Flannery o’connor’s intellectuals: exposing her world’s narrow "field of vision”

Flannery O’Connor’s Intellectuals: Exposing Her World’s Narrow “ Field of Vision” by, Robin K. BrubakerJune 24, 2004Some critics would argue that a fiction writer’s Christianity, or understanding of ultimate reality in terms of the Fall of humankind and redemption through Jesus Christ, automatically disconnects that writer from “ reality” as the modern world defines and experiences it, thereby confining that writer’s work within a closed system of possibilities and purpose. Yet Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor argues directly against this notion in her prose, creatively demonstrating the scope and wholeness of her vision. Perhaps the modern “ horror” she found to be most contrary to her faith and vision was her world’s belief in the self-sufficiency of the human individual apart from God. John F. Desmond believes the motivation behind her work was “ rooted in the fact that the age speciously believed in its own capacity for achieving wholeness exclusive of the divine, a situation she found truly grotesque” (53). While this general human tendency to rely on oneself rather than God as the source of truth and fulfillment in life is hardly a modern development, O’Connor perceptively identifies and counters the particular “ shapes and colors” in which this age-old fallacy appears in her modern world. Through many of her educated (or “ philosophically sophisticated”) characters, O’Connor effectively exposes her world’s limited “ field of vision” and tries to open its eyes to an all-encompassing reality—the boundless mystery and possibilities of God’s grace. THEORY OF THE CHRISTIAN WRITERO’Connor sought, in her personal belief system and in her fiction, a comprehensive world view that did not separate the reality of human experience and knowledge from abstract or spiritual truth. In her essay, “ The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” she recognizes that this Manichean separation of “ spirit and matter” is “ pretty much the

modern spirit” (68). She complains about critics who approach her stories only as statements of abstract truth and forget that “ the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction” (73). Furthermore, she believed that the Church as well had focused too long on the abstract at the expense of the imagination: Christian writers, therefore, “ will try to enshrine the mystery without the fact, and there will follow a further set of separations which are inimical to art. Judgment will be separated from vision; nature from grace; and reason from the imagination” (“ The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South” 864). Consequently, O’Connor saw a unique and important vision for her fiction: she called it “ an incarnational art” (“ The Nature and Aim of Fiction” 68)–a fitting description for her work which certainly incarnates spiritual truths firmly in the “ flesh” of a visible, tangible, and often grotesque reality. O’Connor uses many of her characters to show how the modern mind is guilty of the “ separations” she mentions, especially the separation of “ reason from the imagination,” or what I also call the separation of the head from the heart. Believing strongly in the need to convince her readers “ through the senses” (“ The Nature and Aim of Fiction” 67), O’Connor reveals the inconsistencies and ineffectiveness of such worldly philosophies often through completely “ natural” means. She brings these proud, intellectual characters to a confrontation with real, undeniable evidence of either unconquerable evil or unfathomable love to expose their own true blindness and helplessness. Critic Carter W. Martin divides O’Connor’s atheists into several groups, one of which includes those who “ reject Christianity on the basis of existentialist philosophical positions that lead them to belief only in nothingness” (55). He includes Joy-Hulga from “ Good Country People” and Hazel Motes from Wise Blood in this group, and I

