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God's Diversion into the Devil's Territory

On the Workings of Grace in Short Stories from Flannery O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge***

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Abstract: According to Flannery O'Connor, the theme of her prose is 'the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.' Taking his cue from this claim, the author reconstructs in theological terms the relationship between grace and human nature in O'Connor's stories. The sharp contrast between the divine and the human, and the violence of the encounters between these two realms of existence has led some scholars to claim that O'Connor's religious thought owes much more to the Southern Protestant tradition than the Catholic Church's theology. The author attempts first to show what is specific to the Protestant approach to the relationship between human nature and grace, and then to consider whether such an approach can be found in O'Connor's stories. The main conclusion is negative; although one can hardly accuse her of anthropological optimism, in her stories she presents a vision far removed from Lutheran pessimism. Among the typically 'Catholic' features of her worldview have been highlighted: her faith in a finite, material, imperfect reality – especially in the human body, which becomes a place of epiphany.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, nature and grace, literature and theology, Crisis theology

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Boża dywersja na terytorium diabła
O działaniu łaski w opowiadaniach z tomu *Everything that rises must converge* Flannery O'Connor

Streszczenie: Według Flannery O'Connor, tematem jej prozy jest „działanie łaski na terytorium w dużej mierze zajmowanym przez diabła". Biorąc za punkt wyjścia to stwierdzenie, autor rekonstruuje w kategoriach teologicznych wizję relacji między łaską a naturą ludzką w jej opowiadaniach. Ostry kontrast między boskością a człowieczeństwem oraz gwałtowny charakter spotkań między tymi dwiema sferami istnienia prowadziły niektórych uczonych do twierdzenia, że myśl religijna O'Connor zawdzięcza znacznie więcej tradycji protestanckiego Południa niż teologii Kościoła Katolickiego. Autor próbuje najpierw pokazać, co jest specyficzne dla protestanckiego podejścia do relacji między naturą ludzką a łaską, a następnie rozważyć, czy takie podejście można znaleźć w opowiadaniach O'Connor. Główny wniosek jest negatywny; chociaż trudno podejrzewać ją o antropologiczny optymizm, w swoich opowiadaniach przedstawia wizję daleką od luterańskiego pesymizmu. Wśród typowo „katolickich" cech jej światopoglądu za szczególnie warte podkreślenia uznano: wiarę, że skończona, materialna i niedoskonała rzeczywistość – szczególnie ludzkie ciało – może się stać miejscem epifanii.

Słowa kluczowe: Flannery O'Connor, natura i łaska, literatura i teologia, teologia kryzysu

Introduction

In her study of Flannery O'Connor's imagination, Sarah Gordon points to the two main approaches critics have taken to her work (Gordon 2000: 34). One approach is to look for what might be called a theological message in O'Connor's prose; the other is to reclaim an "aesthetic" view of her work. Critics who take the latter approach remind us that, for all its theological significance, her fiction is nonetheless literary, not homiletic. To do it justice, they argue, one should focus primarily on the literary aspect, rather than the ideological content.

A theologian writing about the author of *Wise Blood* is tempted to adopt the former attitude for he finds in her prose a clearly visible theological message. Moreover, O'Connor confirms the validity of such a reading in her essays and letters [1]. These sources provide evidence that Flannery O'Connor not only had accurate theological intuitions but also considerable knowledge in the field. She acquired it from books by the most eminent theologians of her day, primarily French and German. Among the books she read regularly

[1] Numerous statements on this subject by the author herself can be found in her letters (O'Connor 1979: 91–93) and essays (O'Connor 2014: 49, 162).

were the works of authors such as Karl Adam, Karl Barth, Jean Danielou, Romano Guardini, Friedrich von Hügel, John Henry Newman, and Karl Rahner[2]. Even if none of these writers significantly influenced the content of her prose, it is reasonable to assume that she found in their works an interest in the same issues that preoccupied her.

