

## STRATEGIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S «THE DISPLACED PERSON»

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Flannery O'Connor's longest short story, «The Displaced Person,» is about displacement, whether it be physical or psychic, literal or literary. Put simply, displacement consists in the substitution of one element by another, both of which are at least remotely related, usually through similarity or contiguity. Displacement is of the realm of metaphor and metonymy. It thus partakes of the nature of figurality and, in a literary text, manifests itself through rhetorical devices and thematic contrasts. Such a blunt opening statement as the above also partakes of the figurative and the rhetorical as it tries to impress with its unwavering claim to knowledgeability and to elicit uncritical assent through its sheer straightforwardness. Behind its bold blatancy, however, there huddles a more circumspect awareness of the dangers of tropological indulgence. Asserting that Flannery O'Connor's story is 'about' displacement is much like asserting that *Moby Dick* is about a white whale or that *The Scarlet Letter* is about the letter A. All these tautological propositions merely state the literally obvious and avoid tackling the central question aroused by these works in their very titles. The named elements around which these works are constructed are quite easily delimited in a literal, almost physical sense, but their 'literary' presence and resonance require rather more explication than a coordinative construction can supply. That is, instead of answering essentialist who, what and where questions, we should turn perhaps to more functionalist enquiries: how do these elements – the Displaced Person, the white whale, and the embroidered letter – function in their respective narratives and why do they function in this way, for what purpose.

The description of a narrative or rhetorical strategy brings with it a subsequent hermeneutic phase, that is, its effective – or speculative – interpretation. This interpretation is a displacement in itself for it substitutes a critical reading, the ‘hidden’ text unearthed by interpretive criticism, for the actual text we read. The literal text seems to give way to the literary reading in an uneven relationship which is embodied in the activity of the reader / critic. However, when we realize that the literal itself is also a displacement whose referents supposedly lie out there in the ‘real’ world in all their pristine objectivity, then our interpretive endeavours seem to lose their bearings. Obviously, I am here allowing the term ‘displacement’ great figurative leverage in assuming that all forms of language, in particular fiction, are inevitably forms of displacement but I do so in the interests of defending my initial affirmation from the charge of critical hollowness. Displacement is essential for Flannery O’Connor’s literary enterprise in that it implies both the figurative movement of language and a numinously stable ‘place’ against which displacement is defined and towards which it should move in a revelatory gesture. In this context, displacement both structures her work and lies at the central core of her thematic concerns as befits their heavily dualistic character. O’Connor’s grotesques may be the most conspicuous embodiment of this narrative impulse but her work is permeated at all its levels by the pressure of displacement. Paradoxically, these strategies of displacement are intended to lead to or, at least, allow us to discern the borders of a unified beyond where discordant poles mysteriously dissolve. A succinct résumé of the import of O’Connor’s «The Displaced Person» would have it that people must be ‘displaced’ so that they may traverse «the tremendous frontiers of [their] true country.» This «true country» may be a realm beyond displacement but displacement, O’Connor seems to suggest, is the only means of entering this transcendent sphere.

The jarring quality of O’Connor’s fiction stems basically from the substitutive and transvaluative processes which it sets in motion, a radical decentring which strips characters of their cherished sense of self and imbues the commonplace with otherworldly prospects. This is what occurs in «The Displaced Person» where a real-life anecdote has been displaced into a fictional construct that expands upon it and restructures it along the analogical lines so favoured by O’Connor. But displacement is more than a figure of speech for O’Connor, always quietly disdainful of the self-sufficiency she observed in her secular audience, both in its worldly concerns and its literary habits. Intent on exploring the ‘irrational’ area of Christian spirituality and equally intent on assigning to this sphere the status of ultimate ‘Reality’, O’Connor was faced with the task of using an essentially mimetic genre to transmit an intrinsically non-imitable ‘reality’. Nevertheless, her starting-point is always the concrete medium, the empirical world, which for a Christian novelist is a sort of palimpsest of the numinous beyond. This is the basis of her «realism of distances»: an initial mimetic concern seen in her attention to local detail and conscientious dramatization (‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’) which is gradually overrun by non-

mimetic modes employing distortion and displacement as fictional strategies. The grotesque is their most concise encapsulation. As Flannery O'Connor put it, in the work of the writer of grotesque fiction

distances are so great. 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. (1984, 42)

