

## Flannery O'Connor on the Work of Imagination

By *Richard V. Horner, Ph.D.*

*Editor's Note: The following is an abridged version of the second half of a talk that Richard Horner recently gave in Orlando. In the first half of the talk he compares Richard Rorty, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor's critiques of scientism (a quasi-religious view of the world that gives science the final word). In the second half of the talk he compares these same three thinkers with regard to their turn to literature to find what science cannot give. Here we offer only the portion of the talk that focuses on Flannery O'Connor's literary turn. For the complete version of this talk, visit – [www.christianstudycenter.org](http://www.christianstudycenter.org).*

As I have observed on other occasions, the story of modern reason led ultimately to a place of absence and emptiness in which there is no meaning or purpose given to human experience. According to a central line of modern thought, all that is left to us are the individualized purposes we create for ourselves, and those purposes are no larger than the finite, shortlived selves who create them. The cultural logic of modernity has led us into a place of absence and emptiness from which any meaningful notion of the subject (or individual agent) has disappeared and in which the very notion of the self has become merely an empty space in the web of beliefs. There are no transcendent meanings given to life; there are only the meanings we invent for ourselves. Leading intellectuals such as Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre in the middle of the twentieth century, or Richard Rorty and Milan Kundera more recently have accepted such an understanding of human experience and have done their thinking and writing under the burden of lightness that such a world lays on them. (See *Reconsiderations* V.1.1, available at [www.christianstudycenter.org](http://www.christianstudycenter.org).) ]

In such a world, modernist (or post-modernist) literature no longer sees itself as penetrating the depths of human reality but rather as imagining possibilities for how we might think and live differently in an otherwise meaningless universe. For writers, who live in the place of absence into which the modern story has led, the work of literary imagination is to fill what would otherwise be empty spaces. Literature fills the empty space created by a universe that is indifferent to human existence and that gives no meaning to existence. Literature fills the empty space inhabited by a curious species of featherless bi-peds that has no nature and will become only what it imagines itself to be. Literature fills the empty space left by the disappearance of the self under the rule of science, a self in which we will find only what we have put there ourselves – what we have imagined in times past and what we have yet to invent tomorrow.

Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor (1925- 1964) sees things differently. Working from within a Christian understanding, she views the work of imagination as creative, of course, but she sees imagination as taking us deep into the nature of human and divine realities. Whereas Rorty's turn to literature views the work of imagination as inventing ways of thinking and living differently in an indifferent universe, O'Connor sees the work of imagination as exploring and revealing depths of reality that run very deep indeed. She agrees with Rorty in pointing out that science is limited and that we need imagination, but she does not see imagination as simply spinning out possibilities for living differently. She locates the power of imagination in its ability to do exactly what Rorty does not allow for, namely, it's ability to put us in touch with deep meanings that are given to us rather than invented. The power of the writer does not lie in the novelty of her thought or in her ability to spin out possibilities but in her ability to take us by way of imagination beyond the surface on which science operates and into depths where science cannot go. O'Connor summarizes her understanding of the power of literature by suggesting that the task of the writer is to "explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected."<sup>1</sup>

O'Connor's understanding of the work of literature grows consciously out of her Christian theological perspective. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy," she writes. "This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ, and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." ["The Fiction Writer and His Country"] Contrary to popular thinking this framework does not constrict or limit her. To the contrary, it frees her to go where the modern writers of her day could not go. "I have heard it said," she writes, "that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, 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 mysteries." ["The Fiction Writer and His Country"] Far from limiting her, then, O'Connor's orthodoxy guarantees a depth that can be explored by imagination but never exhausted.

O'Connor laments the fact that modern fiction does not see itself in this way. Modern writers do not see any depth to explore, and therefore they resist the notion of revealing truth rather than inventing it. They do not see themselves as exploring and reflecting the sacred in reality. In discussing this modern malaise, she writes,

For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God...In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected."  
[Novelist and Believer]

One reason why so much of modern literature is not satisfying is that it is caught in the absence and emptiness to which modern scientism led. Writers have come to accept what is preposterous as if it were normal, and this has distorted their vision.

