

Chapter 11

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND CYNTHIA OZICK— TWO DISPARATE SOULS?

Keywords: “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”, *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, & Other Literary Essays*, doubling, O’Connor, Ozick, *The Complete Stories*, “The Pagan Rabbi”, *The Puttermesser Papers*

MFS: In juxtaposing Flannery O’Connor and Cynthia Ozick, we have a pairing of a Catholic and a Jewish writer, each of whom embraces their respective faiths. O’Connor was from Georgia while Ozick grew up in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx in New York. Why should we compare and contrast these authors?

DS: Here’s a case where the doubling characteristics—those similarities or distinctions that shape our understanding of pairs of writers—are very compelling. Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) and Cynthia Ozick (1928-) are amongst the most interesting writers in contemporary American fiction. They have intellectual substance; they are master stylists; they are moralists; their spiritual and cultural frames of reference permeate their fiction, and they deserve our attention and our appreciation.

Generally writers of fiction are best known for crafting novels or short stories. In the case of O’Connor and Ozick, it’s their short stories and/or novellas that mesmerize. While novels typically sell better and attract a broader audience, the best short narratives—and several of O’Connor’s and Ozick’s works fall into this category—are flawlessly crafted gems. That level of perfection is much more typically manifest in a short story because every word, every sentence, every character, and every event appears replete with symbolism and thematic significance and must coalesce into an immaculately integrated narrative. That tightly woven, nearly perfect story can never be replicated when writing a vast, panoramic work of fiction striving for the coveted designation of “Great American Novel”. There is simply too much content, too many characters, and too many subplots and events unfolding to have them all flawlessly adhere. By contrast, a sublime short story must be exacting, capable of capturing a fleeting instant or a short sequence of moments in time. While I was initially attracted to

novels because of their sweeping vistas, as I became a serious literary reader I found myself increasingly drawn to short stories because of their exquisite craftsmanship. Indeed, it's not uncommon for an exceptional short story writer to be referred to as a "writer's writer"—someone designated as the "best of the best", although his or her stories seldom top the bestseller lists.

For years I vowed to be a purist, reading only a handful of select stories by a few writers I judged to be nearly "perfect"—John Cheever, J. M. Coetzee, Harold Brodkey, Cynthia Ozick, and Steven Millhauser were my designated favorites at the time. Of these authors, all but Coetzee were primarily short story writers. Today, I would certainly include O'Connor on that list.

What attracts me to O'Connor and Ozick are their ferocious intellects, their extraordinary craftsmanship, and the moral worldviews undergirding their fiction. Of course, a Southern writer steeped in Catholicism (which is at variance with the prevailing Protestant religiosity of the South) is, necessarily, a very different person inhabiting a very different world than an Orthodox Jewish New Yorker. It's safe to say that O'Connor's and Ozick's outlooks are not the same; *ergo*, they write different kinds of stories.

In some respects O'Connor seemed almost divinely inspired. According to her biographer, Brad Gooch, she appeared to be celibate, a writer whose stories were shaped by other-worldly forces. Indeed, Flannery characterized herself as "thirteenth century" and the poet Robert Lowell—who converted to Catholicism—referred to Flannery, according to the writer Caroline Gordon, as "a saint" (Flannery & Lowell citations in Gooch, 2009, pp. 156, 160).

By contrast, Ozick's temperament, formed by her Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy, is characterized by "skepticism, rationalism, and antimysticism" in contrast with the "exuberant emotionalism of the Hasidic community". Nevertheless, while analytic thought powers her outlook and her literary criticism, mysticism features prominently in her stories (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.).

Nor am I the only literary commentator to draw parallels between these two writers. Edmund White, in reviewing Ozick's novella *The Cannibal Galaxy*, emphasized that "Judaism has given to her what Catholicism gave to Flannery O'Connor—authority, penetration and indignation" (White, 1983).

MFS: How is the modern, secular reader to interpret the fiction of O'Connor and Ozick?

