

FREAKS AND VIRGINS: HAGIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF SEXUAL PURITY AND BODILY DISFIGUREMENT IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY GHOST"

Abstract: Since Flannery O'Connor was deeply familiar with the genre of Christian hagiographies, it comes as no surprise that this literary corpus influenced her prose. Indeed, there is a distinctly hagiographical *modus operandi* in her otherwise modern fiction, and an abundance of hagiographical references can be found throughout her work. In her short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," perseverance in virginity is linked with extreme bodily disfigurement ("being stricken by God"). This puzzling episode can be elucidated by examining the motifs of "endangered purity" and "miraculous disfigurement" in various hagiographical narratives. Medieval cults, with their iconographical and hagiographical devices, form a unique cultural context which provides readings of O'Connor's story with deeper and hidden meanings.

Key words: Flannery O'Connor, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," cultural context, hagiography, virginity, monstrosity

1. Reading monstrosity: Flannery O'Connor's medieval context

John D. Sykes argued that Flannery O'Connor's understanding of physical suffering and bodily disfigurement is the aspect "most difficult of all for contemporary readers" (Sykes 2009: 140) to understand. There is a peculiar tendency in O'Connor scholarship to contrast her prose with contemporary sensibilities, as if she were a 14th-century author and not our near-contemporary.¹ Even the earliest of her critics noticed something conspicuously "unmodern" in her seemingly modern fiction. In 1973, Martha Stephens claimed that in reading O'Connor "one is forced back into the distant past of English religious literature, into the dark side of medieval Christian thought with its constant injunction to the renunciation of the world" (cited in Di Renzo 1993: 11). This apparently widespread intuition, that in order to understand O'Connor's prose properly one has to be supplied with some historical context, familiarized with certain premodern cultural forms that have been lost to the modern reader, may strike us as quite unusual, bearing in mind that all of O'Connor's stories are embedded in 20th-century America. Her characters are modern Americans and not monks, kings and bishops inhabiting "dark" feudal pasts and fortified cities. When the word "medieval" is used in interpreting O'Connor's prose, a contextualization of some sort may be needed.

¹ Flannery O'Connor died on August 3, 1964.

O'Connor's 1954 story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" can provide us with valuable insights into how the process of contextualization works in interpreting her fiction. The story appears to be a strange elaboration of a typically Gothic theme: a child is confronted with a "monster." But what does a "monster" mean? One can hardly tell without a specific cultural context. To put it in Jerome Cohen's terms, "the monstrous body is a pure culture" (cited in Weinstock 2014: 42). Whether they were regarded as gods or taboo creatures, or whether they were strange sublimations of broader cultural fears or ominous instantiations of transgressions of culture's own rules, the monsters were always intricate and one cannot properly read overwritten cultural texts without substantial contextualization. To understand a monster is to understand a culture.

Let us begin our analysis of O'Connor's story by pointing out a specifically medieval understanding of monsters. Ruth Gilbert refers to St. Augustine's notion that monsters

were not necessarily to be abhorred. [...] He suggested that monsters could also be marvels. They were, in fact, signs and inherently connected to representation. To prove the point he noted that the etymology of the word monster "evidently comes from *monstrare*, 'to show', because they show by signifying something." The question was, what did a monster signify? In what context, and for whom? (Gilbert 2002: 22).

Augustine's discourse on the nature of monstrosity was provoked by the enigma "of human beings possessing the characteristics of both sexes" (Gilbert 2002: 22). Incidentally, the same theme is the focal point of O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." In this story, a hermaphrodite is portrayed as a puzzlingly sacred figure and an uncanny preacher of sexual purity.

In making the curious connection between "monstrous" bodies and the Christian notion of sexual purity, O'Connor had predecessors. Namely, in the medieval genre of hagiography, the virginal body of a saint or a martyr was often portrayed as being somehow "abnormal." Far from being a flight from the abject nature of the human body, the treatment of virginity in hagiographies opened a discursive field rich with various somatic representations. In hagiographical *corpora* the very process of attaining perfect chastity was often portrayed as an extremely physical (even visceral) endeavor. Becoming a true virgin included, as childbirth did, blood, pain, and the final emergence of a new life. Uncanny somatic imagery pervades the genre. In virgin saints' hagiographies, as in O'Connor's stories, "all bodies (...) are passing strange":

To be in a body is, for [O'Connor], a spectacle unto itself. Few writers exceed her in mapping the minute bizarreness of arms, legs, noses, chins, postures, ways of walking and sitting. These eccentricities culminate in the double-sexed circus freak of ["A Temple of the Holy Ghost"] (Weinstein 2009: 13).

