The Stained-Glass Man: Word and Icon in Flannery O'Connor’s “Parker's Back.”

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The climactic confrontation between O.E. Parker and his wife Sarah Ruth, at the end of the short story, boils down a conflict between word and image. Parker the tattooed man has just come back home with a final picture on his back, of a Byzantine Jesus, which he hopes will bring his puritanical wife to heel. But the result falls cruelly short of the intent: “God? God don’t look like that!”
What do you know how he looks?” Parker moaned. “You ain’t seen him.”
“He don’t look,” Sarah Ruth said. “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face.”
“Aw listen,” Parker groaned, “this is just a picture of him.”
“Idolatry!” Sarah Ruth screamed. (1990: 529)

The debate between the iconoclasm of a certain form of Protestant fundamentalism and a more Catholic view, in which images are part of the apostolic tradition and can be seen as devotional aids, exceeds the mere religious settling of accounts which surfaces here and there in O’Connor stories. It also acquires the dimension of a self-reflexive probing of the nature of the work of art, especially of literary representation. After all, the reader is presented with the verbal condemnation of a visual item accessible only through written description. This hints at the iconicity of O’Connor’s storytelling art, which has often been described as “dramatic” and “visionary”. It is also reminiscent of the definition she herself gave of her “incarnational art”, deriving its principles from the Christian doctrine of Incarnation (the Word made flesh) and articulating a theory of language and the relations between verbal representation and the created world (both “real” and “fictional”).

Since “Parker’s Back” is, concurrently with “Judgement Day”, O’Connor’s last story, one cannot help viewing it as an ideological and aesthetic testament, revolving around a negotiation between Word and Icon. The icon here is more than a mere image. The first meaning of the term is that of a religious painting, of the kind found in Orthodox churches, for example, and endowed with some of the sacred quality of what it represents. It is then hardly surprising that the model for the tattoo should be the
“haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” (522), identified by some commentators as that of the Pantocrator Christ at Santa Sophia, in Constantinople. The notion of “verbal icon”, coined in 1954 by the critic W. K. Wimsatt, alludes to the fashion in which the New Critics, whom O'Connor was intellectually very close to, stressed the autonomy of the poem, as an object of serious, spiritual contemplation (Gray 142). From the religious icon represented in the text, we therefore move to the text as icon, in a self-reflexive mise-en-abîme of the strong visual dimension of the whole of O'Connor’s œuvre, insofar as it concentrates meaning in an “anagogical” way.

Parker's tattoo symbolically stands at the intersection of all these levels of interpretation, since it is at the same time an image and a (needlework) piece of writing; it also represents the Incarnation of the sacred on the body and skin. Its clarity and rather celebratory nature might hint at a hypothetical new development in the writer's art, “the impossible Flannery” we will never be able to read.

We might take as a guide through the complexity of the story and its significance, its deceptively simple title. “Parker's Back” denotatively alludes to the main focus of attention, the protagonist's anatomical back, where the final, controversial tattoo will be imprinted. This is overdetermined by Parker's sense of someone always being behind him, at his back: “Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion” (516). Yet another configuration obtains if we shift the grammatical interpretation of the “'s” from a possessive case to a verb form. The meaning would then be “Parker IS Back”, “Parker has returned”; and truly, there are two such circular trajectories in the text. Parker first went out to sea, and came back to the South of his childhood; then, within the chronological scope of our story, he leaves home after his tractor accident to get his new tattoo, and comes back home to his wife in the last pages. A variation on this adverbial meaning of “back” is provided by the text on page 522, when the Christ on the tattoo artist’s catalogue calls to him to “Go back”: back to the right page, but also back home, or even back to the fold of the Redeemed? This is the most important “back” in Parker's life, and may encapsulate a form of reading contract. Our own attempt to respect its terms will take the form of an analysis of Parker’s Odyssey (his coming backs), then an examination of the skin of Parker's back as textual palimpsest, and finally a consideration of the entanglements of Word and Icon in the story.

Parker’s Odyssey

Two characteristics seem to single Parker out from most of the other protagonists in Flannery O'Connor’s fiction: he is an active agent in a full-fledged quest, and he is, rather than meets, an Incarnational symbol.

Even though the plots of the stories and novels have sometimes been interpreted in terms of quest (Gordon 93-96), many of the characters appear to be rather passive and have their revelations or encounters with Fate “coming to them”. Asbury in “The Enduring Chill”, Julian in “Everything That Rises Must Converge”, General Sash in “A Late Encounter With the Enemy”, or Hulga / Joy in “Good Country People” might have unconscious desires for the shattering falls they experience, yet they seem to be wishing and waiting more than actively pursuing some sort of cathartic experience. Some characters actually run away from their felt destiny, like Mr. Shiftlet at the end of “The Life You Save May Be your Own”, or Hazel Motes in Wise Blood. The latter seems to be O. E.
Parker’s closest prototype: his excursus to the Army and the war parallels Parker’s stint with the Navy and his self-blinding bears the same stamp of corporeal stigmata. Yet if Parker revisits Motes’s trajectory, he does so through a more positive desire for fulfillment, and converts his predecessor’s Oedipal blindness into a contact with light.