DS:As devoted readers we are or should be driven to pursue great literature regardless of the gender, ethnicity, background, political outlook, and spiritual disposition of the writer. Our selection of books should be dictated by the quality of the writing and the power of the narrative, rather than whether we share the cultural experiences or religious beliefs of these authors. Reading fiction is about being open to new worlds, new perspectives, and new horizons that alter and enlarge our understanding of life. For that reason I encourage all readers to explore the works of both Flannery O'Connor and Cynthia Ozick.

O'Connor's religiosity permeates her writing. While attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she kept a prayer journal (1946-1947), a diary that highlighted her spiritual perspective. This notebook, augmented by her daily prayers at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Iowa City, gave sustenance to O'Connor's literary maturation as a writer and the spiritual

outlook that shaped her fiction. The journal constituted a dialogue with God. At times she sought his assistance “with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing”. At other moments she was exuberant and appreciative: “Dear God, tonight is not disappointing because you have given me a story. Don’t let me ever think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for Your story—just like the typewriter was mine” (O'Connor citations by Robinson, 2013).

Her faith was sustained by sacred rituals and by the Thomist belief that God influences the world in which we live. O'Connor makes no effort in her stories to instruct her readers on matters of Catholic faith. Her stories are steeped in allegory and drenched in irony. They are often tales of Southern Protestant fundamentalists, characters that, from the perspective of agnostic or atheist readers today, may appear to be uncouth, back-country simpletons. Nevertheless, over the course of the story they are transmogrified—often by means of violence and suffering—to what might be characterized as a Catholic state of divine grace. O'Connor's sense of irony deeply pervades her stories, in part, because of the striking contrast between the bumbling characters and the spiritual vicissitudes that alter their destiny.

What makes her fiction disturbing is O'Connor's bleak depiction of her characters and her dismal assessment of humankind. From O'Connor's perspective, suggests Martha Stephens, a novelist and academic, “Human beings are ugly in every way; the human form itself is distinctly unpleasant to behold; human life is a sordid, almost unrelievedly hideous affair”. Consequently, for O'Connor “the only human act that is worthy of respect”, Stephens argues, “is the act of renouncing all worldly involvement, pleasure, and achievement” (Stephens, 1973, p. 10).

O'Connor's spiritual perspective, I would argue, implicitly calls into question whether secular society has the capability of remedying some of our most pressing issues, be they racial inequity or economic misfortune or disparate cultural worldviews. Jonathan Haidt, one of the foremost moral psychologists practicing today, would probably sympathize with O'Connor's perspective since he has demonstrated that traditional societies founded upon spiritual beliefs have a more complex and nuanced method of moral reasoning than Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies that are secular in orientation. The result is that traditional societies adhere to a common and mutually binding system of beliefs as compared with contemporary Western secular societies where social, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences are accentuated at the expense of cohesive unity (Haidt, 2012).

Ozick's philosophical faith, by contrast with O'Connor's, is analytically driven. As a child Cynthia Ozick, unlike most Jewish girls of her generation, received formal religious instruction. As with many observant Jews, the specter of the Holocaust permeates her worldview. Nor should this come as any surprise. On the eve of World War II, Lithuanian Jews accounted for approximately 7% of its entire population or about 160,000 individuals. Between 1941 and 1944 “the Germans had murdered about 90 percent of Lithuanian Jews, one of the highest victim rates in Europe” (*Holocaust Encyclopedia*, n.d.). In the 2011 Lithuanian population census, only 3,050 Jews were identified, and they represented a mere .1% (or $\frac{1}{10}$ of 1%) of the entire population (Verschik, 2014, p. 38).

