sup> O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 536.

<sup>26</sup> O'Connor affirmed in her personal writings that "the most important non-fiction writer is Pere Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S. J." (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 570). In another of her letters, she proposed that Chardin was important for the struggle against secularism: "I might suggest that you look into some of the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (*The Phenomenon of Man* et al.). He was a paleontologist



O'Connor's book titles, published posthumously in 1965, is *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and it is a direct reference to Chardin. As Walter Sullivan points out, this metaphysical optimism amounts to a potent strain of *hope* in O'Connor's work.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, in her personal writings, the author affirmed, "I believe that we are ultimately directed Godward,"<sup>28</sup> and she explained how this idea is borne out in her novels: "This doubtless comes of a Catholic education and a Catholic sense of history [...] Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people's means of grace...."<sup>29</sup> Challenging dualistic theologies, both Catholic and Protestant, O'Connor found an ally in Chardin, embracing unity and hope in creation despite its miseries.<sup>30</sup>

## A sacramental realism

For O'Connor, the sacraments are the center of Catholic life.<sup>31</sup> In her defense of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, she famously made clear her position

-helped to discover Peking man- and also a man of God. I don't suggest you go to him for answers but for different questions, for that stretching of the imagination that you need to make you a skeptic in the face of much that you are learning, much of which is new and shocking but which when boiled down becomes less so and takes its place in the general scheme of things. What kept me a skeptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 477).

<sup>27</sup> Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: Everything That Rises Must Converge," 1.

<sup>28</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 350.

<sup>30</sup> In his dissertation, "Teilhard de Chardin's View of Diminishment and the Late Stories of Flannery O'Connor," Stephen Robert Watkins suggests that Flannery found in Chardin a way to deal with her terminal illness with optimism and to understand physical limitations as a means to evolution.

<sup>31</sup> Emphasizing the importance of the sacraments, Flannery O'Connor writes: "You will learn about Catholic belief by studying the sacramental life of the Church. The center of this is the Eucharist. To get back to all the sorry Catholics. Sin is sin whether it is committed by the Pope, bishops, priests, or lay people. The Pope goes to confession like the rest of us. I think of the Protestant churches as being composed of people who are good, and I don't mean this ironically. Most of the Protestants I know are good, if narrow sometimes. But the Catholic Church is composed of those who accept what she teaches, whether they are good or bad, and there is a constant struggle through the help of the sacraments to be good. For instance, when we commit sin, we receive the sacrament of penance (there is an obligation to receive it once a year, but the recommendation is every three weeks). This doesn't make it easier to commit sin as some Protestants think; it makes it harder. The things that we are obliged to do, such as hear Mass on Sunday, fast and abstain on the days appointed, etc., can become mechanical and merely habit. But it is better to be held to the Church by habit than not to be held at all. The Church is mighty realistic about human nature. Further, it is not at all possible to tell what's going on inside the person who appears to be going about his obligations mechanically. We don't believe that grace is something you have to feel. The Catholic always distrusts his emotional reaction to the sacraments. Your friend

regarding the tendency to explain away such doctrines as symbols: “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.”<sup>32</sup>

At first sight, it might seem she had a negative view of symbols, terrified, perhaps, at the idea of replacing reality and the very presence of God with “mere” symbols. Nevertheless, as Lucretia Yaghjian points out, O’Connor’s stories are *full* of symbols: for example, a woman’s wooden leg that is stolen by a Bible salesman who seems to be seducing her in “Good Country People”; the metaphor and reality of “The Displaced Person” as it is reflected in that story’s characters; the Misfit’s portrait of Jesus and the Grand-mother’s gesture that prompts him to shoot her in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”; the icon of the Byzantine Christ tattooed indelibly onto “Parker’s Back”; and Ruby Turpin’s vision of the communion of saints in the shadow of her husband’s hog pen in “Revelation.”<sup>33</sup>

*Wise Blood* is also replete with theological symbolism. One of the most important symbolic motifs in that novel is that of vision, which—as in numerous Biblical passages—always ultimately refers to spiritual insight. For example, at the beginning of the novel, O’Connor writes of Hazel Motes (whose last name itself alludes to a parable of blindness in the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew):