Displacement is what enables the writer, character or reader to negotiate the passage from the physical to the spiritual, from the visible to the visionary or, to put it in terms more germane to a textual analysis, from the literal to the literary. Distortion became for O'Connor the only way to make people see that ultimate reality which normal human vision cannot countenance. Thus, Mrs Shortley and Mrs McIntyre are both transported, through a mortal epileptic fit and paralysis respectively, to their «true» and «foreign country» (O'Connor 1980, 223 & 250). We do not doubt the physical and psychic upheaval which being displaced has brought about but its ulterior consequences are rather more difficult to define. O'Connor herself was uneasy over the lack of explicitness which accompanies her story's resolution: she thought that «understatement was not enough» to bring out the redemptive nature of Mrs McIntyre's purgatorial suffering (O'Connor 1979, 118). But a displaced element always points both ways, to the latent and to the manifest, holding both in an uneasy tension. Overstatement, on the other hand, can easily lead to unwitting caricature or simplistic affirmation.

Before turning to an analysis of the textual details by which displacement is enacted in O'Connor's story, a brief mention of the inverted parallelism between O'Connor's use of distorting techniques and the role of displacement in Freudian theory is in order. Thanks to his dream analyses, Freud discovered displacement as one of the characteristic processes of the *id* or the unconscious. Through its functioning in the dream-work a latent element is replaced by a remote allusion in the manifest dream and the psychical accent is shifted from important elements onto trivial ones (Freud 1916, 208-209). It thus serves the interests of the dream-censorship in concealing the latent, repressed element behind the obscurity of a distantly related one. At the same time, however, it is used by the dream-work to evade the censorship by displacing «psychical intensities to the point of a transvaluation of all psychical values» (Freud 1900, 650) and thus allowing the latent element at least a token presence in the manifest dream, albeit unperceived by the conscious, secondary processes of thought. Displacement of accent is usually unheard of in conscious thought and the confusion it produces maintains the anonymity of the unconscious or repressed element. In other words, displacement is used unwittingly by conscious thought or intentionally by the censorship in the dream-work for concealment. In literature, however, the remote

allusion or the displaced accent, once interpreted or unravelled, should cast a clarifying light on the element alluded to. This is the visionary function Flannery O'Connor assigns to displacement, a function inversely similar to the one identified by Freud: one reveals and the other conceals. The ambiguity of the revelation in O'Connor and the difficulty of maintaining a hermetic seal on the concealed element in Freudian theory draws the two functions together. Their meeting-ground is the area of interpretation. In the case of O'Connor's fiction, the grotesque, as the most palpable indication of displacement, appears as an incitement to interpretation and thus an ideal artistic means for a fiction which demands «interpretive energy» (Harpham, 186). As an obstacle to conscious, structured thought, displacement in its many varieties bodies forth a contradiction which at once calls for and defies resolution.

In one of his major contributions to aesthetics, his book on jokes, Freud identified displacement as one of the techniques used by certain jokes. Contrary to dreams, displacements in jokes «usually respect the limits imposed on their employment in conscious thinking» (Freud 1905, 230). This is so because, just as in literature, a joke requires a third person's participation – the listener to the joke, in addition to the teller and the person who suffers the joke – and so displacement and distortion must not be so excessive as to impede this third person's intelligibility of the joke or work in question. In this light, however, it would seem that for many of her readers O'Connor's work comes close to infringing the bounds of intelligibility. The interpretive leap required of them, judging from early reactions to her work, has at times appeared excessive. Freud went on to characterize displacement-jokes as peculiarly independent of verbal expression, for they rely on the confusion of trains of thought: the essence of displacement as a joke-technique «lies in the division of the train of thought, the displacement of the psychical emphasis on to a topic other than the opening one» (1905, 88). Nevertheless, in literature the multi-significative capacity of verbal expressions, which may be variously interpreted, allows for this sort of displacement and we can see it functioning, much as a displacement-joke would, in key passages of O'Connor's fiction. These passages unvaryingly point out the discords between characters or draw ironic attention to the gulf between a protagonist's complacent self-appreciation and his or her 'true' character. Such is the fate suffered in O'Connor's story by Mrs McIntyre and Mrs Shortley, employer and employee, placed on different social levels but both assimilated into the same stunted atmosphere of racial prejudice and moral stagnation. Both are eventually 'displaced' by the Displaced Person's presence yet both initially externalize the threat he poses.