would also add Julian from “ Everything that Rises Must Converge,” Asbury from “ The Enduring Chill, and Thomas from “ The Comforts of Home.” There is a certain danger in stereotyping O’Connor’s characters; O’Connor herself, I believe, would have argued against removing characters outside their unique experiences within a story and placing them under an abstract label. Neither all intellectuals nor all worldly philosophies are alike. These characters (mentioned above) are true to life; O’Connor “ incarnates” various deviations from God’s truth in the complex realities of human experience. She does so, however, to identify their shared philosophical errors and practical ineffectiveness and to reveal the limitless powers of her own larger vision of reality. JOY-HULGAJoy-Hulga is perhaps one of O’Connor’s most famous intellectuals, and this moment when someone with such a proud and tough exterior is brought to a condition of complete vulnerability and helplessness is probably one of her most humorous. With her Ph. D. in philosophy, Joy-Hulga seems confident and comfortable in her nihilistic beliefs: “‘ some of use have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation'” (280), she tells Manley Pointer. O’Connor cleverly uses Joy-Hulga’s own mind, however, to give the reader a more realistic view of her. Her education appears to have done her no practical good: she is lazy, unpleasant, and has an exaggerated view of her own intellectual significance. She sees philosophical meaning in the mundane or inconsequential: she considers the name “ Hulga,” for example, as “ the name of her highest creative act” (267). She also reads philosophical significance into her first conversation with the Bible salesman and pretends that their arranged meeting has “ profound implications in it” (275). She imagines herself bringing him out of his innocence into some “ deeper

understanding of life” (276). Ironically, it is he who gives Joy-Hulga this opportunity in the end. This moment comes as Joy-Hulga gradually makes herself more and more vulnerable to Pointer. Of course, the humor lies in the fact that Joy-Hulga, who prides herself in her knowledge and intellectual abilities, is made a complete fool of by a calculating crook she thinks is the face of “ real innocence” (281) and has “ an instinct that came from beyond wisdom” (281). Joy-Hulga, of course, is not whole; her physical imperfection is symbolic of a spiritual handicap. She has remedied her physical handicap with the artificial leg–as artificial and clumsy as the intellectual “ leg” she uses to compensate for her crippled soul. Her own intellectual “ self-sufficiency” has become a fake, “ wooden” shell of protection against exposure of her child-like heart and weak soul: “ She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away” (281). Because Joy-Hulga’s mind is not as strong as she thinks it is, and because her soul still has a longing for love that her worldly philosophy has not satisfied, Pointer is able to trick her into feeling that exposing her leg “ was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (281). At this point, however, she does not know how prophetic, in the spiritual sense, her thoughts will turn out to be. Just as she is left in a completely helpless situation when Manley Pointer steals her wooden leg, she also becomes more vulnerable (or open) to receive grace when evil strips away her “ leg” of pride and intellect to leave a bare and helpless soul. In this moment when sheer evil confronts the soul, all self-dependence and intellectual strength are found lacking or useless: “ Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it as not very good at”

(282). O’Connor is pointing out the weakness and vulnerability of human powers, whether physical or mental, in the face of the difficulties and evils of real life. Having brought her character to this condition, O’Connor typically leaves her with only two options—either accept or reject the available grace. HAZELIt is this same dilemma that Hazel Motes in Wise Blood attempts to escape. Though his education is not mentioned in the novel, Hazel is clearly seeking a “ philosophical” path as his route of escape; he wants to believe that he does not have “ the urge for Jesus in his voice” (27), as Hawks correctly realizes about him. With every effort to prove this is true, however, he runs into contradictions or circumstances he cannot control. In his attempt to run away from this truth (and to deny that there is any truth at all), he only shows that he actually is still seeking some kind of truth. This is the absurdity and self-contradiction of nihilism that O’Connor tries to demonstrate; she believes that people who seek to “ be converted to nothing instead of to evil” (12) are only deceiving themselves. The novel thus traces Hazel’s attempted journey of escape from this truth and his encounters with numerous obstacles that eventually block his every path and leave him, like Hulga, to face his own true helplessness. Hazel tries to proclaim (with his words and actions) that there is no such thing as sin. He knows that to acknowledge the forces of good and evil is to thus acknowledge God and would mean that he must make a conscious choice between the two. While he tries to deny sin, however, he eventually realizes this is useless if sin does not exist in the first place: “ I don’t have to run from anything because I don’t believe in anything” (43). But this realization does not cure his guilt. He eventually must resort to killing Onnie Jay Holy’s false prophet, Solace Layfield–Hazel’s “ conscience” in that he is a reflection of Hazel’s own