When the army finally let him go, he was pleased to think that he was still uncorrupted. All he wanted was to get back to Eastrod, Tennessee. The black Bible and his mother’s glasses were still in the bottom of his duffel bag. He didn’t read any book now, but he kept the Bible because it had come from home. He kept the glasses in case his vision should ever become dim.<sup>34</sup>

Hazel Motes begins the novel boasting of a clear and convincing vision with which he will create his Church without Christ, but this leads him to “perdition.” Moreover, the city where Hazel creates his church provides an overwhelming brightness for the sense of sight. Only when Hazel becomes blind does he set out on his path of redemption. In the end, Mrs. Flood, his caretaker who is attracted by his blindness, watches the eyes of Hazel’s corpse and perceives something new:

He died in the squad car, but they didn’t notice and took him on to the landlady’s. She had them put him on her bed and when she had pushed them out the door, she locked it behind them and drew up a straight chair and sat

is very far afield if she presumes to judge that most of the Catholics she knows go about their religion mechanically. This is something only God knows” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 346).

<sup>32</sup> O’Connor, *Flannery O’Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Yaghjian, “Flannery O’Connor’s Use of Symbol, Roger Haight’s Christology, and the Religious Writer,” 271.

<sup>34</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 18-19.

down close to his face where she could talk to him. “Well, Mr. Motes,” she said, “I see you’ve come home!” [...] She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, Pastor Asa Hawks pretends to be blind but is not. In this way, Flannery leaves in evidence the hypocrisy of some ministers of the faith.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the symbols have an even more explicit connection with sacramental realities. For example, when Francis drowns his cousin, he sinks him into the water while saying the words of baptism; and that very cousin’s name, Bishop, signifies religious authority. In the same vein, *The Violent Bear It Away* has an idea of spiritual hunger at the core of its story. Francis wants to avoid his destiny as a prophet, but his hunger is a sign of the impossibility of such an escape:

The boy sensed that this was the heart of his great-uncle’s madness, this hunger, and what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life.<sup>36</sup>

Francis’s hunger represents his crisis of faith and the drama of redemption. He says, “When I come to eat, I ain’t hungry. It’s like being empty is a thing in my stomach and it don’t allow nothing else to come down in there. If I ate it, I would throw up.”<sup>37</sup> At the end of the novel, Francis realizes that the world cannot sate his emptiness: “...it was the same as the old man’s and that nothing on earth would fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied.”<sup>38</sup>

While in her letters, then, Flannery O’Connor wanted to eliminate the tendency to reduce the sacraments and God’s presence to symbols, her stories promote a reality full of symbols as channels to the mystery of God. To overcome this seeming contradiction in O’Connor, Yaghjian evokes theologian Roger Haight’s definition of symbols: “If something is ‘merely’ a symbol, it is not a symbol at all, for a symbol [...] truly reveals and makes present what it symbolizes.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>36</sup> O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>39</sup> Yaghjian, “Flannery O’Connor’s Use of Symbol, Roger Haight’s Christology, and the Religious Writer,” 270.

In this sense, for Yaghjian, O'Connor's fiction utilized an "analogical vision" that allowed her to depict different levels of reality in one particular event or situation.<sup>40</sup> In other words, O'Connor shows to readers "the Catholic sacramental view of life."<sup>41</sup>

According to O'Connor, Catholic novels are essentially sacramental because they describe reality as it is, impregnated by God's grace. The more accurately the Catholic novel represents reality, the more visible the presence of God in nature and even in the grotesqueness of a seemingly godless world. O'Connor argues: "It's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively. As to natural Grace, we have to take the way it comes—through nature."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, as Yaghjian explains, in O'Connor's view, Catholic novels are a revelation because they rely on symbolic realism.<sup>43</sup>

Flannery O'Connor thought that Catholic novelists could only begin to perceive true reality if they were the recipients of God's grace. Consequently, for her, Catholic novels are products of grace, depending on Jesus' touch:

The poet is traditionally a blind man. But the Christian poet, and the storyteller as well, is like the blind man Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees-but walking. Christ touched him again, and he saw clearly. We will not see clearly until Christ touches us in death, but this first touch is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to accept if we want to realize a Catholic literature.<sup>44</sup>

In the conclusion of her article, Yaghjian connects O'Connor's idea of the Catholic novel with theologian Karl Rahner's definition of creative religious writing. In an informal typology of religious writers, Rahner's point of view seems to coincide with O'Connor's idea of the Catholic novel, agreeing with her belief that fiction must start from concrete reality, "from below": "Creative or imaginative writing," Rahner affirms, "must be concerned with the concrete, and not try to manipulate abstract principles like puppets in a dance."<sup>45</sup> Rather, for Rahner, as evidently for O'Connor,

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 273.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 274.

<sup>42</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Yaghjian, "Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol, Roger Haight's Christology, and the Religious Writer," 286.

<sup>44</sup> Elie, "What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for A Critical Age."

<sup>45</sup> Yaghjian, "Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol, Roger Haight's Christology, and the Religious Writer," 299, quoting Rahner's article "The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living."

Catholic literature engages the imagination as a bridge between concrete reality—in its beauty *and* in its grotesqueness—and the transcendent mystery.<sup>46</sup>

## Mystery and grace against modern determinism and nihilism

The concept of mystery is one of the essential elements in Flannery O'Connor's definition of a Catholic novel. According to her, fiction is the concrete expression of mystery.<sup>47</sup> Against the tendency to reduce nature to fixed laws and determinism, she defended a space in nature to which human reason does not have access, and it is precisely this indeterminate space that must furnish inspiration for Catholic novelists. Without it, a story cannot "work."<sup>48</sup> Mystery is what opens the door to the unexpected in a fictional story; novelists must never attempt to understand it rationally.<sup>49</sup> Mystery surpasses human reason, and for O'Connor, the task of Catholic novelists is to show their readers its ungraspable reality.

At the same time, however, unexpected events are nonetheless believable. In this sense, grace and mystery enter nature as part of the narrative without breaking the relationship of trust between the novel and the reader.

The novel *Wise Blood* makes direct reference to religious narratives and seeks to articulate, directly or indirectly, a theological message. For example, Enoch, Hazel's companion, bears the name of an ancient Jewish book that describes the perversion of the angels, giants, and humans, necessitating a flood. In this light, O'Connor's novel could not end more pointedly than it does, in the house of one Mrs. Flood, who looks into Hazel's blind eyes and predicts a new future.

Most of the time, grace enters violently into O'Connor's narratives. Hazel kills the impostor preacher or "Prophet" with his car and blinds himself in atonement for his evil act. These two events signify a radical turn in the narrative in which Hazel begins a path of surrender and redemption. The dialogue between Hazel and the dying "Prophet," for all its lurid detail, reads like a Catholic confession:

A lot of blood was coming out of him and forming a puddle around his head. [...] The man was trying to say something, but he was only wheezing. Haze squatted down by his face to listen. "Give my mother a lot of trouble," he said

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>47</sup> O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>49</sup> Pinkerton, "Profaning the American religion: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*," 449, 458.

through a kind of bubbling in his throat. “Never giver no rest. Stole theter car. Never told the truth to my daddy or give Henry what, never give him...”  
 “You shut up,” Haze said, leaning his head closer to hear the confession.  
 “Told where his still was and got five dollars for it,” the man gasped.  
 “You shut up now,” Haze said.  
 “Jesus...” the man said.  
 “Shut up like I told you to now,” Haze said.  
 “Jesus help me [...].”<sup>50</sup>

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, grace and redemption also enter violently into the lives of the characters. Indeed, the novel begins with a biblical passage that refers to the violent nature of God’s grace. This is the reason for the novel’s name: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away” (Mt 11:12).