The greatest challenges for Ozick, according to Elaine M. Kauvar, an academic, have been her ongoing “battle between Hebraism and Hellenism, the lure of paganism and the dangers of idolatry, the implications and consequences of assimilation, the perplexities of the artist and the besetting dangers of art” (Kauvar, 1993, p. xii). To read some of her relatively

early fiction, therefore, is for the reader to witness a cultural war that was being waged between Ozick's Jewish spiritual faith and her passion for Western culture. At the heart of this battle was literature itself. As Edmund White has noted, a recurrent theme in her fiction and essays has been "the hubris of anyone who dares to rival the Creator by fashioning an idol" (White, 1983). Indeed, Ozick has emphasized that "the single most useful, and possibly the most usefully succinct, description of a Jew—as defined 'theologically'—can be rendered negatively: a Jew is someone who shuns idols". How precisely has she defined idols? "Anything", Ozick has argued, "that is allowed to come between ourselves and God. Anything that is *instead of*" (Ozick citations in White, 1983). The challenge she has sought to address for many years has been to reconcile her love of fiction with her faith. Her concern has been that if fiction is perceived as too enticing, as drawing the reader away from the word of God toward profane (secular) literature, then, there is the risk of blasphemy associated with celebrating an idol. This is a recurrent theme in Ozick's fiction. However, as she noted in her interview with Tom Teicholz in *The Paris Review* in 1987, she has subsequently revised her perspective, which is given below.

Until quite recently I held a rather conventional view about all this. I thought of the imagination as what the name suggests, as image-making, and I thought of the writer's undertaking as a sovereignty set up in competition with the sovereignty of—well, the Creator of the Universe. I thought of imagination as that which sets up idols, as a rival of monotheism. I've since reconsidered this view. I now see the idol-making capacity of imagination is its lower form, and that one *cannot* be a monotheist without putting the imagination under the greatest pressure of all. To imagine the unimaginable is the highest use of the imagination. I no longer think of imagination as a thing to be dreaded. Once you come to regard imagination as ineluctably linked with monotheism, you can no longer think of imagination as competing with monotheism. Only a very strong imagination can rise to the idea of a noncorporeal God. The lower imagination, the weaker, falls into the proliferation of images. . . . I'm in the storytelling business, but I no longer feel I'm making idols. (Ozick & Teicholz, 1987)

For Ozick, as Kauvar noted, "the principle of continuity overwhelmingly takes precedence over the desire to create new forms and the decision to use the self as the source for fiction" (Kauvar, 1993, p. xii). This, necessarily, placed her at odds with the postmodern relativism of most contemporary writers. Thus, in her essay "T. S. Eliot at 101", which was published in 1989, Ozick called for a return to our "singularity of culture" and declared her resistance to jettisoning the modernist foundations of Eliot.

I admit in some respects, to being arrested in the Age of Eliot, a permanent member of it, unregenerative. The etiolation of high art seems to me to be a major loss. I continue to suppose that some texts are worthier than other texts. The same holds for the diminishment of history and tradition: not to incorporate into an educable mind the origins and unifying principles of one's own civilization strikes me as a kind of cultural autolobotomy". (Ozick cited in Kauvar, 1993, p. xi)

MFS: How have the critics responded to Cynthia Ozick's work?

DS: Cynthia Ozick has won numerous awards. Her first short story collection, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971), received the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award, the Jewish

Book Council Award, the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Award, the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, and was a finalist for the National Book Award the very year, in fact, that the Flannery O'Connor's posthumous collection *The Complete Stories* was designated the winner.

Ozick was the first recipient of the Rea Award for the Short Story. Her collection *Fame and Folly* (1996) received the Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award given for the Art of the Essay. *The Puttermessa Papers* (1997) was a National Book Award Finalist. Her essays featured in *Quarrel & Quandary* (2000) received the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award. Her novel *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004), published in Britain as *The Bear Boy*, made the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize in 2005. Three of her short stories received O'Henry Awards. Ozick received both the PEN/Nabokov Award and the PEN/Malamud Award in 2008. *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, and Other Literary Essays* (2016), her most recent book of nonfiction, has also received a great deal of attention.

Her stories have been frequently published in *The New Yorker* including "The Shawl", which for many readers is her most moving Holocaust story and has been characterized by Erin Overbey, writing for that magazine, as "a miniature masterpiece" (Overbey, 2013). David Foster Wallace, one of America's most celebrated postmodern fiction writers, in an interview with Stacey Schmeidel for Amherst College in 1999 mentioned Cynthia Ozick first among a handful of writers that he characterized as "the country's best living fiction writers" (Wallace, 1999).