Obsession with strange bodies forms a nexus between O'Connor's prose and the ancient genre of virgin saint hagiographies. There is, as we shall see, something "medieval" and "hagiographical" in O'Connor's portrayal of "abnormal" bodies in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." It appears that Martha Stephens's hyperbolically toned

accusation of O'Connor forcing her readers back into "the dark side of medieval Christian thought" should be taken as literally as possible.

2. Virginitiy and sexual maturation: Conflicting semantic registers in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is a puzzling narrative. A twelve-year-old girl and her mother are visited for the weekend by Joanne and Susan, their 14-year old cousins living on the premises of Mount Saint Scholastica, a Catholic convent school. Immediately upon their arrival, Joanne and Susan are seen removing their convent uniforms only to replace them with "red skirts and high heels, lipstick and loud blouses" (O'Connor 1971: 236). They do nothing "but think about boys," we are told. For this reason, they were sent to a Catholic school in the first place. The nuns there are "to keep a grip on their necks" (O'Connor 1971: 236). A shift between two semantic registers can be noticed in these lines: a transfer is taking place, from the register of purity (*convent uniforms* as a symbol of institutional promotion of sexual abstinence) to the register of sexual maturation (*high heels* as a symbol of the popular strategy of subverting institutional discourse). These two registers compete for dominance throughout the story. The stark contrast between *cosmetics* (lipstick, high heels) and *virginitiy* (nuns, convent uniforms) is of tremendous importance here. Writing about the patristic understanding of virginitiy, Howard Bloch notes that virginitiy was perceived "in some deep sense [as] precisely the opposite of the cosmetic; just as marriage is associated with ornamentation, virginitiy implies a lack of ornament" (1991: 99). Cosmetics are forms of deception.

Joanne and Susan are also seen as "often passing the long mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs" (O'Connor 1971: 236). The mirror is, indeed, a primary medium of sexual maturation. It is, to borrow a famous Deleuze-Guattari term, a "fantasy machine" of adolescence. How does this machine operate? It artificially replicates the wooing gaze allowing the subject to see himself captured, seized, and snatched by the gaze of another. To understand a mirror is to understand desire. A mirror is a machine of "disembodiment"² for desire always lacks a precise somatic center. Desire is strangely disincorporate. The body itself is seldom an object of sexual desire. On the contrary, it can often be a sight of repulsion. What diminishes desire is precisely the bodiliness of the body, its explicit somatic nature (stretch marks, pimples, various imperfections, etc.). For example, pornographic representations are never revealing, never explicit: they are part of an industry of desire based on highly elaborate techniques of concealment (e.g., through the use of retouching). Pornography is almost Victorian in its concealment of the body: copious garments are replaced by copious filters and conventions. To paraphrase Žižek, it is the most conservative, the most "conventional" of genres.³ It goes without saying that what is

² See Tolman 2001: 199 and *passim*.

³ See TIFF Talks 2016.

offered to our gaze in ads or pornography is never a real body. There is something “virtual” about the very nature of sexual desire: it is seldom a desire for a body *per se*. Rather, it’s a desire for a ghost of a body, a reflection in the mirror. To become an object of desire, one has to be disembodied. This is, perhaps, the strangest point of O’Connor’s story: purity is extremely somatic, body-centered. Sexual desire, on the contrary, is the flight from the abject nature of the body. Desire always retains something Manichean.

Who is a virgin, then? One can say that a virgin is a person whose reflection is never caught in a mirror. To see oneself in a mirror means to be already engaged in inescapable operations of desire. To look at oneself is already a form of the loss of innocence:

And hence the phrase in the *Didascalia apostolorum*, “pride of eye,” joined by a myriad similar figures of ocular sin: the “guilt in a look” (Ambrose); “unchastened gazing” (Chrysostom); the “concupiscence of the eyes” (Cyprian); or the “adultery of the eyes” (Novatian). A virgin, in short, is a woman who has never been seen by a man. [...] Jerome wonders if it is licit for virgins to bathe at all, for in seeing their own bodies, there is always the potential for desire. [...] “Such an one should blush and feel overcome at the idea of seeing herself undressed” (Bloch 1991: 100).

Convent school in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” purports to be a place of sexual regulation, the parodic version of Joyce’s Clongowes. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the purity discourse within the Catholic educational institution is expressed through Fr. Arnall’s gothic sermon on hell, guilt, and punishment. But in O’Connor, the tone immediately shifts dramatically, for here the institutionalized discourse of purity never attains Joycean gravity. It is highly impotent in its institutional mode. The official endorsement of purity dissolves into a literal joke. The girls refer to themselves in jest as “Temple One” and “Temple Two.” This is reminiscent of advice given to them by one of the nuns:

Sister Perpetua [...] had given them a lecture on what to do if a young man should—here they laughed so hard they were not able to go on without going back to the beginning—on what to do if a young man should—they put their heads in their laps—on what to do if— they finally managed to shout it out—if he should “behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile.” Sister Perpetua said they were to say, “Stop sir, I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!” (O’Connor 1971: 238).