In the novel, there are many examples of how grace enters violently into the characters’ lives. In Bishop’s case, he dies in his baptism. Francis is kidnapped by his great-uncle for his mission, and he returns to his mission after a man has raped him. For Rayber, it takes the death of his son for him to realize how cold he has kept his own heart and to renounce his secularism. It makes sense that at the end of the novel, Francis has a vision of the forceful power of grace and follows his destiny: “Go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy.”<sup>51</sup>

In the same vein and quite related to her notion of mystery, O’Connor placed a high value on dogma. For her, Catholic dogma does not limit creativity but, on the contrary, acts as a safeguard of mystery.<sup>52</sup> For O’Connor, dogma is crucial because it

<sup>50</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 207.

<sup>51</sup> O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 242.

<sup>52</sup> O’Connor writes about mystery and dogma: “Dogma is the guardian of mystery. The doctrines are spiritually significant in ways that we cannot fathom. According to St. Thomas, prophetic vision is not a matter of seeing clearly, but of seeing what is distant, hidden. The Church’s vision is prophetic vision; it is always widening the view. The ordinary person does not have prophetic vision, but he can accept it on faith. St. Thomas also says that prophetic vision is a quality of the imagination, that it does not have anything to do with the moral life of the prophet. It is the imaginative vision itself that endorses the morality. The Church stands for and preserves always what is larger than human understanding. If you think of these doctrines in this sense, you will find them less arbitrary. I think that what you want is not a Church that can be ‘liberalized’ but one that can be ‘naturalized.’ If there were a scientific explanation or even suggestion for these supernatural doctrines, you could accept them. If you could fit them into what man can know by his own resources, you could accept them; if this were not religion but knowledge, or even hypothesis, you could accept it. All around you today you will find people accepting ‘religion’ that has been rid of its religious elements. This is what you are asking: if you can be a Catholic and find a natural explanation for mysteries we can never comprehend, you are asking if you can be a Catholic and substitute something for faith. The answer is no” (O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 365).

protects mystery from the human tendency to rationalize and simplify everything, particularly in times of materialist consumer culture.<sup>53</sup> She writes: “I have heard it that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth [...] it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery...”<sup>54</sup>

O’Connor imagined, then, that dogma can free novelists to observe reality as it is because they have no need to play God or produce a new universe of their own. By accepting dogma, Catholic novelists accept the prevalence of mystery over their own limited human reasoning. In the end, for O’Connor, Catholic novelists acquire a prophetic vision into a hidden truth.<sup>55</sup>

This line of thinking may well evoke Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a second *naïveté*, a dialectical resumption of belief after one has renounced it. It becomes clear in *The Violent Bear It Away*, in which Francis manages to overcome the two dialectically opposed fundamentalisms of his uncles Marion and Rayber, that the prophetic mission of the novelist—as of Francis—is to thwart both religious anti-intellectualism *and* radical secularism. The creative open-endedness of mystery, with its paradoxical marriage of grace and violence, lies in essential distinction to a determinism and nihilism that may be religious or not. O’Connor writes:

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of cosmic accident.<sup>56</sup>

Formally speaking, it is, moreover, true that this attitude towards reality also furnishes useful narrative tools to novelists: unexpected events can appear not as random accidents, but as bemusing omens filled with purpose.

## The Catholic Church, authorities, and fictions

The defense of a specifically Catholic genre of literature invites a potentially complex question: What is the relationship between the novelist and the Church during the process of writing a novel? O’Connor was aware this relationship could be vexed and posited two basic answers. First, she believed that the novelist’s prophetic vision is

<sup>53</sup> Pinkerton, “Profaning the American religion: Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*,” 458.

<sup>54</sup> O’Connor, *Flannery O’Connor: Spiritual Writings*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

part of the magisterial proclamation of the Church. For O'Connor, Catholic novels perform one of the Church's functions: to be a prophetic voice throughout history. She states: "For the Catholic novelist, the prophetic vision is not simply a matter of his personal imaginative gift; it is also a matter of the Church's gift, which, unlike his own, is safeguarded and deals with greater matters."<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, O'Connor was mindful of the potential conflict between the novelist's perspective and the Catholic Church's vision of moral realities: "It would be foolish to say there is no conflict between these two sets of eyes..."<sup>58</sup>