If any work of Flannery O'Connor's is particularly amenable to a theological key, it is certainly her last volume of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The very title of the collection is a quotation from one of her favorite thinkers, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ (O'Connor 1979: 438). A geologist, paleontologist, philosopher, and theologian, the French Jesuit sought to add a spiritual dimension to the materialistic, evolutionary worldview that had emerged from the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century. O'Connor was well acquainted with his thought (Bieber Lake 2005: 234), and she became interested in him most likely because he was looking for an answer to the same problem she had noticed, namely the growing gap between Catholicism and modernity (O'Connor 1979: 388; 449). Catholic thinkers in the first decades of the twentieth century saw more and more clearly that at the root of this rift was an inability to account properly for the relationship between the natural and the supernatural, between nature and grace. Hence their attempts to offer a new account of this relationship. Flannery O'Connor's work can be placed along the same lines, as an attempt to bridge the gap between faith and human experience (O'Connor 2014: 183–184). However, it is a literary rather than a philosophical or theological endeavor, namely, it is not realized through philosophical argumentation or social criticism, but by presenting a particular image of the world in which humanity and God can meet. In this article, I will try to extract from O'Connor's stories a certain model of this encounter, or, in other words, to outline a certain theology of grace that is more or less overtly present in them.

But is a theological reading of Flannery O'Connor's work justified? Are not those right who advocate the latter approach and insist that literature should be read as literature? Such doubts are not unfounded. The author herself emphasizes the difference between "felt-knowledge" and "thought-knowledge," arguing that prose is born of the former. To try to translate it into a set of abstract ideas is to miss its essence altogether (O'Connor 1979: 490–491). If a novelist wants to prove something with his novel, it will certainly not be some idea that can be extracted from the narrative and encapsulated in a dry formula, but something "that cannot possibly be demonstrated any other way than with a whole novel" (O'Connor 2014: 75). This and similar formulations, however, do not seem to negate the possibility of an "ideational" reading of her prose, but merely mark its limited scope. If we must accept, following the author, that "[t]he meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning," then a discussion of this meaning can still "help you to experience that meaning more fully" (O'Connor 2014: 96). This is also the purpose of this text. It is not intended to bring to light some essential message of O'Connor's fiction apart from the narrative itself, but to prepare the reader for returning to her stories with a better knowledge of their theological depth.

[2] The letters contain numerous references of this kind, as the index at the end of the volume of her selected letters attests (O'Connor 1979: 599–617).

1. God as a crisis of man

"I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" (O'Connor 2014: 118). The territory that O'Connor has in mind is not so much the American South as it is, to use the language of classical philosophy, human nature. It is this nature that is "held largely by the devil," from which it follows that grace's encounter with it will be rather tumultuous. The texts contained in the volume analyzed here are rich in examples of such a difficult but benevolent encounter.

The volume begins with the short story "Greenleaf." Its protagonist is Mrs. May, a widow and owner of a dairy farm where she lives with her two grown sons. Mrs. May is a strong, determined woman who seems to control everything around her. However, this sense of power is an illusion, which is revealed when a stray bull appears in her yard. The bull belongs to the Greenleaf family, who work for her and whom she despises. And yet, strangely, she finds herself helpless against them. In an attempt to force Mr. Greenleaf to capture the escaped bull, she ends up provoking a situation in which she herself dies, nailed by its horns to the hood of her car. At best, this would be a story worthy of a mention in a local newspaper chronicle, were it not for the way O'Connor first prepares the reader for, and then describes, the climactic moment itself. As the horn pierces Mrs. May's heart, she experiences a moment of illumination. She stares ahead with her eyes wide open, like "a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (O'Connor 1988: 523). When Mr. Greenleaf finally reaches her, it seems to him that Mrs. May is "whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (O'Connor 1988: 524). What kind of enlightenment, what kind of discovery might she be referring to? The author does not make it clear, but the reader can guess that here, in such a brutal and strange way, God's grace breaks into her hermetically sealed, iron-clad world to restore her sense of reality. Mrs. May discovers her own fragility and dependence, which are inherent features of the human condition.