In my estimation Ozick is the most underappreciated American fiction writer actively publishing today. I attribute this gross oversight to her demanding prose and her focus on Jewish themes. The neglect of Ozick is clearly evident if you look at the short shrift given to her biography and her fiction on Wikipedia in contrast to the extensive coverage devoted to Flannery O'Connor. I say this not to minimize O'Connor's talents, which are immense, but rather to point out that while O'Connor's fiction, despite its implicit religiosity, had been "mainstreamed", Ozick's reputation and work has been essentially relegated to the Jewish ghetto, which is a grave disservice to readers around the globe.

The greatest literary influence on Ozick's fiction is Henry James whose presence is manifestly evident in both her first published novel, *Trust* (1966), her most recent novel, *Foreign Bodies* (2010), as well as *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, & Other Literary Essays* (2016). James was also the subject of her M.A. degree in English literature while studying at Ohio State University. The greatest literary theme addressed by Ozick throughout her fiction, as Kauvar suggested and we discussed earlier, is the "battle between Hebraism and Hellenism". *Trust*, Kauvar argues, reads almost as if it were a 19th century novel. It is "the artist as a young woman" and her search "for a father and a tradition" (Kauvar, 1993, p. xiii). By contrast, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971) and *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976) examine "tradition and its discontents" while her third collection, *Levitation: Five Fictions* (1982), represents "meditations on tradition, the storyteller's apprehension of the Second Commandment, a nuanced perception of idolatry" (Kauvar, 1993, pp. xiii-xiv).

MFS: For the Jews, the rabbi is the spiritual leader of their synagogue and often their community. Why would Ozick write about "The Pagan Rabbi"?

DS: Ozick's short story "The Pagan Rabbi" is one of her most celebrated tales. It's about a 36-year-old rabbi, Isaac Kornfeld, who has committed suicide. The narrator, never identified

by name, serves as the author's alter-ego. His quest is to determine the reason the rabbi killed himself. At the urging of Sheindal, the rabbi's widow, he examines the man's notebook and, subsequently, she reads to him a "love" letter written by Isaac and addressed to a "Creature" of Nature —*Iripomoñoéià*—with whom he may have been intimate. What's clear is the rabbi was deeply engaged in theological questions relating to Jewish faith and secular idolatry, that is, philosophical and religious matters with regard to the soul and its associations with nature. This leads to his crisis of faith that for his widow constitutes nothing less than a "pagan" worship of nature. The narrator, who had once been attracted to Sheindal, is disappointed by her lack of appreciation for the rabbi's moral crisis. The story concludes with an ironic twist: The narrator returns home where he disposes of his three houseplants in an effort to cleanse himself of any associations with idolatry.

This allegorical tale addresses one of the central themes implicit in Ozick's stories, namely, her attempt to reconcile her passionate commitment to her faith and her love of fiction. Let's examine a brief passage from this story.

In the bottommost meadow fringing the water I recognized the tree which had caused Isaac to sin against his own life. . . . The rope was no longer there; the widow had claimed it. It was his own prayer shawl that Isaac, a short man, had thrown over the comely neck of the next-to-lowest limb. A Jew is buried in his prayer shawl; the police had handed it over to Sheindel. I observed that the bark was rubbed at the spot. The tree lay back against the sky like a licked postage stamp. Rain began to beat it flatter yet. A stench of sewage came up like a veil in the nostril. . . . I would stand through eternity beside Isaac's guilt if I did not run, so I ran that night to Sheindel herself. (Ozick, 1971, p. 5)

MFS: O'Connor's father died early of lupus and she was surely aware that her time was limited. How did that impact her later writings? Why did fate and race seem to figure so prominently in her works?