Creativity through fiction can sometimes clash with religious tradition as defined and defended by ecclesiastical authorities. This potential conflict leads many writers to think that if they are subordinated to the Church and its tradition, they will lose their creativity. O'Connor described this fear among Catholic novelists: "The writer may feel that to use his own eyes freely, he must disconnect them from the eyes of the Church..."<sup>59</sup>

However, O'Connor clarified that the reason for this feeling is the lack of integration between the novelist and the Church. For her, Catholic writers should assimilate the ecclesial dimension of their Catholic identity: "The tensions of being a Catholic novelist are probably never balanced for the writer until the Church becomes so much a part of his personality that he can forget about her."<sup>60</sup> In this line of thought, it would seem that any tension between novels and the Catholic Church would remain essentially the fault of the novelist, who lacks integration into the Body of Christ.<sup>61</sup> The more integrated the writer's personality is into that of the Church, the more effective the writer's prophetic work will be.

This argument is, admittedly, somewhat tendentious because it supposes a monolithic and uniform Catholic magisterium or tradition. In fact, the complex

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> O'Connor writes: "What the Church has decided definitely on matters of faith and morals, all Catholics must accept. On what has not been decided definitely, you may follow what theologian seems most reasonable to you. On matters of policy you may disagree, or on matters of opinion. You do not have to accept everything your particular pastor says unless it is something that is accepted by the whole Church, i.e., defined or canon law. We are all bound by the Friday abstinence. This does not mean that the sin is in eating meat but that the sin is in refusing the penance; the sin is in disobedience to Christ who speaks to us through the Church; the same with missing Mass on Sunday. Catholicism is full of such inconveniences and you will not accept these until you have that larger imaginative view of what the Church is, or until you are more alive to spiritual reality and how it affects us in the flesh" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 365).



power relationships and varied theological visions among ecclesiastical authorities have historically determined the value of the artistic manifestations for the Church, independently of the writers' and artists' fidelity to its dogma.

It is important to point out that Flannery O'Connor articulated most of her Catholic and cultural worldview before the '60s, a decade that represented a paradigmatic turn for Western Catholic Christianity with the advent of the epochal Second Vatican Council.

## The grotesqueness of reality

Flannery O'Connor described herself as a "thirteenth-century lady" and judged her own orthodoxy by the light of Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, Mark Bosco believes that she ultimately had more of an affinity with the seventeenth century and so identifies her as an artist of the Catholic Baroque.<sup>62</sup> Bosco explains that the early Baroque was a political and artistic strategy of the Counter-Reformation, when the Council of Trent understood the arts never to be "pure" or for their own sake but to have profound ideological meanings and repercussions.

Against the Calvinist idea that Christians cannot trust in their senses, the Baroque movement emphasized the sacramental quality of images, just as the Counter-Reformers insisted that the presence of God is accessible to everyone and that faith is a dramatic experience that evokes a believer's response rather than remaining an abstract concept.<sup>63</sup> Bosco sees Baroque art as holding the grotesque quality of the world together with an affirmation of its beautiful mystery.<sup>64</sup> If this is so, it should be clear by now how one might locate O'Connor in this lineage. Bosco argues:

The aesthetic strategies of the Catholic Baroque—an accessible experience of God through the lens of realism, an excessively dramatic action that leads to a surplus of meaning, and the violent crash of a transcendent moment falling or opening upon characters—provide a fascinating way to understand O'Connor's context within the largest artistic responses of Catholic faith.<sup>65</sup>

In this vein, *Wise Blood* is replete with the grotesque, full of dark and burlesque humor, even as it proposes a theological reflection on reality. For example, Enoch Emery seriously suggests to Hazel that the new Jesus of his church should be the mummy he has seen in a museum. The image of a church worshiping a mummy is

<sup>62</sup> Bosco, Mark. "Flannery O'Connor as Baroque Artist: Theological and Literary Strategies," 42.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

grotesque, but at the same time, it contrasts sharply with the worship of the resurrected Jesus, who has discarded his burial cloths. Moreover, Enoch, in his desire to please people, disguises as “Gonga,” a famous movie star gorilla, but instead of earning their sympathy, he frightens them away.