hypocritical life. He is as incapable of denying sin as he is in his desire for Jesus or salvation. He cannot help his interest in Hawks, for example, and he finds himself preaching the need for a “ new jesus”: “‘ What you need is something to take the place of Jesus'” (80). Evidently, “ nothing” is not good enough. His rejection of the mummy Enoch offers as a “ new jesus” is another moment of truth for Hazel. As hard as he tries to run away from him, Christ is still a dominant force in his life and actions. His Church Without Christ is also a comic irony. If Jesus is only a man and so insignificant, why specify his absence from the church? By denying him, Hazel is actually affirming his importance. It also is ironic in this sense: it demonstrates that while he is denyingChrist he is simultaneously affirming a new truth, a new religion. This is, of course, contrary to what he says he wants to do–believe in nothing. Yet Hazel is determined to convince everyone he is not a preacher of Christ, but he can’t escape being a preacher of something (even if that something is “ nothing”). He is still trying to achieve some kind of salvation. Again, O’Connor seeks to target the logical inconsistency of nihilism. Since he had earlier decided to ignore the contradictions of his new truth—that “ he would forget it, that it was not important” (69)–he seems to grow more and more irrational. O’Connor comments that nihilism and other human philosophies do not render Jesus irrelevant or erase humans’ need for him; they merely attempt to replace him with something else. The destruction of Hazel’s car–his “ faithful” means of escape—is the final obstacle preventing his escape from truth. It is through this gradual process of having his nihilistic beliefs truly reduced to “ nothing” that his nihilism, as O’Connor writes in a letter, begins to turn him “ back to the fact of his Redemption” (923). Suddenly, with all hope gone, “ His face seemed to

reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space” (118). His eyes are opened to a reality larger than himself: “ Hazel’s vision is his first and last. It is, in effect, all-inclusive; having seen it, he has nothing left to see” (Bumbach 342). When he receives this vision of grace, he devotes his life only to paying the debt of his redemption. JULIANJulian may seem to be quite a different kind of person from Hazel, but his basic problem is the same–he believes in his own self-sufficiency. Even though he thinks that he can appreciate his southern heritage better than his naÃ¯ve, unthinking mother, he can only appreciate with his mind, not his heart: “‘ True culture is in the mind, the mind'” (489), he tells her. Julian thinks that he has escaped the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of his upbringing and that “ instead of being blinded by love for her [his mother] as she was for him, he had cut himself “ emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity” (492). This is ironic in light of the ending, in which he discovers he really does love her. Given her lack of “ mind” and Julian’s lack of “ heart,” I think O’Connor’s suggestion is that the truth is somewhere in between the two. Perhaps this is part of the meaning of the title “ Everything that Rises Must Converge” as well-the story is gradually working toward a convergence of the heart and mind. Julian, like Hulga, is educated but still being supported by his mother. He is intelligent, but “ too intelligent to be a success” (491). He also, like his mother, has an escape from the unpleasant realities around him. She lives on in the “ heart” of her past, but he retreats to the “ mental bubble” (491) of his own mind: “ From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without” (491). This is further criticism from O’Connor that