The discourse of purity is interrupted by laughter and “gales of giggles,” for it cannot elevate itself above the domain of a joke. The purity discourse first appears as a parody, but gradually attains a more serious and enigmatic tone.

During their stay, Joanne and Susan visit a small-town fair on a double date with two local boys, Wilkins brothers. In one of the tents reserved for “grown-ups,” there is a “freak,” a biological curiosity in a bizarre peep show. Upon their return from the fair, the girls describe to their twelve-year-old cousin what they saw. The freak they saw was “a hermaphrodite”:

The girls heard the freak say to the men [...] “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing

His way. [...] The child felt every muscle strained as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself. She wanted to get back into her own bed and think it out (O'Connor 1971: 245-246).

The twelve-year-old, being still unacquainted with human anatomy, is perplexed by the strange "creature," that "was a man and a woman both" (O'Connor 1971: 245). In her subsequent fantasy, this curious event attains more nuanced features. The freak-show becomes strangely church-like:

She could hear the freak saying, "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit," and the people saying, "Amen. Amen." "God done this to me and I praise Him." [...] "A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen." "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." "Amen" (O'Connor 1971: 246).

The next day, when the twelve-year-old and her mother visit the Eucharistic adoration at a church, at the most sacred moment, as the priest lifts up the consecrated host, the child recalls the hermaphrodite from the day before. Hermaphrodite's admonitions are evoked again, yoked with the words the priest utters in the course of the mass:

She could hear the freak saying: "A Temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know. [...] If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin, and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A Temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. [...] I am a temple of the Holy Ghost" (O'Connor 1971: 247).

The motif structure of the story oscillates dramatically from adolescent wooing (double date) to the abject body (anatomical discourse of disfigurement), ending finally with a strange warning on the sacral importance of purity. Within the context of the Holy Mass, "the body of hermaphrodite achieves the sacramental significance of the Eucharist itself" (Di Renzo 1993: 82). Di Renzo states bluntly: "O'Connor is playing with the sacrilege" (1993: 82).

3. Monster of interpretation: Morphology of virginity

The "circus freak" in O'Connor's story can be read as a sign of interpretative ambiguity, for a hermaphrodite was often perceived as a portent "both inviting and defying interpretation" (Gilbert 2002: 7). The notion of conflict is written into the somatic center of the hermaphroditic body. Writing about "discrepancies and ambiguities generated by hermaphroditic figures" (Gilbert 2002: 6) throughout history, Gilbert has claimed that "hermaphrodites raised a series of ontological and epistemological questions. Was the hermaphrodite a sublime spiritual figure or a grotesque monster?" (2002: 1). This conflict between the sacred ("spiritual") and the utterly profane ("grotesque") is reproduced in O'Connor's story in which two drastically opposed settings are strangely simultaneous: the holy of holies of the Catholic church in which the mass takes place and the grotesque peep show. O'Connor's own characterization of the story deepens the mystery of the plot

even further. In a letter to Betty Hester, she writes: “Purity strikes me as the most mysterious of the virtues. (...) ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’ all revolves around what is purity” (O’Connor 1979: 117). The story proposes a complex puzzle (“the most *mysterious* of the virtues” and the “riddle” of the hermaphrodite), but fortunately it offers copious clues for its own contextualization.

Let us recall, for instance, the name of the boarding school attended by Joanne and Susan: Mt. St. Scholastica. This name carries direct hagiographical reminiscence, thus opening a sudden cultural context into which the Christian purity discourse in O’Connor’s story is embedded. St. Scholastica was a twin sister of Saint Benedict, a holy virgin consecrated to God from her early youth, considered also to be a patron saint for those who seek to preserve virginal innocence.⁴

There is a plethora of other hagiographical references to virginity in O’Connor’s story. Before Susan and Joanne visit the fair with the Wilkins brothers, a courtship of sorts takes place. Boys are playing on their guitars a devotional “hillbilly song” for girls, and the girls sing in return a Catholic eucharistic hymn, Aquinas’s *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum*, which they learned at the convent school. Secretly observing the strange filtration between her cousins and the boys, the 12-year-old peevishly exclaims at one point: “You big dumb ox” (O’Connor 1971: 240), referring to one of the boys. This is yet another reference to Aquinas since the phrase (“dumb ox”) was allegedly used by his peers to describe young Thomas, who was a quiet man of some corpulence. It’s no coincidence that Aquinas is evoked twice in a story dealing with sexual purity. Important hagiographical reference is hidden in the strange wooing episode. There is a famous incident dealing with perseverance in sexual purity in Aquinas’s hagiography, mentioned by O’Connor herself in her private correspondence:

[St. Thomas’s] brothers didn’t want him to waste himself being a Dominican and so locked him up in a tower and introduced a prostitute into his apartment; her he ran out with a red-hot poker. It would be fashionable today to be in sympathy with the woman, but I am in sympathy with St. Thomas (O’Connor 1979: 94).