Enoch will be associated repeatedly with animals, symbols of the instinctive and of the absence of divinizing grace; for example, Enoch likes to talk with monkeys in the zoo. However, the title of the novel itself describes the intuition Enoch possesses—his trust in worldly knowledge, his following of human intuition without the need for spiritual guidance or interpretation:

In spite of himself, Enoch couldn't get over the expectation that the new Jesus was going to do something for him in return for his services. This was the virtue of Hope, which was made up, in Enoch, of two parts suspicion and one part lust. It operated on him all the rest of the day after he left Sabbath Hawks. He had only a vague idea how he wanted to be rewarded, but he was not a boy without ambition: he wanted to become something. He wanted to better his condition until it was the best. He wanted to be *the* young man of the future, like the ones in the insurance ads. He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand.<sup>66</sup>

However appealing Bosco's evocation of the Baroque may be, it is also true that the grotesque is present in the Gothic genre as well. Still, like Bosco—though perhaps for different reasons—Patricia Yaeger also prefers the term “neo-baroque” to “Southern Gothic” in a discussion of this sort of literature. According to Yaeger, the connection between the Gothic and the South belies a pessimistic vision of a regional culture, evoking all too closely its history of racial and sexual discrimination.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, in her research, Claire Renae Cothren analyzes the development of the term “Southern Gothic”: Ellen Glasgow, in her 1935 article “Heroes and Monsters,” does seem to have coined the term in order to characterize Southern literature as full of aimless violence and an anti-modern conception of reality, the product of its ostensibly dark regional past.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, the term “Southern Gothic” involves a pejorative conception of a local culture that nevertheless, through time, came to

<sup>66</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 193.

<sup>67</sup> Cothren, “The Evolving Southern Gothic: Traditions of Racial, Gender, and Sexual Horror in the Imagined American South”, 13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Cfr. Glasgow, “Heroes and Monsters.”

label a genre of literature and to function as a pedagogical and critical framework, much as Latin American magical realism or other names in literary criticism have.<sup>69</sup>

The initial pejorative conception of the Southern Gothic literature is based on an American prejudice regarding the South:

As Leigh Anne Duck explains in *The Nation's Region*, the South has long been configured in U. S. discourse as removed from the contemporary national culture. During the 1930s, in particular, the South increasingly was seen as a threat to national economic, social and political structures. As a result, dramatic gothic tropes proliferated in then-contemporary literature describing the region: the “tremendous and ghastly visions” of the South’s white supremacists, the Dantean “inferno” of its agricultural districts, the “lunatic, disintegrating wildness” of its evangelical Protestantism, and its culture “linger[ing] in the dark backward abyss of time.”<sup>70</sup>

In the American social imaginary of the first half of the twentieth century, the “Confederate” South became a region of the Gothic grotesque: the horrors of racism, anti-modern religiosity, “the repository for everything the nation is not”<sup>71</sup>. Despite the negative burden that the South placed on the American social imaginary, a group of authors, including O’Connor, knew how to rescue its riches, contradictions, complexities, and uniqueness. For this reason, in my view, Flannery O’Connor shares more similarities with generally accepted Southern Gothic authors such as William Faulkner and Carson McCullers than with neo-baroque writers like Alejo Carpentier or José Lezama Lima. As O’Connor herself affirmed, her culture was the American South, and her faith was Catholicism.

One dimension of her genius resides in being able to create a perfect synthesis between Southern Gothic sensibility, connected with the American Protestant South,

<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, the Oxford Research Encyclopedia: “Southern Gothic is a mode or genre prevalent in literature from the early 19th century to this day. Characteristics of Southern Gothic include the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation.”