intellectuals frequently divorce themselves from real life to diagnose the world’s problems without ever participating in the active correction of those problems. Julian’s mother realizes that Julian is right: the world of the past is gone, and she is a stranger in the current one. It is a moment when her heart, which is good but lacks the guidance of her mind, converges with the mind of Julian to bring her to a moment of truth. In the same way, the mind of Julian, which works quite well but has been separated from his heart, will have to converge with the heart of his mother. In the panicked moments when he realizes his mother is having a stroke, his love for her seems to come rushing back. This moment of convergence for both of them brings true self-understanding and exposes all ignorance and pride. For his mother it seems to be a reality she cannot face; she wants to escape it in the familiarities of her home and her old nurse, Caroline. For Julian it means “ his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (500). ASBURYAsbury is another proud, unsuccessful intellectual who will enter this same world of guilt and sorrow, though through an entirely different kind of experience. If he can be given a specific philosophical label, he seems to be more of an existentialist than a nihilist. While Julian takes pride in the fact that (he thinks) he has overcome his stifling upbringing, Asbury believes that his has ruined his capacity for art and imagination: “ I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can’t create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn’t you kill that too?'” (554), he wrote in a letter to his mother. It is true that he has this desire, but blaming his upbringing for his own failure to find a way to satisfy this desire is only a way to escape responsibility. He evidently uses Kafka as an inspiration for the letter to his mother (554), and indeed, its contents sound “ Kafkaesque.” He is trying to turn his death into something

tragic and heroic like Kafka’s and is morbidly enjoying the thought of everyone realizing it after he is gone. He envisions this death as a “ victory” and “ his greatest triumph” (560). Asbury, like Hazel, seems to be trying to escape something that at the core of his being he knows is true. He is “ tormented now thinking of his useless life. He felt as if he were a shell that had to be filled with something but he did not know what” (568). His solution for this feeling, however, is himself: he searches for “ some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died—make for himself out of his own intelligence” (568). Of course, this is impossible, and he only grows more frustrated in his failure to create this meaning for himself. In this sense, he is artistically “ crippled.” He realizes that “ there would be no significant experience before he died” (570). Even his last hope that his death would be this “ significant experience” is dashed when he learns that he only has “ undulant fever” from drinking the raw milk and that he would not die. Although he had hoped to leave his mother with “ an enduring chill” (555), ironically, in the end, it is he who is left with the enduring “ ice” (572). Like the undulant fever, it will keep coming back but will not kill him. THOMASThomas, in “ The Comforts of Home,” is more comparable to Julian; he also seems self-satisfied in his “ mental bubble.” He tries to ignore his natural inclinations toward love and pity but cannot quite escape them. For example, he admits to loving his mother “ because it was his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became nothing but pure idiot mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control” (575). He is unable to understand his mother’s love for him and Sarah Ham because love is not something that can be completely understood by the

only faculty he pays any attention to—his mind. O’Connor recognizes that humans have been given both reason and the capacity for love but clearly suggests that people like Thomas are wasting both faculties: “ Thomas had inherited his father’s reason without his ruthlessness and his mother’s love without her tendency to pursue it. His plan for all practical action was to wait and see what developed” (577). Sarah Ham forces an inner conflict between Thomas’s heart and mind. The literal intrusion of Sarah Ham into his home mirrors the intrusion of the moral and intellectual dilemma she brings into Thomas’s formerly well-fortified and comfortable “ mental bubble.” He no longer is protected by “ the comforts of home” or the neat boundaries and orderliness of his rationalistic approach to life. His mother’s “ irrational” love for Sarah brings this contradiction directly in front of him. Sarah Ham, as the undeserving object of his mother’s compassion, is outside of his “ powers of analysis.” He believes that if it were not for Sarah, he could have gone on ignoring or rationalizing away both the world’s evil and his mother’s love: “ The blast [of the gun] was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order” (593). But by following the evil mind of his father, he has not silenced the “ laughter of sluts” but the loving heartbeat of his mother. Through her final act of self-sacrifice–the ultimate “ irrationality” in Thomas’s world view—his mother forever disturbs the “ peace of perfect order” he thought had existed in the world and his own mind. As Jesus does for the Misfit in “ A Good Man is Hard to Find,” she “ upsets the balance” of Thomas’s life, and like Christ’s, her sacrifice brings divine grace to a corrupt, earthly reality. RAYBERTwo other important intellectuals in O’Connor’s work,