In providing these hagiographical traces dealing with virginity and purity, O’Connor is trying to introduce a specific cultural context in which her story is to be read. However, the most important contextualizing clue is offered when Joanne and Susan depart with the Wilkins brothers to the fair and the twelve-year-old is left alone in her room, fantasizing about what she wants to be when she grows up. At first, she’s thinking of becoming a doctor or an engineer, but on a second thought “she felt that she would have to be much more”: “She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything you could know” (O’Connor 1971: 243). This is an important point in the narrative, since the girl’s ensuing fantasy of martyrdom neatly follows a specific genre pattern:

She began to prepare for her martyrdom [...] in a great arena. [...] The first lion charged forward and fell at her feet, converted. A whole series of lions did the same [...] and finally, the Romans were obliged to burn her but to their astonishment, she would not

⁴ See, for example, her liturgical collected in <http://www.liturgies.net/saints/scholastica/readings.htm>.

burn down and finding she was so hard to kill, they finally cut off her head very quickly with a sword and she went immediately to heaven. She rehearsed this several times (O'Connor 1971: 243).

Her fantasy operates as a parody of Christian martyrology. Genre conventions are scrupulously evoked. A virgin martyr is commonly portrayed as being triumphant in her demise, for she dies only after a series of futile attempts of her executioners to put her to death. Her martyrdom before a seated crowd in the *circus* functions as a complex visual spectacle. Virgins constantly evade death – lions are tamed, swords are broken, fire is extinguished. Saint Agatha, a well-known virgin martyr from the Christian antiquity, after being subjected to various deadly mutilations, is miraculously restored time after time. Similarly, the attempt of Saint Agnes's executioners to burn her down fails miserably and, finally, she dies by the sword and only so by her own volition (as in the case of the imaginary martyrdom scenario of O'Connor's twelve-year-old protagonist).⁵

The martyr is portrayed not as a helpless, tragic victim, but as a person in control over her own death. A frail, female body is made resistant to various kinds of deadly tortures and the entire military industry. The virginal body becomes a focal point of martyrology, a unique somatic site of resistance, contesting and defying imperial power and the state apparatus.⁶ "Martyrdom is practically synonymous with virginity, as Ambrose insists" (Bloch 1991:108). Indeed, in martyrologies, virginity continuously provokes mutilations and assaults to bodily integrity. To be a virgin means to be prone to extremely radical bodily disfiguration. To offer a striking example: Saint Agatha's breasts were cut off with pincers (Velimirović 2001: 86). In the process of her martyrdom, she was deprived of the symbols of her femininity. The discourse of virginity destabilizes firm gender dichotomy, thus refashioning standard human anatomy.

The virgin is always a martyr, suffering from soldiers or tribunals, or self-inflicted regime of penance, throwing herself into the "mills of asceticism", (1991: 74) to use Bloch's phrase. Asceticism was another way of martyrdom, closely coupled with virginity. In the hagiographical discourse of virginity, the body always remains a site of violent fashioning (be it through literal martyrdom or severe penance). "To defend his purity, Saint Francis of Assisi rolled in the snow, Saint Benedict threw himself into a thorn bush, Saint Bernard plunged into an icy pond..." (Escrivá 2002: 66). Virginity is, indeed, an industry of violent practices.

As Bloch notes, "asceticism, better than any modern-day surgical rearrangement of the anatomy, offered a way out of the gendered spirit-body dichotomy" (1991: 107). The same author mentions various hagiographical episodes of cross-dressing among virgin ascetics:

⁵ According to some hagiographical accounts, at the time of her martyrdom, St. Agnes was approximately the same age as O'Connor's protagonist. See, Velimirović 2001: 51.