The plot of the short story "The Enduring Chill" follows a similar pattern. Asbury, a would-be writer, returns from the city to his family home in the American countryside. Unable to cope with literary failure, he tells himself that he is terminally ill and intends to make his own death the final act in the drama of his life. But the intervention of a simple priest and a provincial doctor brings him back to reality. Their common sense dispels the fog of romantic nihilism that Asbury had imbibed during his studies and allows him to face reality: the illness is not fatal, he is not a writer, and his life is not the work he creates, but an ordinary existence in a body that makes him dependent on others. The moment he realizes these facts is for him both death and liberation. It is also a moment of vision. The frightening water stain in the shape of a wild bird on one of the walls of the room where Asbury lies is suddenly transformed into a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who, "emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend" (O'Connor 1988: 572).

The epiphany is also accessed by Ruby Turpin, the heroine of the short story "Revelation." She resembles Mrs. May in many ways; she also owns a farm. Proud of her virtues, she looks down on the poor and unsuccessful people around her. In the story, we meet her as she sits with her husband in the doctor's waiting room. The wait grows longer,

and Mrs. Turpin kills time by looking at other patients in the room. She pigeonholes and judges them, and this is reflected in her conversations with these people. At one point, an antipathetic college student (with the telling name of Mary Grace)[3] cannot stand this display of thinly disguised hubris and contempt. She throws a book at her and whispers: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (O'Connor 1988: 646). These words hurt Mrs. Turpin far more deeply than the book thrown at her. Even when she returns home, she cannot shake them: she feels that they are not just an insult, but the expression of a deep insight. On her return home, in a sincere, desperate prayer, she asks God: "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (O'Connor 1988: 652). Finally, she goes to the pigsty and angrily begins to pour water on the sow and her piglets, as if to erase from her memory an image that is, after all, an image of herself. Then she has her first epiphany; looking at the piglets cuddling with their mother, Ruby begins to see something human and authentic in them, something pulsing with latent life. She stares at them in the light of the setting sun, "as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (O'Connor 1988: 653). A second revelation follows in the form of a mystical vision: Mrs. Turpin sees a multicolored crowd ascending to heaven on the last ray of the sun. At the head of the crowd are the poor, both white and black, and at the end are she and other "decent people" whose virtues have been "burned away"[4].

"Parker's Back," on the other hand, is a grotesque version of St Augustine's life, as described in his *Confessions*[5]. Parker, a small time salesman and lifelong vagabond, is haunted by an unidentified restlessness. This has been going on since he was fourteen years old and saw "a man tattooed from head to foot" at a fair and for the first time in his life experienced a kind of illumination (O'Connor 1988: 657). To alleviate his anxiety, Parker also begins to get tattoos on his body. When we meet him, the only part of his body that remains blank is his back, which is out of sight. In a decisive moment, responding to a mysterious inner demand that seems to come from without, he tattoos on his back the stern face of Christ "with all-demanding eyes" (O'Connor 1988: 667). As a result, he loses everything: his wife, who is a radical Protestant with iconoclastic beliefs, considers this religious tattoo blasphemous, beats her husband with a broom, and throws him out of the house. Before she does so, however, she forces him to say his biblical name, which is evidence that he comes from a religious family (O'Connor 1988: 673). Parker has always been so ashamed of it that he shortened it to just the initials. In the final scene, we see "Obadiah Elihue – leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (O'Connor 1988: 674). Although at first glance the ending is cruel and incomprehensible to the protagonist, it is quite easy to read its deeper meaning: the new-old name and the baby's cry indicate not despair but a new birth.

In the four stories discussed above, the moment of crisis is also a moment of grace. It turns the characters" lives upside down but, as one might suspect, ultimately leads to their positive transformation: Mrs. May frees herself in the last moments of her life from the compulsion to control everything, Asbury loses his illusions and begins to live a humble but true life, the scales of pride fall from Ruby Turpin's eyes, and the humiliated Parker is reborn as a child of God. Grace, though it must wreak havoc on their hypocrisy, is finally

[3] "Mary" and "grace" are words with unambiguously theological connotations.

[4] The scene is considered to be a literary reworking of certain themes of Teilhard de Chardin's eschatology (Murphy 2017: 62–63).