DS: O'Connor's father died of lupus, an autoimmune disease, when he was 45. In 1951, at the age of 26, Flannery was diagnosed with lupus. She was not expected to live very long. O'Connor moved back to Georgia to live with her mother, Regina, in Milledgeville. Thanks to large doses of ACTH, a corticosteroid that encouraged the production of cortisone in her body, the lupus went into remission, enabling O'Connor to publish two novels, as well as 32 short stories over the next thirteen years. She died in 1964 at the young age of 39. Given the severity of her illness and her profound religiosity, how could fate fail to influence O'Connor's fiction?

Keep in mind here was a young woman, devoutly Catholic, who created a prayer journal when she was 20 and maintained it while she attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, years before being diagnosed with lupus. Her entreaties to God in the notebook are forthright: "Please let Christian principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian principles to permeate". Responding to the religious skepticism and the lax doctrinal practices of her fellow classmates, she prays to God to reveal "the bareness and the misery of the places where You are not adored but desecrated" (cited by Robinson, 2013). At Iowa her classmates generally viewed her as a loner while, nonetheless, acknowledging her talent.

Her literary prowess was evident right from the outset. In the Fall of 1945, while taking graduate courses in the school of journalism, she approached Paul Engle, the director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, for admission to his program. Her Southern dialect was so pronounced he had trouble understanding her. Consequently, he asked her to write her request, which was direct and to the point: "My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writers' Workshop?" (Gooch, 2009, p. 117). She then submitted writing samples, which Engle judged to be "imaginative, tough, alive" (Gooch, 2009, p. 118). She was immediately accepted into the program, which at that time was dominated by men.

Again and again, O'Connor's stories were selected, read, and commented upon by notable writers. Thus, visiting poet John Crowe Ransom, who founded the *Kenyon Review*, the principal literary journal devoted to promoting New Criticism, choose to read one of her short stories. Robert Penn Warren likewise selected one of her submissions. Andrew Lytle, a member of the faculty at the University of Iowa and one of the principal members of the Southern Agrarians, a movement in support of a Southern literary renaissance, was a strong supporter. After graduation she was accepted to the highly prestigious artists' colony Yaddo, which also embraced Southern writers including Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote. While at Yaddo a fellow writer Paul Moor gave O'Connor an introduction to his literary agent, Elizabeth McKee. One of her most influential literary contacts there was Robert Lowell, who became her strong advocate. O'Connor, then barely 23 and looking as if she were just on the cusp of adolescence, became in Lowell's eyes "our Yaddo child" (Gooch, 2009, p. 165). Lowell introduced her to his editor Robert Giroux, then working at Harcourt Brace, who subsequently became her editor there and, later, at the publishing house known today as Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

The point I'm trying to emphasize is that O'Connor's talents were recognized early and often.

It's unlikely that any white, Southern writer can entirely escape the unsavory specter of race relations as they were practiced in the 1950s and 1960s. When John Crowe Ransom read one of O'Connor's stories while at Iowa, he substituted "Negro" for "nigger", causing O'Connor later to complain to another instructor, "The people I was writing about would never use any other word" (Gooch, 2009, p. 125). In 1955, when her story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was published, John Crowe Ransom expressed his concern about the short story title "The Artificial Nigger", which referred to a hitching post featuring a black jockey. Today, it's offensive to our ears. Many readers are now offended by the use of "nigger" in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* even if in O'Connor's story and Mark Twain's novel the term reflected the spoken parlance of its day. Ultimately, O'Connor prevailed and the title remained as designated, despite the potential criticism that might ensue, when O'Connor convinced Ransom that "the story as a whole is much more damaging to white folk's sensibilities than to black" (Gooch, 2009, p. 253).

As Gooch is at pains to point out, "Flannery's personal attitudes about race were actually quite progressive during her years in Iowa" (Gooch, 2009, 132). Not only did she object to blacks being told to sit at the back of the bus, she ignored her mother's exhortation to avoid contact with a black graduate student and objected to student efforts to try to support Jim Crow segregationist practices at Iowa.

MFS: Ozick appears to dwell on trauma. What was in her background that precipitated this?