⁶ In the course of martyrdom, the very nature of the virginal body is changed. It constantly defies common biological expectations. Executioners were unable to cut off St. Panteleimon's head for the sword melted like beeswax when it touched the saint's neck (Velimirović 2001: 531). In the course of martyrdom, the "normal" human body permanently changes and is often replaced by a strange, almost "bionic" one. Virginity and martyrdom are inseparable from the notion of bodily metamorphosis.

of women disguised as monks for the purpose of hiding their identity, and also of surpassing the perceived limits of gender. Perpetua⁷ dreams of assuming a male body before her martyrdom. Thecla and Mygdonia cut their hair short and dress as men; Pelagia, in male garb, passes for a eunuch; Hilaria's breasts supposedly withered; Apollonaria's body is said to have become like the exterior of a turtle (Bloch 1991: 107).

Virginity operates as a cultural anomaly destabilizing the notions of femininity and masculinity in many a hagiographical narrative. Virginity was perceived in martyrologies, to use the phrase Hélène Cixous employs while speaking of Ovid's hermaphrodite, as "a painful ability to be cut" (Cixous 1997: 156). It was a "body passing strange" (Weinstein 2009: 13) in the visual center of virgin saints hagiographies. In the hagiographical *corpus*, becoming a virgin was often exemplified through highly elaborate spectacles of monstrosity. A similar revelation of the uncanny body is, in effect, the central theme of O'Connor's story.

Saint Methodius, the 9th-century patriarch of Constantinople, was once slandered as having committed a carnal sin with a certain woman. To defend himself, Methodius stood naked in front of the judges exposing to their gazes his bare, emaciated body severely disfigured by asceticism. His "secret parts" which were, as his hagiographer observes, completely "withered" and dead-like (Velimirović 2001: 417), were not only the anatomical proof of his innocence, but were also a holy and striking icon and a portent of virginity.

The discourse of virginity establishes a monstrous body: a body not yet made, a perfect body in becoming, for hagiographical virginity was perceived as the process of fashioning a new man, an "eschatological virgin."⁸ Virgin is always something "unfinished", a "Quasimodo" of heavenly desire. Hagiographical virginity and hermaphroditism were often portrayed as the strange states of simultaneous perfection and imperfection. In mythology, hermaphrodite was perceived, to use Gilbert's phrasing, as "self-generating an ideal plenitude rather than a disturbing lack" (2002: 53). At the same time, however, a hermaphrodite was perceived as a monster, a radical imperfection, a body unmade. Virginity was recognized as the perfect heavenly state of angels and God Himself, but at the same time, becoming a virgin in this life was always entangled in imperfections, and hopelessly so, for no man alive could claim to be a perfect virgin and thus already share the divine life of God and angels.⁹ As a sign both of temporary imperfection and eternal perfection, the anatomical reality of virginity was often instantiated in the form of abject, disfigured bodies. Just as it was the case with Plato's hermaphrodites in *The Symposium*, hagiographical virginity was seen as a deep yearning for wholesomeness, for the eschatological condition in which there was no male and female. It was a sign of "powerful nostalgia for a return

⁷ The name Perpetua is already familiar to us since the nun who gave practical advice on preserving purity to convent girls in O'Connor's story is also named Perpetua. The Perpetua reference was noted by various authors. See, for example, Gordon 2003:155.

⁸ See, Bloch 1991: 97.

⁹ There is a famous quote attributed to Saint Basil of Cesarea: "I do not know woman, but I am not a virgin" (cited in Brakke 2006: 194), meaning that, although Basil lived a celibate and chaste life, he considered himself unworthy of the lofty title of virginity.

to the time before the Fall” (Bloch 1991: 98). What is eschatologically perfect can be properly represented in temporal reality only by a monster.

4. “Stricken by God”: O’Connor’s hermaphrodite and miraculous disfigurement in St. Christopher and St. Wilgefortis hagiographies

In the twelve-year-old’s fantasy, the hermaphrodite becomes a preacher of purity, paraphrasing St. Paul’s admonitions against sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6. This arcane literary proceeding can be further elucidated by examination of motifs of “endangered purity” and “miraculous disfigurement” which can be found in hagiographical narratives on St. Christopher and St. Wilgefortis. This hagiographical *corpus* offers what are perhaps the most radical examples of the “monstrosity” of virginity.

Saint Christopher was occasionally portrayed in iconography as a *cynocephalus*, an uncanny dog-headed figure. According to one hagiographical account, he was so prodigiously handsome that to “avoid temptations for himself and others,”¹⁰ he prayed to God asking to be disfigured. Divine intervention protects Christopher from compromising his virginity by making him “monstrous” in appearance. The strange body appears once again amid the purity discourse. The identical procedure from this hagiographical “facture” is replicated in O’Connor: the disfigurement of the body is portrayed as a benevolent action of God, mysteriously followed by admonitions to purity.