[5] On how much Parker has in common with St Augustine (cf. Garavel 2017: 146–165).

recognized as such, as a benevolent act. Flannery O'Connor, however, does not always leave such clear clues. If one assumes that all of her stories speak of the workings of grace, in some of them those workings seem downright cruel. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Shepperd, an educator who believes in the power of rehabilitation, takes in Rufus Johnson, a teenage hooligan with a deformed foot. But his educational efforts are counterproductive. Rufus cannot stand the fact that his unbelieving guardian "thinks he is Jesus Christ" (O'Connor 2019: 507) and decides to teach him a lesson: he devises a cynical plan that leads to the suicidal death of Norton, Shepperd's son (O'Connor 2019: 533). It is only as a result of such a shock that Shepperd begins to understand that, in addition to psychology, positive thinking, and belief in progress, there are realities such as salvation and damnation, holiness and profanity, and radical evil. Can we also add radical goodness? O'Connor leaves this question unanswered. Nor does she address the consequences of the crisis experienced by Julian, a young intellectual and the protagonist of "Everything That Rises Must Converge." As he rides the bus, his head is full of dreams of human brotherhood, while at the same time, he is ashamed and contemptuous of his mother, who rides with him. He only discovers the value of her love – and of human relationships in general – when his mother drops dead in the street from the humiliation she has suffered. This experience will take him out of the world of abstract ideas and bring him "into the world of guilt and sorrow." But will the guilt be redeemed and the sorrow lead to true liberation? We do not know, although the very moment when a distraught Julian, brutally brought back to earth, cries out for the first time "Mother! […] Darling, sweetheart, wait!" can be taken as a foreshadowing of a good ending (O'Connor 2019: 464).

The endings of the other texts in this volume are even more ambiguous. The grandfather who kills his beloved granddaughter in "A View of the Woods" sees no light at the moment of his death, but only a bulldozer, a symbol of progress, which is now just a "huge yellow monster," deaf to his cries of despair (O'Connor 2019: 394). In the short story "The Comforts of Home," it is unclear what the son experiences when he accidentally shoots his mother. Similarly, we do not know if the seemingly senseless death of the old man in "Judgment Day" is a longed-for release from the nightmare of the big city. While the reader can interpret these moments of crisis as paradoxical revelations of grace, such an interpretation would be very difficult for the characters themselves (Williams 2005: 100). For these are devastating, irreversible events that often lead to their physical death.

2. Flannery O'Connor and the Protestant "crisis theology'

The intervention of God's grace as an event that breaks and disorients a person, sometimes leading to death, is a recurring motif in Flannery O'Connor's plots. She subjects her characters to extreme experiences that only the reader – with his or her "top-down" perspective – can interpret as moments of grace (Bosco 2017: 114). As Rowan Williams notes, while the characters in her stories become the object of God's intervention, they do

not necessarily experience meaning and fullness. Rather, grace is a certain excess that may or may not point to meaning (Williams 2005: 117).

The vehemence of God's interventions in O'Connor's prose has repeatedly led scholars to argue that, despite her professed Catholicism, her worldview has little in common with Catholicism. Indeed, the Catholic view emphasizes the harmony of human nature and divine grace, in accordance with St. Thomas's famous principle that "grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it"[6]. In O'Connor's prose, however, grace seems to act as an alien element, disrupting the normal course of events. Based on this observation, Harold Bloom, for example, believes that, while an orthodox Catholicism emanates from her essays and letters, the author unconsciously pours a dark, Gnostic vision of the world into her short stories (Bloom 2009: 4–5). However, this is an isolated voice: most authors attribute her anthropological pessimism to the influence of Protestantism. After all, we are talking about a "Catholic novelist in the Protestant South"[7], which was populated by religious fanatics and self-proclaimed prophets. In one of her letters, she mentions a Catholic priest who, after reviewing her stories, stated that "her beliefs may be Catholic, but her sensibility remains Lutheran" (O'Connor 1979: 108)[8]. Is there a contradiction between the author's beliefs and the artistic vision revealed in her stories? Does she tell us more about herself in her prose than she would like to? Before attempting to answer this question, it is worth pausing to consider what this "Lutheran" or "Protestant" sensibility that pervades her prose is supposed to be[9].