The Displaced Person's efficiency and versatility endangers the work prospects of the Shortleys but this socioeconomic threat is transformed or displaced by Mrs Shortley into religious bigotry and a racial xenophobia which even tries to cajole the Negro farm help on to her side. The Guizacs, war-refugees from Poland, are associated in her mind with the foreign Catholic religion which had had «none of the foolishness ... reformed out of it» (202, my ellipsis) and which for Mrs Shortley is the direct moral

cause of the European holocaust. Her newsreel-image of concentration camp carnage figurally displaces the Guizacs, despectively alluded to by her as the «Gobblehooks,» converting them into «rats with typhoid fleas» (200). They are rodent-like in their menacing industriousness and disease-bearing in that the placid Southern scene is disrupted or «contaminated» by their foreign social and religious attitudes. The grotesque comparison both reflects on Mrs Shortley's simplistic psychological reactions, already evincing a deep-seated unease, and describes imagistically the nature of the threat posed by the war-refugees. Incidentally, Mrs Shortley's newsreel vision is an apt emblem of the way the grotesque functions:

Before you could realize that it was real and take it into your head, the picture changed and a hollow-sounding voice was saying, «Time marches on!» (200)

The utter incomprehensibility of the scene of massacre and mutilation defies and, at the same time, demands interpretation. Such a scene could only be grotesque and only the grotesque, which flourishes on the margins of language according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, could convey such a scene. The grotesque «accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted; it is a defense against silence when other words have failed» (Harpham, 3-4). Yet the grotesque, as Harpham goes on to point out, can open up with its displacements and startling incongruities new areas of experience and discover new relationships which normal logic and syntax cannot broach. This is the function which Flannery O'Connor sought for her use of the grotesque but it is a function which ultimately depends on the reader's interpretive willingness. The dramatic representation of the passage from the grotesque or the scene of displacement to a new order of being is achieved with difficulty. Mrs Shortley's grotesque vision of «a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing» (200) is dramatically enacted at the crucial moment of her physical and psychic displacement as the Shortley family leaves the farm:

She thrashed forward and backward, clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself, Mr Shortley's head, Sarah Mae's leg, the cat, a wad of white bedding, her own big moonlike knee... (223)

Her violent fit does not end in a new vision, however, but in her death and, unless we should want to equate death with this visionary moment – an equation to which a traditional Christian perspective would probably not object – «the tremendous frontiers of her true country» remain shrouded in ambiguity. Carol Shloss, for one, is prepared to lightly chastise O'Connor for the lack of explicitness as regards the nature of Mrs Shortley's displacement:

If we are really to infer that her «true country» is death, then the central displacement is that experience of death, and not the temporal uprooting occasioned by Mr Guizac's employment. (Shloss, 75-76)

But perhaps Shloss is being overly ingenuous here in demanding an explicitness which would do away with the need for interpretation, make the displacement superfluous and probably jeopardize the artistic status of the work as a whole. This is not to deny the presence of the literal displacements which the story dramatizes and in no way should we disdain the sociological dimension within whose bounds Shloss prefers to remain in order to explain the displacements effected in the story. She locates their force in the challenging of «operative values» which uncovers the «tenuous grounds of our temporal society» (77). She rejects the Mr Guizac / Christ identification which the story tentatively explores by arguing that mere allusion to Christian myth is not the same as a conscientious use of a mythic narrative structure. Here we would wholeheartedly agree, given the conflicting spheres which O'Connor's story attempts to merge asymmetrically (the displacement of narrative perspective reveals more fully this asymmetry), and we would espouse her contention that the critic must soberly give the mythical analogy its «proper interpretive weight» (78). But when Shloss claims that «the mythical reference adds to, but is subsidiary to, the realistic surface of the text» (78), we can detect a traditional view of literary realism in which figuration and symbolic resonances are to be naturalized within a framework of narrative verisimilitude or avoided at all costs. William Peden adopts a similar, though opposed, critical stance when he defines Flannery O'Connor as «basically an allegorist or fantasist rather than a realist, although her stories are so securely rooted in specific time and place as to seem as real as rain» (Peden, 87).