<sup>70</sup> Cothren, “The Evolving Southern Gothic: Traditions of Racial, Gender, and Sexual Horror in the Imagined American South,” 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, 76. The problem of racism and sexism in the Southern Gothic is a fascinating and vital research topic. In her work, Claire Renae Cothren does a splendid job analyzing this topic: “Southern Gothic texts are also sometimes problematic in their representation of African American characters as marginalized figures whose primary and limited function is, as Toni Morrison suggests, to serve as allegories and metaphors for white American authors to talk about themselves and promote the ‘neutrality’ of whiteness” (ibid., 225). For her own part, Flannery O’Connor’s approach to racism in her two novels is complex. On the one hand, she represents Southern discrimination against African Americans without explicitly challenging it. On the other hand, she defends human equality in some parts of her novels. Due to space restrictions, this article does not address this issue.

and pre-Vatican II Catholic theology. O'Connor uses her dark humor as a weapon against modern determinism and nihilism, laying their ugliness bare and contrasting them with the unavoidable presence of grace in the world.

## Conclusion: a Southern Gothic Theology

Flannery O'Connor's effort to define a "Catholic" novel doesn't eliminate the complexity of the term; quite the contrary. Her definition can be contradicted by quoting other Catholic novelists, because what some authors consider to be an integral component of the Catholic novel, others do not. For example, the fantastical *oeuvre* of J. J. R. Tolkien challenges O'Connor's conviction that realism is the only way to create a Catholic novel. In a letter to Robert Murray, a Jesuit priest, in 1953, Tolkien wrote:

*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out practically all references to, anything like 'religion,' to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and symbolism.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, a grotesque and sacramental realism, which awaits the violent arrival of grace, does not apply to other Catholic authors such as GK Chesterton. Regardless of the impossibility of defining the term, I think that O'Connor's thought transcends the field of literature and demonstrates a distinctive and sophisticated "Southern Gothic" vision of the Christian faith and its theology.

This, in my opinion, is where its richness lies. By ostensibly weighing in on a specifically literary term, O'Connor ultimately elaborates a theology which, I would propose, can itself lay claim to the mantle of the "Southern Gothic," and which can perhaps be applied not only to Catholicism but to Christianity in general.

We might begin to summarize the significance of this movement by looking first at the origins of its name. The Gothic literary genre emerged in the late eighteenth century in England and subsequently spread especially to the United States and to other parts of Europe. The term comes from the European medieval architectural style prevalent from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, because most "Gothic" stories were set in castles, medieval buildings and cathedrals. Gothic stories generally created in their readers a sense of terror or mystery, since the supernatural, the sinister, the grotesque, and the insane broke violently into the narratives.

Southern Gothic, identified as a subgenre of the Gothic, substitutes for the spooky medieval atmosphere the ambiance of the southern United States. In addition,

<sup>72</sup> Bruckner, "Concerning Hobbits and Philip Marlowe."

it focuses on the sociological aspects and cultural contradictions of social reality, leaving in the background the more individualistic and psychological aspects of classical Gothic horror. There too, though, the supernatural and the grotesque burst dramatically into reality, exposing the sinister realities of racism and social injustice. In this sense, this subgenre returns to a kind of literary realism on the level of style or depiction without abandoning the supernatural and mysterious aspect of reality itself.

This narrative perspective, added to her scholastic formation, allowed Flannery to articulate a theological vision of the world, art, and reality. First, O'Connor's theology begins with a realism that questions the modern Cartesian self and forces the believer to face reality on a day-to-day basis. Based on the scholastic philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and its updates through Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, it suggests that doubts about the existence of entities are beside the point; reality is so dense and overwhelming that it is impossible to deny it.

Second, the author believes that sacramentality impregnates this imminent reality. The divine and the supernatural interact with everyday environments, far outside the traditional gothic imaginary of medieval churches and mysterious places. The mystery of God, for O'Connor, manifests itself wherever we are, and we have to face nature with all its complexities. Both in her writings and letters, O'Connor demonstrates the importance of symbols, not as representations of something that lies beyond but as the incarnation of the divine in the immediate and the real.

Third, through the use of dark humor, O'Connor demonstrates how the grotesque interacts with the divine mystery.<sup>73</sup> Her characters display inner struggles in the drama of redemption, and their human moral corruptness deforms reality.<sup>74</sup> However, grace enters their lives violently and unexpectedly. Less thoughtful characters are captured by the grace and mystery of God after living through a process of purification in the midst of their moral turpitude. In addition, the violent arrival of grace exposes the social injustices of concrete contexts.