In a letter dated November 1958, Flannery O'Connor writes enthusiastically about the so-called "crisis theologians", who for her are "the greatest of the Protestant theologians writing today". She mentions Karl Barth and Paul Tillich and laments that the Catholic side lacks authors who are equally creative and responsive to modernity (O'Connor 1979: 305–306). The ideas of the former theologian, in particular, are well suited to show what a "Lutheran sensibility" in theology is. Although he was a Reformed evangelical, the pathos inherent in the thought of Martin Luther can easily be discerned in his thought, especially in his emphasis on the contrast between a holy God and a sinful humanity (Balthasar 1992: 22).

Barth – like Luther and other reformers four centuries earlier – develops his theology with a sense of the profound crisis in which the Christian world finds itself. As a result of the changes in thinking that took place in the nineteenth century, the "default option" for modern man became the image of a world devoid of positive traces of God (Guja 2012: 99). While Catholic authors overwhelmingly took a polemical stance against this image, Barth tried to interpret it theologically. He adopted the worldview present in the writings of Nietzsche or Feuerbach, but reinterpreted it in the light of the main tenets of Reformation theology. For him, then, the sense of the godlessness of the world is not so much the fruit of a fatal intellectual error as an experience that reflects the actual relationship between God and creation. The holy God and the sinful world have nothing in common, and human

[6] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 9 q. 1 a. 8.

[7] Cf. the title of one of her essays included in *Mystery and Manners*.

[8] O'Connor adds, of course, that she absolutely disagrees with such an opinion.

[9] "Lutheran" here refers to a particular kind of thought and expression that characterized Martin Luther and other leaders of the Reformation, rather than to the Lutheran church as such. As is well known, most of the Southern Protestant congregations that O'Connor knew from personal experience were Calvinist, not Lutheran.

beings are part of the latter. Barth's theology is called "crisis theology" not (or not primarily) because he tries to offer a solution to the spiritual crisis of his time, but because he sees the relationship between God and man in terms of crisis. It is God who is "the absolute crisis of the world of humans, time and things" (quoted by Guja 2009: 58), the great "No" to all human attempts at self-affirmation.

> Or may not some perhaps, even thou they be few, be able to avoid this situation? May not the wrath of God be just one possibility, peculiar to a certain kind of men and women and characteristic of certain periods of history? Are there in the army of light no heroes who have broken through and escaped from the darkness? [...] Does not an island of the blest rise from the ocean of the unfortunate: an island of men able to hear the long-promised Gospel of God? [...] Has none held himself upright at the bar of the divine judgement of the world as it is, and, after his removal from the darkness, sat down by the side of God as His assessor in judgement? Or must we take it that the circle is closed and that no one has eluded the inevitability of cause and effect, of downfall and apostasy, which the mark of men as men and of the world as the world? Those who do not know the unknown God have neither occasion nor possibility of lifting themselves up. So it is also with those who know Him; for they too are men; they too belong to the world of time. There is no human righteousness by which men can escape the wrath of God! (Barth 1933: 55–56).

God hides behind the mask of finitude, uncertainty, and the tragic nature of human destiny – and thus behind all that challenges man's claim to make sense of the world and his own life independently (Guja 2009: 59). But it is precisely this experience of the divine "no" that can become a salutary jolt for man, a turning point that leads him to God. Precisely where the deepest scepticism reigns, where nothing "higher" can be found, where man seems incapable of committing himself to anything, a real "breakthrough" can occur, which is the thought of God, of God alone (Barth 1933: 66).

O'Connor's theological intuitions seem surprisingly similar to the vision of Karl Barth. This can already be seen at the level of her diagnosis of modernity as an age without traces of God; for example, in a letter to Elizabeth Hester dated August 28, 1955, she wrote: "if you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe" (O'Connor 1979: 97). Moreover, her writing strategy is similar to that of the Swiss theologian: starting from a contemporary, "disenchanted" and tragic image of the world, she tries to present it in such a way that God appears in it, at least in his "negative." She focuses on the most grotesque and hopeless, cruel and empty situations, guided by a deep conviction that God exists and that He will ultimately reveal Himself there as well (Williams 2005: 117). Finally, for her, as for Barth, the encounter between God and man must first be a confrontation before it becomes a peaceful union. If man is to be fully healed of his rebellion against God, he must first experience God's violence, he must be broken and his dreams of power crushed to dust. "All of human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and change is painful," the author writes in one of her letters (O'Connor 1979: 307). In the face of such resistance, violence remains the only way God can get through to her stubborn characters (O'Connor 2014: 112). The association of grace with violence is a distinctive and, for many critics, troubling feature of her plot constructions (Bieber Lake 2005: 14–15). However, O'Connor deliberately combines these two realities. She argued that the protagonists of her stories were people who had lost a sense of reality and given way