The traditional account of St. Wilgefortis’s passion offers another remarkable example of miraculous disfigurement of the virginal body. There was a very popular fourteenth-century lore concerning Saint Wilgefortis, a pious maiden miraculously saved from losing her virginity by sprouting a male beard. She was often portrayed as a bearded woman crucified on a cross. According to hagiographical tradition, Wilgefortis was a daughter of a heathen king and a convert to Christianity. She refused her father’s biddings to marry a pagan prince and was, as a result, held captive and tortured. The typical structure of virgin saint martyrology is made obvious once again: virginity is always to be tested by pain and torment. But Wilgefortis goes even further: she implores God to strike her with a terrible and revolting predicament so that she can evade marriage arranged by her father. Her prayers are answered: “she take(s) on the appearance of a man, and a rich beard frame(s) her face” (Friesen 2001: 66). Virginity, as in O’Connor’s story, is strangely associated with the spectacle of androgyny. The disfigured body becomes a portent of purity. O’Connor’s hermaphrodite also shares one specific iconographical characteristic with Wilgefortis: both of them are portrayed wearing a blue dress.¹¹

¹⁰ A brief traditional account of St. Christopher’s life can be found at: <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2017/05/09/101334-martyr-christopher-of-lycia-and-with-him-the-martyrs-callinika-a>.

¹¹ See, O’Connor 1971: 245, Friesen 2001: 71.

5. **Virginity, Monstrosity, Eucharist**

The appearance of androgynous iconography in the midst of purity discourse is not a product of some outlandish contingency. Explicit hermaphrodite imagery was the pervasive feature of a specific mystical discourse in the late medieval culture of the Church. When the hermaphrodite is put into the Eucharistic context in O'Connor's story (for, let us remember, the twelve-year-old suddenly ponders on the hermaphrodite in the middle of the Eucharistic rite) this could strike a contemporary reader as a somewhat "irreverent" proceeding. However, this maneuver also ought to be interpreted in a specific cultural context.

Christ was endowed with remarkably androgynous iconographical characteristics in late medieval eucharistic devotions. Ilse Friesen notes that

during the fifteenth century, Christ's flesh was seen as being simultaneously male and female. He was male insofar as he was the son of God and Mary; however, his body was also regarded as a female in that his flesh had been fashioned from the womb of his mother [without a male agency] (Friesen 2001: 25).

The iconography of androgyny had a deep eucharistic resonance. As Liz Herbert McAvoy claims, in medieval culture, women, rather than men, were perceived as providers of food: Elias Canetti "has suggested that the mother offers her own body to be eaten, first nourishing the child within her and then with her own milk" (cited in McAvoy 2004: 48). In the mystical tradition of the medieval and early modern Church, this inscription of "the feminine upon the traditionally masculine" was based on a poignant analogy: just as a baby is nursed by her mother's body, so Christ feeds his congregation with his own body and blood (McAvoy 2004: 145). In medieval iconography, Christ was sometimes represented as a strikingly androgynous mother figure, and was even occasionally portrayed as "feeding the faithful from his breast" (McAvoy 2004: 49).

The uncanny transition from androgynous representation to the Eucharist that we encounter in O'Connor's story was already made in the medieval mystical tradition of the Church. Far from being just a bizarre gothic exercise in uncanniness, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" replicates a specific theological and iconographical context into which notions of virginity, monstrosity, and Eucharist are united, thus forming a unique and coherent semantic field.

6. **A premodern storyline in the modern setting: Silence and reconciliation in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"**

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is a narrative charged with peculiar somatic tension. Why is the circus hermaphrodite such an intriguing figure for the girl? One possible explanation for this strange preoccupation could be that the twelve-year-old protagonist is passing through the natural process of anatomical maturation without

proper mentoring by her straight-laced mother.¹² Thus, she is left to her own devices in coping with the physical changes she experiences. This could be a proper explanation for the girl's constant restlessness. During this stage of development, one's own body could often appear as something "uncanny," producing thus a strange destabilization of one's previous "primitive" grasps of human anatomy. The girl's obsession with blood and gory details of medicine and martyrdom could thus be understood as a part of her attempts to come to terms with her own physical development. The image of the hermaphrodite, as an enigma of anatomy, can be easily incorporated within one's personal adolescent experiences of physical selfhood "passing strange."

Adolescence, for O'Connor, represents the period in human life in which our own body appears, for the first time, as something demanding and craving our acceptance. Adolescence, after the undisturbed spontaneity of childhood, represents a stage in which one's identification with their body becomes less straightforward and more problematic. This is a newly discovered burden of something being utterly "mine": "my own body" is now seen as different from anybody else's. The hermaphrodite thus comes to represent the "uniqueness" (or, perhaps, the "monstrosity") of my own body (its peculiarities, uncontrolled growth, still inexplicable and seemingly dangerous mutations, etc.), its perplexing strangeness brought to the extreme.