DS: For a devout Jew looking across the horizon of the twentieth century into the new millennium, the specter of having nearly one's entire tribe wiped out during the Holocaust looms large; the fate of Israel appears today dangerously imperiled, and Jews around the globe today seem existentially threatened. How could trauma not enter into Ozick's fiction?

Oddly enough, I suppose, my love of Ozick's fiction—and, by extension, O'Connor's stories as well—stems not from religiosity or an ethnic sense of belonging—although my paternal grandparents died as a result of the Holocaust—but from the extraordinary stylistic quality of Ozick's fiction and the muscular intellect of her literary essays. I read her stories not because of ethnic loyalty, but in spite of the associations these stories have with Judaism. Why? Because Ozick writes better than almost anyone else living today. How could I not love her fiction and essays? The power of her moral imagination, the elegance of her language—that's the drawing power that brings me back to her work again and again.

My favorite story of Ozick's is her novella *The Cannibal Galaxy*. It's a nightmarish fairy tale about Joseph Brill, a man who survived Nazi-occupied France through the efforts of nuns who hid him in a cellar containing an eclectic library amassed by a priest. Brill's reading leads to a dream of creating an educational institution that embraces Jewish and European cultures. After the war he immigrates to the United States where he establishes an elementary school in America's heartland that encompasses his "Dual Curriculum".

The school was on a large lake in the breast-pocket of the continent, pouched and crouched in inwardness. It was as though it had a horror of coasts and margins; of edges and extremes of any sort. The school was of the middle and in the middle. Its three buildings were middling-high, flat-roofed, moderately modern. Behind them, the lake cast out glimmers of things primeval, cryptic, obscure. These waters had a history of turbulence; they had knocked freighters to pieces in tidal storms. Now and then the lake took human life. (Ozick, 1984, pp. 3-4)

Although the school thrives, Brill despairs of its students who appear content to aspire to middling mediocrity. Where are the child prodigies he longs to nurture? Then, he encounters Hester Lilt, a genius and mother to Beulah. From Brill's perspective Hester is a "cannibal galaxy", one of "those megalosaurian colonies of primordial gases that devour smaller brother-galaxies" (Ozick, 1984, p. 69). Brill sets his sights on her child, Beulah, in hopes that he might nurture her genius. Alas, he concludes, Beulah is only middling. Freed from the curse of fostering exceptionalism, Brill marries an ordinary woman, adopts an ordinary child, and, miracle of miracles, also fathers an exceptional child, one with prodigious talent.

Given this Grimm-like fairy tale, problems ensue. Brill is nothing less than an idolater in his pursuit of his curriculum, in his attraction for Hester, in his desire to create a child genius. The story ends with a cruel twist, at least for Brill. His child proves to be middling while Beulah matures from a cognitive "ugly duckling" into an intellectually splendid and august swan.

It's a moral tale that spins itself into a kind of philosophy of ethics poised with respect to, as Kauvar suggested earlier in this Q&A, the "battle between Hebraism and Hellenism".

If I had to choose a second fictional story as a favorite, it would be Ozick's *The Puttermessa Papers*. The life of Ruth Puttermessa is presented by means of five discrete

episodes that were initially conceived as stand-alone stories. One features a female golem, Xanthippe, who propels Puttermesser to mayoral success in New York City only to lead to her undoing due to the golem's unquenchable sexual appetites. At each stage of Ruth's life she meets with tragedy. Even, that is, when she ascends to paradise. It's yet another of Ozick's moral and philosophic fables comically presented, drenched in pain, and embedded with irony. I'll provide a small excerpt from *The Puttermesser Papers* in hopes of piquing the interest of our readers.

Mayor Puttermesser's reputation is ebbing. The cost of municipal borrowing ascends. A jungle of graffiti springs up on the white flanks of marble sculptures inside museums; Attic urns are smashed. Barbarians cruise the streets. O New York! O lost New York! . . .

The City is diseased with the golem's urge. The City sweats and coughs in her terrifying embrace. The City is in the pincer of the golem's love, because Xanthippe thirsts, she thirsts, she ravishes and ravages, she ambushes management level after management level. There is no Supervising Accountant or Secretary to the Minority Leader who can escape her electric gaze.