Rayber from The Violent Bear It Away and Sheppard from “ The Lame Shall Enter First,” closely resemble each other but are quite different from the other characters examined so far. Martin places them in his group that rejects Christianity “ as a dangerous myth which interferes with the psychological and social adjustment of the individual” (55). They are unlike Hulga, for example, who is satisfied to believe in nothing. They are unlike Asbury, who is desperately searching for some meaning other than “ nothing.” They are unlike Thomas, who wants to remain isolated from the world’s problems. Rayber and Sheppard believe strongly in their own minds and in the “ saving” power of human knowledge for all humanity. Once again, O’Connor counters this philosophy, not through abstract arguments, but “ through the senses,” through dramatic confrontations with the very real but “ irrational” parts of human experience. Rayber’s problem is that he persists anyway in believing that he can, through his own efforts, overcome this “ madness” in himself and in Tarwater: “‘ It’s the way I’ve chosen for myself. It’s the way you take as a result of being born again the natural way —through your own efforts. Your intelligence'” (451). Although Rayber realizes Tarwater’s problem is “ a compulsion” beyond reason (421) and that his own love for Bishop comes from an uncontrollable source, he still believes that he can raise Tarwater “ to be his own saviour” (375) and that he can control himself “ by pure will power” (376). The irony is that, as reasonable as Rayber thinks he is, this thinking is really quite unreasonable. His own failure to reform Tarwater, and the reminders, time after time, that Tarwater’s “ affliction” is not something that responds to reason do not rid Rayber of his notions. Like Hazel, as his own philosophy breaks down before his very eyes, he ultimately must resort to even greater irrationality to

protect his “ rational” beliefs. The result, as O’Connor demonstrates, is a kind of “ numbing” or ineffectiveness of both the mind and emotions: “ he would have to resist feeling anything at all, thinking anything at all. He would have to anesthetize his life” (443). Even after it seems that all his efforts have failed, Rayber devises one last plan to “ save” Tarwater: “ It was to take him back to Powderhead and make him face what he had done . . . His irrational fears and impulses would burst out and his uncle—sympathetic, knowing, uniquely able to understand—would be there to explain them to him” (423). Once there, he continues “ preaching” that Tarwater needs to be “ saved” and that he is the only one who can truly save him. O’Connor’s description of him at this point—that “ he looked like a fanatical country preacher” (438)—suggests that Rayber is not doing away with all religion but instead is creating a new one. Rayber never expects that returning to Powderhead would have the effect on him it does: he is overcome with a “ dreaded sense of loss” (445). Every time the old uncontrollable “ madness” inside him threatens to push to the surface, he forces it back with his mind and continues planning to conquer the “ problem” of Tarwater. The moment he realizes his failure is complete—that Tarwater has not only baptized but drowned Bishop—could have been his moment of grace. It is the equivalent of the moment when Hazel loses his car, but unlike Hazel, Rayber rejects his opportunity. He truly has “ anesthetized” himself to the vision and grace that could have been his: “ He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing” (456). SHEPPARDSheppard’s similarities to Rayber are clear: his faith in the mind, his “ Enlightenment” optimism, and his equally unsuccessful attempts to reform a troubled youth. His final choice, however,

is acceptance instead of rejection. The story becomes a conflict between Sheppard’s desire to have Johnson “‘ make the most of your intelligence'” (600) and Johnson’s insistence that Satan “ has me in his power” (600). Sheppard has great confidence in the human mind and scientific knowledge: “ He wanted him [Johnson] to see the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated” (601). This knowledge, then, is the answer for “ evil” and is bound to improve the human condition: “ Where there was intelligence anything was possible” (601). Norton, though less intelligent than his father, clearly has more of a heart. Facing Norton’s desire to believe that his mother is in heaven (which is his heart’s natural response), Sheppard can only muster a lofty comparison of man reaching the moon to “‘ the first fish crawling out of the water onto land billions and billions of years ago'” (612-13). O’Connor is demonstrating the inability of the mind to meet the needs of the heart, or the inability of man’s knowledge to fill the heart’s natural yearning and need for God. This is also the ultimate reason why Sheppard fails with Johnson. Johnson believes what Sheppard does not—that “‘ Nobody can save me but Jesus'” (624). Sheppard continues believing that humans can save themselves. However, he encounters the same problems as Rayber. Despite his exposure of the world’s knowledge to Johnson, Johnson turns back to his “ old ignorance” (601) and life of crime and poverty. It becomes clear that reforming Johnson is really about protecting the “ security” of Sheppard’s own beliefs: “ Secretly, Johnson was learning what he wanted him to learn—that his benefactor was impervious to insult and that there were no cracks in his armor of kindness and patience where a successful shaft could be driven” (611). Of course, there is a crack in the armor of his “ philosophy,” and his failure with Johnson is the “ shaft” which