to a false belief in their self-sufficiency to such an extent that violence was the only way to bring them back to reality (O'Connor 2014: 118). For this reason, she preferred to speak of "grace" rather than "mercy" or "divine love"; as one of her letters reads, "love suggests tenderness,' whereas "grace can be violent or would have to be" to compete with the evil present in the world (O'Connor 1979: 373).

3. A Catholic theology of grace between pessimism and naivety

Are the parallels between the theology *implicit* in Flannery O'Connor's stories and the "crisis theology" of which Karl Barth was a leading exponent evidence that the Catholic novelist felt the world in a Protestant way? A nuanced but nonetheless negative answer to this question was given by Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, a contemporary American Catholic theologian (Bauerschmidt 2004: 163–183). His arguments will be outlined below.

Bauerschmidt begins by pointing out something that is easily overlooked by a theologian who analyzes the world depicted in prose as if it were the real world, namely, that Flannery O'Connor does not strive to represent objective reality as faithfully as possible in her stories. She deliberately uses the literary device of grotesque exaggeration to break through the indifference with which modern man reacts to spiritual matters (Bauerschmidt 2004: 183, cf. O'Connor 2014: 185). The strong contrast between human nature and grace is thus a certain unconventional mode of communication, but the very content of this communication falls within the Catholic convention of thinking about the relationship between man and God.

After sensitizing the reader to this aspect of O'Connor's prose, Bauerschmidt takes a closer look at what used to be considered the fundamental difference between Catholic and Protestant accounts of the relationship between nature and grace. The differences between these accounts stem from a different interpretation of the Fall – the original sin. Catholics, following St. Thomas Aquinas, argue that sin wounded but did not destroy human nature. Man has lost God's gifts and his nature has been weakened, but he remains the image of God. Therefore, St. Thomas may have believed that even such a fallen nature need not be destroyed by grace; it is enough that it be healed and perfected by it. Classical Protestant thought, on the other hand, following Martin Luther, maintains that after sin man has ceased to be himself; from the image of God he has become the image of the devil, his nature is a "corpse of nature," and all the spontaneous movements of his soul draw him away from God or even turn him against Him (Luther 1976: 70; Ebeling 1989: 105–108). In this situation, God can only save man by acting against him.

The Baltimore theologian does not deny this distinction, but shows that the anthropological optimism attributed to St. Thomas must be nuanced. The fact that grace "does not destroy nature" should not lead one to conclude, as some theologians do, that it is a painless perfection of nature. It is true that in the Catholic vision the effect of sin is a weakening, not a complete destruction, of nature. But this weakening is serious – it is not like a paper cut, but a deep, festering wound (Bauerschmidt 2004: 174). The remedies

must therefore be radical. The axiom of St. Thomas quoted above does not suggest that the transformation of nature by grace is an easy and pleasant process. It simply says that a person does not have to cease to be a person (by becoming an animal, an angel, or something else) in order to receive grace (Bauerschmidt 2004: 175). Aquinas, however, sees this perfection of humanity by grace in the same way as an artist "perfects" resistant matter in order to create a work of art; such perfection would be impossible without painful blows and cuts. The fact that grace refines nature does not exclude that grace does so by shaking nature to its core (Bauerschmidt 2004: 176). To summarize: Bauerschmidt maintains that the attribution of a "Lutheran sensibility" to O'Connor stems as much from a failure to appreciate the grotesque aspect of her prose as from a superficial knowledge of Catholic theology of grace. For the latter is something other than a religious version of humanistic optimism.