A conscious realist with distracting symbolic flights or a conscious allegorist with realistic ballast? A novelist or a romance writer? Which of the two are we to choose? Flannery O'Connor herself claimed Hawthorne as one of her literary ancestors while at the same time asserting that the fiction writer is «concerned with ultimate mystery as we find it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience» (1984, 125). We are confronted once again with the two poles of her realism of distances, «the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth» (1984, 179). Rather than quarrel over the degree of reality appertaining to either pole, we would prefer to remain with the distortion used to bridge both extremes, arguing that the rhetorical ploys used for this purpose are, in one sense, more realistic than either pole for it is only through the displacement effected by language that reality becomes «real» in a fictional text. In other words, distortion and displacement can be considered exaggerated symptoms of what all language entails. Both strategies, by drawing attention to the process of interpretation itself, the process by which meaning is instilled in external reality, extend fiction's mimetic impulse to areas which traditional realist tenets avoid. Taking the grotesque as a representative example of

these fictional techniques which highlight the process of representation itself, Harpham suggests that though grotesqueries «are frustrating they are far from pointless, for with their help we can arrive at a better understanding of the methods of representation, of the relation between play and creation, and of the force of habit and convention in understanding» (Harpham, 43). But, before continuing these metacritical speculations, let us return to the story before us and, in particular, to the other victim of displacement, Mrs McIntyre.

It is Mrs McIntyre, as the hierarchically superior member of the farm community, whose all-consuming displacement is given the greatest relevance in the story coming as it does at the end of the narrative, provoked by Mr Guizac's death / murder. Approximately the same amount of narrative space is dedicated to her as to Mrs Shortley and the narrator does not fail to underline resemblances between them, particularly in their scornful attitude toward a deeply felt religiousness. However, we sense that Mrs Shortley's plight is a foreshadowing of what Mrs McIntyre will undergo, the negative image of the latter's subsequent mental and physical breakdown. The advent of the Displaced Person is seen by Mrs McIntyre in mundane terms as a good business deal and initially his presence pays off in farm-work quite handsomely. Her crass commercialization of religious values leads her to comment: «But at last I'm saved! ... That man is my salvation!» (209, my ellipsis). Two exclamations whose irony is doubly sardonic: in her identification of money-interest with personal salvation and in her obtuseness to just what renunciations that 'salvation' will demand. The displacement occurs here at the level of the word; what Mrs McIntyre takes to be salvation is not what the ensuing narrative will show it to be. This type of ironic contrast, propitiated by the detached narratorial stance, recurs later in the narrative, juxtaposing once again material wealth with spiritual poverty. In this case, Mrs McIntyre searches for excuses which will justify her dismissal of Mr Guizac in terms acceptable to her self-satisfied moral sense. Her self-deceit as regards her financial situation is actually an accurate, though unwitting, reflection of her surface morality: «She told him how the people who looked rich were the poorest of all because they had the most to keep up» (243).

The priest's appropriate reply to Mrs McIntyre's evasive question as to whether he thought she was made of money is to «let out a great ugly bellow as if this were a comical question» (244). Indeed, it is comical but bitterly so for Mrs McIntyre's miserly obsession with money matters (the reason she accepted the refugee family in the first place) leads to a moral hollowness which finds its external projection in the image of her deceased third husband's, the Judge's, empty safe «set like a tabernacle» in the centre of his office. The imagistic displacement which has been carried out here, converting the Judge's former workroom into a «sacred» place, «dark and quiet as a chapel» (232), reveals the wholly secular nature of Mrs McIntyre's reverential and religious sentiments, comically undermined through her ironic appropriation of this liturgical setting. The empty safe becomes a projection of her spiritual inanition:

When she sat with her intense constricted face turned toward the empty safe, she knew there was nobody poorer in the world than she was. (233)

The revealing comedy of Mrs McIntyre's place of worship only comes after the jolt given to her flawed sense of social decorum by Mr Guizac's tampering with the Southern racial code in trying to marry off a cousin with the moronic Negro hand, Sulk, and in this way save her from certain extermination in a concentration camp. This upsetting of the Southern code, whose delicate hypocrisy is apparent throughout the story, is one of the major literal displacements we witness and its generative force is such that it brings with it the erosion of Mrs McIntyre's ego and the story's tragic dénouement. Carol Shloss is right in assigning to it the greatest importance, for without the Guizacs' unconscious threat to a small rural community's set of sociocultural attitudes, without the «radical disruption of commonplace life» (Shloss, 74), we could not be granted any extended insight into the hidden «spiritual» life of its inhabitants. Shloss considers the story to be «an account of developing consciousness in relation to a European refugee» (75). Her notion of consciousness is strictly confined to the characters' awareness of the limits of their racial and social codes. She rejects the mythical expansion of Mr Guizac's role through the Christ analogy by not stepping beyond the bounds of his refugee status. Shloss assumes that the «fear of the alien» which the Displaced Person instils in the farm community is perfectly subsumable within the secular framework of «temporal society.» Any spiritual connotations are symbolic extensions of this secular setting, used figuratively to endow it with greater repercussive force, much as Mrs Shortley uses her literalistic Biblical imagery speciously to cover a more mundane and shallow distrust of the foreign.