In such a culture, O'Connor argues, the Christian writer's task is, in part, to help modern minds see the distortions as distortions. O'Connor admits that this is not easy to do, but it is one of the tasks that she gives herself in her fiction. She writes,

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. ["The Fiction Writer and His Country"]

This wonderful paragraph describes perfectly what O'Connor does in her fiction. She shocks by shouting and drawing large, startling figures that she hopes will jar her modern audience out of their complacent acceptance of the distortions that dominate their thinking.

O'Connor not only helps us understand why modernist literature struggles as it does, she also helps us understand why good literature succeeds when it does. She helps us realize what makes great literature great – wherever it appears. There are, of course, many nonbelieving writers who write wonderfully and with great insight into the human reality, and when they do, O'Connor asserts, it is because they have taken us to what she calls "ultimate realities." Citing Joseph Conrad, O'Connor asserts that it is the writer's task to do justice to the concrete realm of experience, and in doing so to explore the depths that are present in that concrete realm. She observes, "When Conrad said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, he was speaking with the novelist's surest instinct." And then she continues, "The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality." ["Novelist and Believer"] Writers in the modern context may not realize that this is what they are doing, but whether the writer acknowledges God or not, whether he views the world as O'Connor does or as Rorty does, the writer's task remains the same, and the power of his writing comes from the same place. It comes from the writer's ability to open up ultimate realities by way of imagination.

As O'Connor continues to help us understand the ways of great literature in the contemporary world, she notes that, "We have to look in much of the fiction of our time for a kind of sub-religion which expresses its ultimate concern in images that have not yet broken through to show any recognition of a God who has revealed himself." Good writers, whether they see it this way or not, are not simply spinning out ways of thinking differently in an indifferent universe. To the contrary, they are exploring and revealing the depths of a world in which the sacred is reflected. Although modern cultural history may have led to a place of absence that suggests that imagination does the work of invention rather than revelation, the fact is that, no matter what their framework, gifted writers take us into the depths of reality that science cannot reach. Though a burden of lightness may weigh on modern writers, the weight of the image of God weighs heavily as well. As a result, great works of literature always transcend the authors that create them, and these great works certainly transcend the emptiness into which modern scientism led. One sees examples of this in the writings of Milan Kundera and Albert Camus.

In reflecting on the "fascinating imaginative realm" of the novel, Milan Kundera writes compellingly of "the art born as the echo of God's laughter, the art that created the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood."<sup>2</sup> Although Kundera, struggles with what he calls an "unbearable lightness of being," his musings on *The Art of the Novel* betray the source of the power of imagination. The power lies in God himself, and Kundera captures this truth in the wonderful image of art as born in the echo of God's laughter. Rorty processes this image by seeing God as simply the first in a long line of metaphors, and he chooses to live in a divinized world where neither the scientist nor the poet has the "priestly function [of] putting us in touch with a realm which transcends the human."<sup>3</sup> Even Rorty admits, however, that there are moments when the power of imagination tempts one to think there is something larger at work than imagination itself. There are times, for instance, when one has to wonder if there is not some deep reality behind all the metaphors rendering those metaphors not only possible but meaningful – times when one seems to hear a deeper echo in the echoes of laughter.

Albert Camus, like Milan Kundera, also tried to live and write in a world that is devoid of deep meaning. For Camus, and for the characters he creates, there is no meaning given, there are only the meanings that we create for ourselves, and yet the pages of Camus' novels are haunted by deep meaning. In *The Fall*, for instance, Jean Baptiste asserts that he is living on the surface, but despite his best attempts to do so, he keeps running up against realities in himself and in his world that seem to run deeper than anything we have put there ourselves. Among those deep realities, death looms large, of course, and so does Jean Baptiste's lack of moral courage in the face of the death of a stranger – together with the shame that follows, but the haunting presence of deep meaning appears in simpler ways as well.