However, the circus freak is not merely a semantically intricate text, some Rorschach inkblot which the girl now supplies with personal—though completely arbitrary—meanings. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the hermaphrodite is a "medium-term" between the girl's own body and the Eucharistic body of Christ. It allows the girl to pass from the notion of the "abject" body to the deeper appreciation of its sacredness, even in its "abjection." There is something truly "hagiographical" in this unsettling simultaneity of the sublime and the disturbingly somatic. The girl's own body now appears as a foreign object, demanding for the first time to be accepted as "my own body," *corpus meum*, to use the Eucharistic formula.

The hermaphrodite is thus a medium of reconciliation, allowing the girl to read the Eucharist as a "text" of tremendous intimate importance: the body of Christ, exposed and broken during the Eucharistic rite, becomes a medium of wholesomeness and salvation. The girl's inner aggressive voice, probably provoked by some internal conflict and deep-rooted feelings of shame, is suddenly silenced, precisely at the moment she establishes the connection between the hermaphrodite as a preacher of purity and the Eucharistic rite.

The basic Eucharistic theme (of physical fracture and fragility that paradoxically enables deeper unity and healing) is repeatedly reenacted in various virgin saints' hagiographies, and, as we have seen, the theme of sexual purity mediated by various hagiographical references constantly crops up in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." There is a scene at the very end of the story where the girl, while leaving the mass, is violently embraced by one of the nuns who "nearly smothers her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt" (O'Connor 1971: 248). Again, the themes of violence and virginity are traditionally paired together.

¹² See also, Vujošević 2019: 57.

Perhaps, this image of the girl “immersed” in the monastic robe and with the cross imprinted on her face,¹³ could be read as a foreshadow of the girl’s future vocation. The hagiographical theme of “becoming a virgin” is now reworked in a modern setting of American secular life, as part of a coming-of-age narrative. It is no coincidence that the story of maturation (and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” certainly is) enables the introduction of purity as a theme. Seemingly paradoxically for O’Connor, purity begins where innocence ends:

And along this line, I think the phrase “naive purity” is a contradiction in terms. I don’t think purity is mere innocence; I don’t think babies and idiots possess it. I take it to be something that comes either with experience or with Grace so that it can never be naive. On the matter of purity, we can never judge ourselves, much less anybody else. Anyone who thinks he’s pure is surely not (O’Connor 1979: 126)

The “wise blood” of the Eucharist, explained by the “hermaphrodite’s disturbing wisdom” (Giannone 2010: 101), functions as a true “rite of passage” in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” For the girl, the process of spiritual maturation begins with her reconciliation with her physical self. The first symptom of this reconciliation is, fittingly, silence and peace, marking thus the end of her aggressive internal chatter: “Her mind began to get quiet” (O’Connor 1971: 247-248).

7. Conclusion: Flannery O’Connor and hagiographies

Since Flannery O’Connor was highly familiar with the genre of Christian hagiography, it comes as no surprise that this literary corpus forms an important cultural and historical context in understanding her prose. Indeed, there is a distinctly hagiographical *modus operandi* to her otherwise modern fiction, and an abundance of hagiographical references can be found throughout her work. She once described her novel *Wise Blood* as “a book about a kind of Protestant saint” (O’Connor 1971: 69). Indeed, the novel neatly follows the structure of penitential hagiography portraying successive stages of life in sin (murder and blasphemy), conversion (*metanoia*) and radical penitential practices, which can also be found, for example, in the hagiographical account of Saint James the Faster of Phoenicia. Specific references to various hagiographical episodes are frequent in O’Connor’s work: Athanasius’s *Life of Saint Anthony of Egypt* is explicitly evoked in “The Comforts of a Home”, and the “polesitter” reference (O’Connor 1962: 372) in *The Violent Bear It Away* comes directly from the hagiographical record of Saint Simeon the Stylite’s life.

Her stories, in general, could be described as “cryptohagiographies” (Vujošević 2019: 54), for there is almost always an implicit hagiographical matrix hidden in the seemingly secular settings of her literary cosmos. “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is perhaps the most striking example of this technique. The decontextualized and cryptic presence of hagiographical narrative devices in the story has provoked her

13 See, Giannone 2000: 101.

secular readers, unversed in Christian antiquity and its genres, to interpret the text as an uncanny example of Gothic sensibility. For when we are devoid of adequate contexts, her stories seem to be nothing more than strange tales replete with bizarre accounts of violence and bodily oddities. Describing her prose as “Gothic” provides us only with a temporary peace of mind: something crucial in her stories is hurriedly dismissed by this evasive concept. The term “Gothic” was an expression of interpretative trouble: a label insufficiently clear and sufficiently broad to serve as an abbreviation for a pervading sense of opacity (for all those highly obscure religious hints and seemingly unmotivated ruptures of violence) in O’Connor’s fiction.