It is hard not to agree with Shloss if we bear in mind the inconsistent use of the mythical analogy as a structural device. Mr Guizac undergoes no agonistic 'via crucis', while his 'crucifixion' is a sordid piece of manslaughter, a death which becomes murder through collusive inaction on the part of the bystanders. The Christian parallels are there in suggestive indefiniteness, but they are used intensively rather than extensively. The figure of the priest serves to bring both poles together, as befits his ecclesiastical function, and he does so through his discreet catechizing of Mrs McIntyre. Their dialogues are often a model of comic displacement and at times resort to the techniques of displacement-jokes mentioned above: a ploy used occasionally by O'Connor in which two characters talk at cross-purposes causing an ambiguity which the reader must disentangle or, as in this case, a sudden identification. Here is our example:

The old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. «The Transfiguration,» he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about. «Mr Guizac didn't have to come here

in the first place,» she said, giving him a hard look.

The cock lowered his tail and began to pick grass.

«He didn't have to come in the first place,» she repeated, emphasizing each word.

The old man smiled absently. «He came to redeem us,» he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (239)

We have here most of the elements which undergo figural displacement in order to suggest that other sphere of transcendental interaction: the peacock, Mr Guizac, Christ and the priest, the vehicle of this anagogical vision, as the nexus between both poles. When Mrs McIntyre, in a crucial moment of self-revelation, utters «As far as I'm concerned... Christ was just another D.P.» (243, my ellipsis), the major identification would seem to have been made explicit. But this seems too trite an analogy to colour the whole narrative and, significantly, it is made by a character whose vision is seriously flawed. Similarly, the peacock, «just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all» (202), appears as too pat a metaphorical image to merge unobtrusively with the rest of the narrative. Frederick Asals objects to its obviousness and lack of «sufficient actuality» (Asals, 73) but perhaps this is not to be considered a defect in a fiction which courts the allegorical. It is a fiction which pays its dues to both corporeality and spirituality and does so with an unswerving fidelity to both. The displacement is not meant to end in reconciliation, for O'Connor's «aesthetics of incongruity,» as Asals calls it, while opening up new areas of experience, does not envisage wholeness this side of mortal life. We may object to the often loaded character of her figural and rhetorical displacements, at times glaringly obvious and thus very un-Freudian, but we must recognize that they are usually accompanied by more literal counterparts that deflate their metaphoric excesses.

Amongst these are the literal displacements which invariably serve as an anchor in everyday reality to the less palpable disruptions. Behind Mrs Shortley's visionary crisis we find an unobtrusive fear of the alien intruder and the labour threat he poses; behind Mrs McIntyre's shocked self-righteousness lies an uncharitable defence of racial prerogatives; and behind the overall thematic displacement which the narrative connotes we find a skilful use of narrative perspective which discreetly but firmly controls the ironic tone of the story's characterizations. Indeed, this general perspectival displacement underlies the analogical thrust the story tries to impart to its various elements. Of particular interest is the presentation of the Displaced Person himself as this affects the significance of the Christ analogy which suffuses the latter parts of the narrative. Large parts of the narrative are focalized through the eyes of Mrs Shortley and Mrs McIntyre with penetrating intrusions by the ironically aloof narrator which serve as an illuminating foil to the two women's self-serving observations. In Mrs Shortley's eyes the foreigner becomes «a monkey» (208), his wife is «shaped like a peanut» (198) and his whole family are «rats with typhoid fleas» (200). But the

narrator undercuts this biased vision by describing the mechanics of Mrs Shortley's gaze in a strident metaphor which is itself a consummate example of figural displacement:

Her look first grazed the tops of the displaced people's heads and then revolved downwards slowly, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass. (201)