Finally, O'Connor's theology points out that Christian beliefs rely on narratives, not on abstract concepts. These narratives interact with the stories of our lives as individuals and cultures. O'Connor's novels interact specifically with the

<sup>73</sup> "If a novelist wrote a book about Abraham passing his wife Sarah off as his sister-which he did-and allowing her to be taken over by those who wanted her for their lustful purposes-which he did to save his skin-how many Catholics would not be scandalized at the behavior of Abraham? The fact is that in order not to be scandalized, one has to have a whole view of things, which not many of us have" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 143).

<sup>74</sup> "I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call [my stories] brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard, but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism" (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 90).

American South, with all its complexities and—whatever the merits of the phrase—with Southern Gothic sensibility, showing the mystery that lies within the grotesque and waiting with hope for the violent arrival of divine grace.

## Bibliographic references

- Bergonzi, Bernard. “The Catholic Novel: Is There Any Such Thing?” *Commonweal* 134/9 (2007): 10-12.
- Bosco, Mark. “Flannery O’Connor as Baroque Artist: Theological and Literary Strategies.” In *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 62/1 (2009): 41-61.
- Bruckner, D. J. R. “Concerning Hobbits and Philip Marlowe.” *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1981.
- Chamberlain, Stephen. “The Dispute between Gilson and Maritain over Thomist Realism.” *Studia Gilsoniana* 6/2 (2017): 177-195.
- Cothren, Claire Renae. “The Evolving Southern Gothic: Traditions of Racial, Gender, and Sexual Horror in the Imagined American South.” Ph.D. dissertation, Texas A&M University, 2015.
- Elie, Paul. “What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for A Critical Age.” *Commonweal* 135 (2008): 12-17. *Georgetown University*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-flannery-knew> (access: August 26, 2018).
- Garfitt, Toby. “What Happened to the Catholic Novel?” *French Studies* 66/2 (2012): 222-230.
- Gilson, Étienne. *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*. Translated by Philip Trower. San Francisco (CA): Ignatius Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*. Translated by Mark A. Wauck. San Francisco (CA): Ignatius Press, 1983.
- Glasgow, Ellen. “Heroes and Monsters.” *The Saturday Review of Literature* 12 (1935): 3-35.
- Goddu, Teresa A. *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. New York (NY): Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Loneragan, Bernard. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. In *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Vol. 3. Edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

- Maréchal, Joseph. *A Maréchal Reader*. Edited and translated by Joseph Donceel, S. J. New York (NY): Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Maritain, Jacques. *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*. Translated by Gerald B Phelan. Notre Dame (IN): University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Science and Wisdom*. New York (NY): Scribner, 1940.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Range of Reason*. New York (NY): Scribner, 1952.
- Niederauer, George H. "Flannery O'Connor's Religious Vision." *America* 197/21 (2007). *America Magazine*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/639/article/flannery-oconnors-religious-vision> (access: October 20, 2018).
- O'Connor, F. *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*. Edited by Robert Ellsberg. New York (NY): Orbis, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Church and the Fiction Writer." *America* Vol. 96/26 (1957): 733.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Habit of Being*. New York (NY): Vintage Books, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Violent Bear It Away*. New York (NY): Farrar, Straus and Giroux Edition, 2007. Kindle.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Wise Blood*. New York (NY): Farrar, Straus and Giroux Edition, 2007. Kindle.
- Pinkerton, Steve. "Profaning the American Religion: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*." *Studies in the Novel* 43/4 (2011): 449-469.
- Rahner, Karl. *Spirit in the World*. Translated by William Dych. New York (NY): Continuum, 1994.
- Sullivan, Walter. "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: Everything That Rises Must Converge." *Hollins Critic* Vol.2 (Sept. 1965): 1.
- Watkins, Stephen Robert. "Teilhard de Chardin's View of Diminishment and the Late Stories of Flannery O'Connor." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington, 2005.
- Yaghjian, Lucretia B. "Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol, Roger Haight's Christology, and the Religious Writer." *Theological Studies* 63/2 (2002): 268-301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300203>