Sex! Sex! The golem wants sex! Men in high politics! Lofty officials! Elevated bureaucrats!

Mayor Puttermesser is finished. She can never be re-elected. She is a disgrace; her Administration is wrecked. Distrust. Desolation. It is all over for Mayor Puttermesser and the life of high politics. The prisons are open again. The press howls. Mayor Puttermesser is crushed. The golem has destroyed her utterly. (Ozick, 1998, pp. 86-87)

I suggest readers consider Ozick's collection of essays *Quarrel & Quandary* (2000), which contrast beautifully with J. M. Coetzee's collection *Stranger Shores* (2001). What makes that comparison intriguing is that while Ozick's narrative thrust is principally elliptical, Coetzee's is essentially linear.

In Ozick's most recent essay collection, *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, & Other Literary Essays*, she suggests the circumstances facing literary fiction today may have more to do with the quality of literary criticism than the decline of readers or the dearth of great novels. "The real trouble", she contends, "lies not in what is happening, but in what is not happening". For Ozick, "The novel, then, in all its forms and freedoms, is not in danger; nor is the born novelist—dwindling audiences and the intrusions of pixels notwithstanding". Rather, she insists, "Novels, however they may manifest themselves, will never be lacking". Instead, "What is missing is a powerfully persuasive, and pervasive, intuition for how they are connected, what they portend in the aggregate, how they comprise and color an era". For Ozick, then, this absence of consequential literary analysis results in an absence of "an infrastructure, of serious criticism" (Ozick, 2016, pp. 16-18).

I disagree. If there are fewer serious readers, then the market for demanding fiction perilously declines, which further diminishes the development of literary readers and the demand for great literature. The result will be the loss of meaningful fiction engaged with the world. Without great fiction there will be no need for penetrating literary criticism to highlight the meaningful connections since there will be no great books, no great narratives, and hence no need to imbue readers with their larger social significance.

What we have here is the proverbial question of the chicken and the egg. Ozick imagines criticism as the structural edifice. Yet what use is that "infrastructure" if the quality of fiction

becomes so fundamentally degraded that it offers the critic no meaningful substrate to illuminate the world in which we live?

Despite my disagreement with Ozick on this issue, I, nevertheless, encourage readers to examine her latest essay collection—filled with many important insights—and draw their own conclusions.

MFS: We associate Flannery O'Connor with the literary grotesque. How is this exemplified in her stories?

DS: Flannery O'Connor's chosen genre was Southern Gothic, a subset of American Gothic, nurtured and developed exclusively south of the Mason-Dixon line. Southern Gothic is macabre, sinister, and grotesque. The settings are unseemly and derelict, saturated with violence and horrific outcomes, although the narrative may be laced with irony and embedded in a distinctive Southern style of naturalism. For its proponents—including William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor—Southern Gothic represents a reflexive resistance to modernist fiction while, nevertheless, employing modernist techniques containing traces of what might be characterized as magical realism.

While O'Connor embodied Southern Gothic and her stories were drenched in the grotesque, nevertheless, she was at pains to emphasize the universality of her stories: "When you're a Southerner and in pursuit of reality, the reality you come up with is going to have a Southern accent, but that's just an accent; it's not the essence of what you're trying to do" (citing O'Connor, Gooch, 2009, p. 260).

The elements of O'Connor's style were evident in her first novel *Wise Blood*. As she stated in her "Author's Note"—accompanying the second edition, published in 1962, as well as the paperback edition published in 2007—"It is a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death" (O'Connor, 2007). Robert Giroux obtained a blurb for *Wise Blood* from the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, a fellow Catholic who was celebrated in America after the publication of his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Waugh's endorsement read as follows: "If this is really the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product" (Gooch, 2009, p. 212). Later, upon learning that Maurice-Edgar Coindreau would be translating *Wise Blood* for Gallimard, the celebrated French publishing house, Faulkner enthusiastically acknowledged O'Connor's novel, exclaiming, "*That's good stuff*" (Gooch, 2009, p. 308).