Bauerschmidt's argument seems generally convincing: one need not ascribe the violent contrast between nature and grace, often present in O'Connor's short stories, to a kind of subconscious Protestantism. A vision of the encounter between God and man as an existential crisis also fits well with a Catholic worldview. Nevertheless, one must be careful not to accept too readily the author's self-description as a "Thomist" (O'Connor 1979: 4391). Her penchant for paradox and violent transformation suggests that her decidedly Catholic sensibility meets the undoubted influences of the Protestant environment in which she lived and wrote (Wood 2004: 193).

4. Corporeal epiphanies

As we have seen, the dramatic vision of the encounter between nature and grace in O'Connor's stories is not as far removed from classical Catholic theology as one might think. However, it is worth clarifying what distinguishes the American writer's worldview from a consistent anthropological pessimism. First, when she repeats, echoing Protestants, that nature "resists grace violently" (O'Connor 1979: 307), this resistance is not the last word for her. In her stories, the man who is finally broken and can no longer resist does not cease to be himself; he loses himself, but only to regain himself[10]. The encounter with grace is not destructive for him in the proper sense of the word; it does not leave his mind in tatters, like the revelations of the dark gods in H. P. Lovecraft's stories (Płaza 2013: 761). It shatters the walls of illusion with which man has tightly sealed himself off from reality; reality itself, however, appears not more terrible, but more beautiful and better than the layered lies. Even when the crisis experienced by the characters is tremendous and its immediate consequences are left unspoken (for example, when Shepperd enters the attic and sees his son's dead body), the reader still has the feeling of stepping out of a stuffy room into the open air. It is true that we do not know what happened to Julian's life after his mother's death. But when he cries "Mamma, Mamma!" he is a truer, better, more complete person than the smug intellectual on the bus.

Second, although in most of the stories in *Everything that Rises Must Converge* only the reader sees that the crises her characters experience are experiences of grace, the characters

[10] Cf. Lk 9:24.

themselves are given some glimpse of it. This, then, is a feature that clearly distinguishes O'Connor's prose from the legacy of Martin Luther. The latter was consistently opposed to all mysticism, to all supernatural glimpses experienced here on earth. For him, man's relationship to God was one of naked obedience: all one can do is bow the neck to His mighty hand and follow the Word in the dark. Any attempt to s e e and u n d e r s t a n d means falling away from faith (Balthasar 1982: 47–48; Luther 2024). In contrast, O'Connor sometimes allows her characters to see and understand. When Mrs. May's body is pierced by a bull's horn, she looks ahead like "a person whose sight has been suddenly restored," and before her "the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky" (O'Connor 1988: 523). Such is the transformation experienced by Asbury in the short story "The Enduring Chill": the narrator describes how he "blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror" (O'Connor 1988: 572).

The moments of revelation in "Everything that Rises…" also have another remarkable quality. They are paradoxical; while they open the protagonists to heaven, they bring them down to earth. They do not push them into the immeasurable abyss of God, in which everything material and finite would lose its meaning. On the contrary, the people who experience the epiphany are called back from the heights of a solitary human subjectivity to the things of this world (Bosco 2017: 117). Grace allows them to find a legitimate middle ground, a place of rootedness between the terrifying emptiness of nothingness and the equally overwhelming pure infinity. This middle ground – the place of God's manifestation – is the body. It is noteworthy that the sacramental approach to the body is, according to the American writer, a defining feature of Catholic theology. Typical of the Protestant sensibility, on the other hand, is the attempt to reach the realm of the spirit without the mediation of matter (O'Connor 1979: 304)[11]. Flannery O'Connor's prose is infused with a fundamentally Catholic conviction that the imperfect, grotesque human body – or, more broadly, material reality – is the very site of the revelation of grace. As she admitted, the incarnation of the Son of God is the Archimedean point of her stories. Although the incarnation is outside the plot rather than within it, the whole plot depends on it and is set in motion by it (Fitzgerald 1988: 92, 125, 227). And since God has once bound himself to the corporeal world of human beings by becoming human himself, the body – always imperfect, grotesque, more or less formless – should be treated as a potential site of epiphany.