For instance, laughter catches Camus' attention just as it does Kundera's. On several occasions Jean Baptiste hears laughter, and it always troubles him. It seems to ring in his ears as one of those "rumors of angels" that says there is depth to reality after all. It helps us understand that Kundera's image runs deeper than Rorty wants it to. Laughter finds its source in God himself, and when we hear the laughter, it reveals its source to us. Literature works the same way. God is not simply the first of metaphors he is the source of metaphor, and when imagination does its work well, it reveals him to us. Whether written within a consciously Christian framework or from a place of absence and emptiness, when literature succeeds, it does so because it explores and penetrates a world in which the sacred is reflected.

At least in passing, we would do well to note that what O'Connor argues with regard to fiction can be applied to other areas of creativity and imagination too. Here too artists take us into depths of mystery that science cannot reach, and in doing so they reveal ultimate realities just as writers do. As George Steiner, a remarkable Jewish thinker, has argued, encounters with literature, painting, and music cannot be made intelligible, "if they do not contain a postulate of transcendence." Steiner argues that "the experience of music cannot be made intelligible apart from transcendence, something beyond the music that comes to us in the music. In the final analysis, any experience of communicated meaning is underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." Questions about poetry, music, and art, he concludes, "are ultimately, theological questions."<sup>4</sup> This is why great art has the depth of meaning that it does – even in a world that has often forgotten the source of that meaning or of imagination itself.

All the arts stand caught between a cultural logic of modernity, which leads to absence and emptiness, and a Theo-logic of divine creation that endues every human with the image of God, renders every human being significant, and declares every creative act meaningful. Go to your local art museum or to a concert and you are likely to experience both sides of this tension. The burden of lightness does take its toll, and yet, reality haunts, ultimate concerns linger, the image of God weighs on us all, and common grace shines in all that's fair. We do well to celebrate this truth wherever we find it, for it always bespeaks the glory of the Creator – whether we find it in those who consciously honor him or not. One encounters his presence even in the absence, and we do well to celebrate the deep work of imagination whenever it reveals that presence to us.

In conclusion I would like just to allude to the passage in Flannery O'Connor that provoked this essay. It appears in *Wise Blood*, whose central character is Hazel Motes, a sort of anti-type of Christ. In this passage we find Hazel wandering down the street in a small town called Talkingham.

His second night in Talkingham, Hazel Motes walked along down town close to the store fronts but not looking in them. The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all of time to complete. No one was paying attention to the sky.

In her wonderful way, O'Connor penetrates the concrete world in which the sacred is reflected, and she also redirects her reader's gaze from the surfaces to the depths of reality.

Today many scientists are paying attention to the sky and telling us that their work shows them the very face of God. George Smoot, for instance, one of two physicists who recently won the Nobel prize in physics, has observed that he sees the face of God in the instruments and telescopes through which he observes the universe. It is a good thing when scientists recognize that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork, but we need to remember that when the scientists have taken us as far as they can take us, they will have taken us to a point beyond which science cannot speak. They may take us to the very face of God, but then we will need some help. Indeed, the very mention of the "face of God" suggests that we have exceeded the reach of science and entered the realm of literature.

While we need George Smoot to help us see what only the COBE instruments and Hubble telescope can show us, we also need Flannery O'Connor to penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected. My eyes are not so good. I tend to gaze at surfaces, and all-too-easily I live in the shallow places to which my gaze leads me. I need O'Connor to redirect my gaze away from the store fronts and up into the night sky – "that black sky...underpinned with long silver streaks that look like scaffolding – and depth on depth behind it thousands of stars that all seem to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involves the whole order of the universe and will take all of time to complete."

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<sup>1</sup> While specific essay titles are noted, all quotations of Flannery O'Connor can be found in *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings* (Orbis Books, 2003). The best way to find specific page numbers is to read this excellent collection that we have enjoyed greatly at the Study Center.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) frontispiece. From Milan Kundera *The Art of the Novel*.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 21. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 134, 227.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 134, 227.