The grotesque use of animal imagery has here been turned back onto Mrs Shortley, «the giant wife of the countryside» (197), and, coming as it does from a narratorial description, we accordingly give it greater interpretive value. Nevertheless, the tendentious perspectives of these two women, their warped or displaced vision, form part of the realistic apprehension of backwoods narrow-mindedness. We could not expect a different response from these Southern rural reactionaries. The disruption they suffer, however, is due to the fact that the sense of otherness they assign to Mr Guizac for different reasons actually comes from within. Here is where the perspectival displacement serves its purpose most effectively. Through its ironies we come to realize that the threats and menaces that they project onto the Displaced Person are purely internal and arise from the contradictions of their brittle social mores. This projection is another species of displacement, especially manifest when the D.P. suffers the murderous materialization of its consequences. The savagery which has been falsely attributed to him is used against him. Even Mrs Shortley has to admit of the refugee family that «they looked like other people» (198). The normal or the normative is seen to include the alien element. It is only the angle of vision, its displacement from a conventional position, that reveals its presence: «It's them little eyes of his that's foreign» (213).

We are never given the view from Mr Guizac's vantage-point and thus, even for the reader, he remains a «foreigner,» outside the domain of revelatory introspection. This perspectival asymmetry preserves the unsettling quality of the D.P.'s presence but it creates ambiguity as regards the significance of the Christ analogy. One suspects that the anagogical view casts more light on the sacramental role Flannery O'Connor attributed to the Christ-figure within her theological framework than on the true nature of the hardships a war-refugee would suffer in a foreign environment. Having said this, her use of narrative perspective does serve to reveal the sham moral outrage and hypocritical sense of community used to ward off the alien element which threatens a society's self-identity. The denying of narrative voice to Mr Guizac is also rooted in realistic detail, for he has no command of the English language. His displacement is not only geographical, it is also linguistic and one must keep in mind that language is the principal means of maintaining and enforcing social convention. His stilted, monosyllabic English uncomprehendingly breaks through the fragile yet tenacious Southern code, thus setting in motion the story's tragic conclusion. Mrs Shortley had

earlier remarked comically about the refugees: «They can't talk ... You reckon they'll know what colors even is?» (200, my ellipsis). Her naïve naturalization of the English language, of a conventional linguistic code, can be read figuratively in a different fashion. The D.P. certainly knows what visual colours are; what he doesn't master are the «colors» of rhetoric, the figures of speech which as socially entrenched forms of displacement would have enabled him to come to terms with this particular social and linguistic community.

This interpretation may seem as displaced as the other displacements we have detected in O'Connor's story, but if we consider language's role in shaping a community and marking off what is foreign to it, it may not seem as far-fetched as it sounds. Mrs Shortley doubts that the D.P. will be able to drive a tractor as he does not speak English and she even objects to the priest's Irish accent: «The priest spoke in a foreign way himself, English but as if he had a throatful of hay» (202). Literalizing the image, we recall the «hay» which fails to clog the tractor of which the D.P. proves to be an expert driver. And Mrs McIntyre decides that the «certain stiffness about [the D.P.'s] figure» is due to the fact that «she couldn't hold an easy conversation with him» (226). Once again it is Mrs Shortley who provides the most graphic image of this aspect of the D.P.'s foreignness. Her projected «war of words» gradually blends into her concentration-camp vision, her imaginative literalism serving as a figural melting-pot for the linguistic, geographical and religious displacements incarnated in the Pole which threaten her world:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. (217)

Soon after this, Mrs Shortley starts to «read her Bible with a new attention,» but she is singularly inattentive to the spiritual exigencies of the «Word made flesh,» that central displacement of Christian faith.

Needless to say, the only mudflinging in the story is carried out by the Shortleys themselves, in particular by Mr Shortley on his return to the farm after his wife's death. His insidious vilification of the Pole climaxes in the intense final scene where Mrs McIntyre sees Mr Shortley's «long beak-nosed shadow glide like a snake halfway up the sunlit open door and stop» (246). The satanic imagery complements the slowing down of time and the obliteration of space – «The countryside seemed to be receding from the little circle of noise around the shed» (248) – which converts this scene into a ritual enactment of wilful murder transported or displaced to a higher plane. The

Christ analogy fits in with this sacrificial vision, though, despite the spatio-temporal distortion of this scene, we never lose touch with the worldly determinants of this act. One reason for this is that the whole scene is presented through Mrs McIntyre's eyes. The mythical displacement we might identify by analyzing this episode as the representation of 'an-Other' man's death (and, for O'Connor, Christ was quite definitely 'Other') is dependent on the paralyzing moral shock Mrs McIntyre suffers at seeing her guilty desires, previously disguised by her self-centred ethics, acted out before her. The death of the refugee, crushed by the tractor he had expertly driven, strips away her narrow-minded smugness and subjects her to the alienating experience of her unadmitted moral degradation:

She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance. (250)

Reminiscences of the Christian parallel on Mount Calvary are certainly not explicit if even discernible for the agnostic reader. It seems that the detached narrator was not willing to burden the figure of the Polish refugee with a mythic dimension which, though connoted, is certainly not fully embodied in the fiction. This contrasts with the more openly symbolic passages which pepper the narrative though, interestingly, the contexts in which they occur serve to underline the characteristic blindness of her prejudiced protagonists. It is the narrator, not Mrs Shortley, who notes that the clouds look like «rows and rows of white fish washed up on a great blue beach» (218) and the dairy-woman similarly fails to notice the peacock tail before her absent gaze, his tail «a map of the universe» (204) later unconsciously incorporated in her first self-gratifying vision (218). Indeed Mrs Shortley, just before her mortal stroke, looks ahead «as if she saw nothing whatsoever» (220).

Vision, a key-word for Flannery O'Connor, is carefully controlled throughout the story. Through the narrator's ironic aloofness we trace its successive displacements as these characters progress from the superficial comprehensiveness of their external gaze to the dark confines of their final inner visions. The narrative follows this reductive path forcefully, but its endpoint remains ambiguous. Mrs McIntyre may have had something «wearing her down from the inside» (244), but beyond her moral backtracking as regards her responsibilities to the refugees it is difficult to adjudicate wider import to that «something.» Import there quite definitely is but, as in Mrs McIntyre's patchwork image of the D.P. – «His whole face looked as if he might have been patched together out of several others» (234) – there is an amalgamation of factors with no explicit predominance of one over the other. The displacement perhaps does not reach far enough to displace the secular reader's interpretive habits. Perhaps the displacement would have had to come from outside literature for its full ramifications to be felt. But in that case Flannery O'Connor would probably have considered her

fiction redundant. That it is not so is due to the very force of her literary displacements and the ambiguities of their irresolution. Her displaced rhetoric with its figural exaggerations and imagistic distortions provides the textual basis for her thematics of displacement, a straining towards a theological absolutism which allowed no integration of opposites. As Frederick Asals puts it:

Her stories and novels characteristically do not close on images of harmony and reconciliation, all passion spent, but in pain and violence and a profound sense of displacement, of permanent exile from the known and familiar, including the final displacement of death. (120)

In the final analysis, perhaps Flannery O'Connor chose the wrong means for divulging transcendental concerns univocally. Then again, she certainly chose the right means as far as her fiction's continuing relevance is concerned. The recognition of the hidden order behind the apparently disorderly and meaningless implies, paradoxically, an undoing of the grotesque and the displacement it embodies: «really to understand the grotesque is to cease to regard it as grotesque» (Harpham, 76). However, this would effectively do away with the need for the strategies of displacement in the first place. The work of art would no longer be necessary. Art must remain ultimately impervious to univocal interpretation while at the same time eliciting the interpretive effort. Flannery O'Connor's discordant narratives function in this way, much to the chagrin of some critics and perhaps against the tenor of some of the author's own intentional statements, postponing interpretive resolution through the indefiniteness and ambiguity of their dénouements. The unresolved displacements and, in particular, the grotesque become representative tropes for art, «for if the interpretation supplanted the form that gave rise to it, there would be no need for art» (Harpham, 178). The reader / critic must take a Kierkegaardian leap of faith—the interpretive leap—in order to undo the discord of elements and thus unite the Absolute and the contingent (Asals, 30). Or he may opt for the ambiguity and multiplicity of the middle ground where meanings are incessantly displaced and deferred. As Harpham describes it in his illuminating book:

Art, perhaps, is measured by its ability to enrich our understanding, but it is also measured by its capacity to provide evidence for the falsification of whatever theories we arrive at. It is this latter capacity that insures a text's continued life, that guarantees that there is something left to discover. (191)

Flannery O'Connor's fiction is intent on falsifying all secular theories whatsoever without becoming the «pious trash» she so abhorred. Its rhetorical efficiency and thematic complexity, its willingness to tackle the material world and infuse it with meaning, assure us that there is always something left to discover, the elusive «something» that guarantees a text's survival.

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