O'Connor leaves clues in her stories that allow us to see the manifestation of grace in just this way. Mrs. May's epiphany occurred when her body was pierced by a charging bull, and the bull had "buried his head in her lap like a wild, tormented lover" (O'Connor 1988: 523). Ruby Turpin, on the other hand, was infused with a new consciousness as she looked at the sow and piglets cuddling with her, whom she had moments before mercilessly doused with icy water from a hose (O'Connor 1988: 653–654). Refusing to accept his wife's austere Puritan spirituality, Parker finally accepts Christ through the flesh – tattooing His

[11] This remark may be somewhat surprising in the context of Protestantism, which accepts the mystery of the Incarnation. It is worth noting, however, that the Incarnation has sometimes been understood with varying degrees of unity. Karl Barth, for example, did not understand it as a true synthesis of God and corporeal humanity, but rather as a paradox in which the two levels converge but do not really meet – like the tangent of a circle that touches it but does not touch it at the same time (cf. Guja 2009: 67).

face "with all-demanding eyes" on his back (O'Connor 1988: 667). His revelation, which is a new birth, is completed by Sarah Ruth's physical act of rage – the merciless beating of his back with a broom (O'Connor 1988: 674). Even the paradoxical revelation of the supernatural order that Shepperd sought to flatten with his pedagogical knowledge and belief in progress – a revelation of radical evil that allows us to think its opposite – has its corporeal manifestation. Rufus's depravity finds its almost sacramental expression in his deformed foot, which he proudly displays.

The protagonists of O'Connor's stories are human beings who want to shape their surroundings according to their own intellect and will. The body, however, does not submit to this shaping and thus brings them back to reality. The body does not fit into the head, and by resisting the human will to self-determination, it becomes a potential vehicle of grace. The American writer's emphasis on the positive role of the body can be understood as a jab at the modern religion of the subject, emancipated from all conditioning and free to define itself[12]. As Christina Bieber Lake notes, in Flannery O'Connor's prose, the overcoming of this false religion of the autonomous subject is accomplished not only through the individual body, but also through the corporeal community. The subject who wishes to give birth to itself can ultimately only be born into true life by recognizing its dependence on the material world and on other people (Bieber Lake 2005: 35)[13].

Conclusion

Harold Bloom claims that Flannery O'Connor would have been an even better writer if she had been able to restrain her spiritual "tendentiousness" (Bloom 2000: 51; Bloom 2009: 8)[14]. The focus of this text is on what constitutes this alleged "tendentiousness," that is, the implicit theology it contains. Leaving aside the theological level of meaning, it seems impossible to do justice to this prose. O'Connor had a sense of mission: through her novels and short stories, she wanted to show that modern man is still only human. This, in turn, means that he cannot do without God in his life, even if he already experiences Him only in the form of emptiness and absence. At the same time, her plots are composed in such a way that faith in God appears as a return to reality rather than an escape from it. Such a return to reality must be painful; after all, reality differs from dreams in that it resists. The reader is given a minimal dose of what her characters ingest in much higher concentrations: a painful awakening, a snatching from the world of illusion, and a forced return to the real world. The modern people who populate the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* share the fate of Icarus: the desire to break free from the earth and soar toward the heavens on their own terms ends in their downfall. But their fate is also that of the prodigal son; the

[12] In the novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, resistance to intellectual reduction appears as the basis of the dignity of "unmodern" people. The young Tarwater says to Rayber, who is trying to fathom the extent of his illiteracy: "I'm free […]. I'm outside your head. I ain't in it. I ain't in it and I ain't about to be" (O'Connor 1997: 275).

[13] It is worth quoting here the opinion of an American researcher: "The triumphant birth of the self is replaced by a much lowlier birth at the hands of others, a birth usually triggered by a humiliating encounter with the physical world" (Bieber Lake 2005: 35).

[14] A discussion of Bloom's allegation and a polemic against it can be found, for example, in Bieber Lake 2005: 40.

fall from the heights is also the return home. In this pattern, which is repeated in successive stories, the author by no means reveals a pessimistic, Protestant or Gnostic vision of grace. Rather, she translates into narrative the fundamental paradox present in the teaching of Jesus: "whoever wants to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life […] will keep it"[15]. This is Catholic realism, which consists in keeping one's feet firmly on the ground and one's eyes fixed on heaven, with a hope that is sometimes so little different from despair.

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[15] Lk 9:24.

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