Let's look at the opening passage from *Wise Blood* to give our readers a sense of Flannery's mesmerizing prose.

Hazel Motes sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car. The train was racing through tree tops that fell away at intervals and showed the sun standing, very red, on the edge of the farthest woods. Nearer, the plowed fields curved and faded and the few hogs nosing in the furrows looked like large spotted stones. Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, who was facing Motes in the section, . . . was a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs and pear-shaped legs that slanted off the train seat and didn't reach the floor. (O'Connor, 2007, p. 3)

It's an ungainly story that struggles to congeal while, nevertheless, containing brilliant passages. Not surprisingly, O'Connor fought with her initial publisher in order to retain the story's distinctive character before they eventually parted ways.

I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from. . . . In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do. . . . The finished book, though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you now have. (Giroux, 1986, p. x)

To understand and fully appreciate O'Connor's remarkable gifts, the reader should examine *The Complete Stories* published after her death, which posthumously won the National Book Award. In 2009 readers on the National Book Award site selected it as the "Best of the National Book Awards Fiction". Begin with "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", which Robert Giroux has aptly characterized as "a masterpiece of a story" (Giroux, 1986, p. xii).

The premise is simple enough. A Southern family living in Atlanta is planning a trip to Florida. The difficult grandmother tries, unsuccessfully, to convince her son instead to visit Tennessee by suggesting that an escaped convict may, in fact, be headed for Florida. While they're traveling through Georgia, they take a detour, events happen, and the car careens down into a gulch. The grandmother hails a passing car on the road above. It stops: Three men get out who are armed with guns. The grandmother recognizes one of them as "The Misfit", the escaped convict, and tells him as much before realizing that the very act of acknowledging who he is has put her and her entire family at risk. The grandmother tries to engage The Misfit: "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 127).

Slowly, methodically, the rest of the family is divided and brutally murdered by the two other men. First, the father and the boy are killed; then, the mother, the baby, and the girl. We hear the shots off at a distance. We witness the relentlessly unfolding horror. Throughout the grandmother tries to reason with The Misfit. She suggests prayer. Momentarily she realizes her son is gone. She cries out "as if her heart would break" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 132).

The grandmother appears to be in a state of shock, and it's not entirely clear whether she fully comprehends that her entire family has been murdered. In the final moment of her life, she exhibits compassion and empathy for The Misfit. The grandmother softly says to him, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" and touches him (O'Connor, 1986, p. 132).

Violently repelled by her gesture, he shoots her in the chest three times. Then, with the grandmother slumped in her own pool of blood, her face beneficently tilted upwards toward the sky, The Misfit delivers what can only be characterized as a "killer" punchline: "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 133).

Lawrence Downes suggests it is precisely during the grandmother's moment of grace that she is murdered. For it is then that she is transformed from meddling and difficult to someone who exhibits empathy for a stranger even under the most heinous of circumstances. Thus, he notes, we are witness to the specters of "good and evil" that "are as real as a spreading puddle

of blood". In O'Connor's universe this constitutes, Downes emphasizes, "a happy ending" (Downes, 2007).

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is vintage O'Connor. In this story, we are witness to her signature worldview, her "sense of evil", her "idea of death as a manifestation of grace", and her "stubborn refusal", as Martha Stephens emphasizes, "to see any good, any beauty or dignity or meaning, in ordinary human life on earth" (Stephens, 1973, pp. 4, 6, 9).

Two years before Flannery O'Connor died, with the prospect of her life and literary talent ebbing, she received a letter by Father McCown that praised her short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" featured in *The Best American Short Stories 1962*. Her response was heartbreaking: "Pray that the Lord will send me some more". She added plaintively, "I've been writing for sixteen years and I have the sense of having exhausted my original potentiality and being now in need of the kind of grace that deepens perception, a new shot of life or something" (Gooch, 2009, p. 345).

As readers, we can't help wishing that Flannery O'Connor had been granted a long and healthy life and that we would have been blessed with many more of her magnificent stories.

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