is driven in and makes it fall completely apart. This defeat, however, has still not brought Sheppard to the point of admitting his errors and accepting the truth. He still sneers at the Bible and Christianity, saying “‘ It’s for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves'” (627). Of course, his efforts to figure things out for himself have failed. Johnson has to run away and purposely get caught by the police for this to sink into Sheppard’s stubborn mind–to “‘ show up that big tin Jesus,” (630). Johnson is right: though Sheppard may not say he is God, he has replaced God with himself. This crisis for Sheppard makes him slowly realize the untruths he has been telling himself—that he has been acting selflessly. As these lies “ echoed in his mind, each syllable a dull blow” (632), he hears Johnson’s judgment more clearly: “‘ Satan has you in his power'” (631). This revelation brings true self-knowledge: “ his image of himself shrivelled until everything was black before him” (632). Unlike Rayber, who rejects his vision and feels “ nothing,” Sheppard accepts his revelation and experiences a “ rush of agonizing love” (632) for Norton. He now sees him as “ the image of salvation” (632). He determines, like Hazel, to begin to pay the debt of his redemption: he must give the same undeserved love to Norton that has been given to him. FAITH AND REASON FOR THE CHRISTIAN WRITERO’Connor’s criticism of these intellectual characters should not be misconstrued as an attack on human reason. She did not view knowledge as a threat to true Christian faith but sought to warn her readers against the separation of human reason from its true source—the mind of God. Such a separation, she believed, produces a distorted view of reality. She once wrote, “ St. Thomas called art ‘ reason in making.'” This is a very cold and very beautiful definition, and if it is unpopular today, this is because reason

has lost ground among us. O’Connor’s stories show an author attempting to create an inseparable fusion of reason and imagination in her art. Desmond describes her efforts as “ a total interpenetration of the Christian historical sense and the intuitive creative sense in the act of writing fiction” (15). The result is a whole and clear vision of reality that surveys the horrors and limitations of human existence in light of a central figure of history–Jesus Christ. Thus, it is a vision that offers transcendence through divine grace. O’Connor wrote once that “ because I am a Catholic I cannot afford to be Less than an artist” (“ The Church and the Fiction Writer” 809). With such a vision, she was compelled to “ incarnate” it in her fiction. WORKS CITEDBumbach, Jonathan. “ The Acid of God’s Grace: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor” TheGeorgia Review 17 (1963): 334-346. Desmond, John F. Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of History. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987. Martin, Carter W. The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969. O’Connor, Flannery. Collected Works. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.—. “ Everything That Rises Must Converge.” 485-500.—. “ Good Country People.” 263-84.—. “ Letter to Ben Griffith.” 3 March 1954. 923-4.—. “ The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South.” 853-64.—. “ The Church and the Fiction Writer.” 807-12.—. “ The Comforts of Home.” 573-594.—. “ The Enduring Chill.” 547-572.—. “ The Lame Shall Enter First.” 595-632.—. The Violent Bear It Away. 331-479.—. Wise Blood. 3-131.—. Mystery and Manners. “ The Nature and Aim of Fiction.” Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961. 63-86.