Once the hagiographical context is brought to consciousness, the content of the story changes dramatically. The aesthetic quality of O’Connor’s prose resides precisely in this discrepancy between the secular Gothic camouflage of her stories and its sacral, “medieval self” (Spivey, as cited in Bosco 2009: 42).

References

- Bloch, H. (1991). *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bosco, M. (2009). Flannery O’Connor as Baroque Artist: Theological and Literary Strategies. *Renascence*, 62 (1), 41-61. <https://doi.org/10.5840/renascence200962117>
- Brakke, D. (2006). *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in the Early Christianity*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Cixous, H. (1997). Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forrays. In A. D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of Gift*. (148-173) New York: Routledge.
- Di Renzo, A. (1993). *American Gargoyles: Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University.
- Escrivá, J. (2002). *Camino/The Way*. Leominster: Gracewing.
- Friesen, I. (2001). *The Female Crucifix: Images of Saint Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*. Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University Press.
- Giannone, R. (2000). *Flannery O’Connor, Hermit Novelist*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Gilbert, R. (2002). *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*. New York: Palgrave.
- Gordon, S. (2003). *Flannery O’Connor: The Obedient Imagination*. Athens, London: The University of Georgia Press.
- Martyr Christopher of Lycia, and, with him, the Martyrs Callinika and Aquilina (2017, May 09). Retrieved from <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2017/05/09/101334-martyr-christopher-of-lycia-and-with-him-the-martyrs-callinika-a> [09.08.2019.]
- McAvoy, L. H. (2004). *Authority and Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- O’Connor, F. (1962). *Three by Flannery O’Connor: Wise Blood, A Good Man is Hard to Find, The Violent Bear It Away*. New York: Signet.

- O'Connor, F. (1971). A Temple of the Holy Ghost. In *The Complete Stories*. (236-248). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- O'Connor, F. (1979). *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sykes, J. D. (2009). O'Connor and the Body: Incarnation, Redemptive Suffering, and Evil. In H. Bloom (ed.), *Flannery O'Connor*. (139-66). New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.
- TIFF Talks (2016, May 24). In *Conversation with... Slavoj Žižek* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih07tJMR-3c> [09.08.2019.]
- Tolman, D. (2001). Female Adolescent Sexuality: An Argument for a Developmental Perspective on the New View of Women's Sexual Problems. In E. Kaschak, L. Tiefer (eds.), *A New View of Women's Sexual Problems*. (195-210). Binghamton: The Haworth Press.
- Velimirović, N. (2001). *Ohridski prolog*. Šabac: Glas crkve.
- Vujošević, V. (2019). 'Једна од оних крвавих прича: жанровски идентитет прозе Flannery O'Connor', *Књижевна смотра*, 51(191(1)), pp. 51-60.
- Weinstein, P. (2009). "Coming Unalone": Gesture and Gestation in Faulkner and O'Connor. In H. Bloom (ed.), *Flannery O'Connor*. (9-20). New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.
- Weinstock, J. A. (2014). American Monsters. In C. Crow (ed.), *A Companion to American Gothic*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Владимир Вујошевић

НАКАЗЕ И ДЈЕВИЦЕ: ХАГИОГРАФСКИ КОНТЕКСТ ЧЕДНОСТИ И ТЈЕЛЕСНОГ ДЕФОРМИТЕТА У „ХРАМУ СВЕТОГ ДУХА“ ФЛЕНЕРИ О'КОНОР

Резиме

Фленери О'Конор била је темељно упозната са различитим дјелима хагиографског жанра, те стога не чуди да су бројни мотиви и конвенције овог књижевног корпуса присутни у њеној прози. Могуће је тврдити да је у њеном модернистичком дјелу, поред мноштва експлицитних хагиографских референци, присутан и својеврсни хагиографски *modus operandi* који формира посебан културни контекст, незаобилазан у тумачењу њених романа и приповиједака. У њеној приповијетки „Храм Светог Духа“ мотив дјевичанства тијесно је повезан са мотивом „абнормалног тијела“. Овај необични поступак могуће је адекватно објаснити тек у контексту хагиографских наратива. Средњовјековни светачки култови, са својим иконографским и хагиографским формама, образују јединствен културни контекст који омогућава нова и дубља читања прозе Фленери О'Конор.

Vladimir.Vujosevic@udg.edu.me