Other characters, who appears to be engaged in more active pursuits, are actually misdirected, and find what they were not looking for. The Grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” finds death while searching for memories of her youth; Harry / Bevel confuses a literal for a symbolic quest of the Kingdom of God in “The River”. Yet the latter might also be a close prototype of Parker, in the sense that both their quests for a “painted” haven have led them to the real thing.

While most characters, therefore, could be compared either to the biblical Jonah fleeing from his calling, or to Job, complaining about his sad, crippled life, Parker would be closer to Ulysses, and his travels to an Odyssey. Both have circumnavigated the known world and come back home, Parker retaining from each stopover one more tattoo, like a map of his peregrinations written on the skin. The “foreign parts” mentioned on page 512 are both the countries he visited and the new additions to his body. The prime mobile of his wanderlust is a deep-rooted dissatisfaction, which finds its medication in the brief solace of each new tattoo. As in the case of Ulysses, his wanderings are a curse as well as a quest.

In this somewhat playful mythical configuration, Sarah Ruth, the waiting wife, is hardly a Penelope. If a courtship conducted by means of bushels of apples (515) can remind the reader of the story of Adam and Eve (an inverted, hillbilly scenario of the Fall as a hint to the bride’s sour Puritanism — Blaikasten 13), or of Paris’s choice of Venus in the prologue of the Iliad (Pothier 141 — in this case the Trojan War may be echoed in the couple’s domestic discords), the aptest parallel of Parker’s ununderstandable attraction to this woman might be a parody of Ulysses’s enthralment by Cice, here converted into an unenchanting enchantress. Actually, if we follow the track of this classical typology, Parker takes on the qualities of both Ulysses the wanderer and Penelope the tapestry weaver, who undoes by night what she has threaded by day. A parallel may be found between the Queen of Ithaca, thus stalling for time in a bid to delay her engagement to one of the numerous suitors claiming her hand and Ulysses’s succession, and Parker, who accumulates tattoos, making of his body a living tapestry (a needle-work), yet without advancing towards peace, the real object of his quest.

This union of active and passive, or masculine and feminine, polarities points to Parker's second original characteristic. Instead of meeting the incarnational symbol and being confronted to it — like Asbury in “The Enduring Chill” (the bird of ice as an avatar of the Holy Ghost), Mr. Head and Nelson in “The Artificial Nigger” (the statue of the black man in the garden), Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person” (the peacocks), or Henry / Bevel in “The River” (the river itself) — Parker becomes it. His tattooing is a self-fashioning of his body into a work of art, culminating in the icon of Christ, which is literally incorporated, or incarnated, as an inscription of the divine onto the physical. In a way, Parker is another variation on the theme of the failed artist (Julian, Asbury, Thomas in “The Comforts of Home” …). Yet, contrary to them, he has something to show for his attempts: he is the artist of his own life, transformed by his “creations”. But this metamorphosis is doubly incomplete: its aim is at first purely narcissistic, as implied in the mention of his contemplation of himself in any “decent-sized mirror” (514) and the benefit of attracting otherwise unattainable girls (513); then Parker needs the mediation of another artist, the “tattoo artist”, who brings to life the desires of the subject. The
representative function is therefore split twice in the short story, between active and passive figures: on the one hand, intent and realization are attributed to two personae; on the other hand, the same character is subject and object of the creative act. The *mise en abîme* resulting from this redistribution of artistic agencies amounts to a self-reflexive meditation on artistic creation in general, and on O'Connor’s work in particular, giving the text the multi-layered dimension of a palimpsest.

**Palimpsests**

1. “Parker’s Back” can therefore also be read as an artistic Odyssey, from a random collection of tattoos to the final, crowning piece that gives them all coherence, at the same time as it provides the protagonist with spiritual cohesion. The text bears witness to this progression towards, and need for, aesthetic and existential unity. Parker's disappointment when confronted with mirrors posits the need in a negative way: “The effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled.” (514). The pictures that are supposed to fill a void only point out to this void and, according to the logic of desire, call for another elusive “fulfillment”. An idolatrous gluttony characterizes this quasi-Lacanian “mirror stage”, in which the desire to identify with a unified image in the mirror is always painfully contradicted by the awareness of failure and an endless quest for / through secondary identifications.

2. A reconduction of this in the intersubjective mode is to be found in the development of love relationships, first with the aforementioned “girls”, then with Parker’s wife Sarah Ruth, a woman he cannot explain his attraction for, yet wants to seduce in a absolute, definitive way. Dissatisfaction began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside a tattoo. It had to be his back. There was no help for it. A dim half-formed inspiration began to work in his mind. He visualized having a tattoo put there that Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist—a religious subject .... But as urgent as it might be to for him to get a tattoo, it was just a s urgent that he get exactly the right one to bring Sarah Ruth to heel (519 - 520).

3. One might remark here the mixture of aesthetic and erotic vocabulary, converging in the idea of domination. The transitive use which the tattoo is invited to fulfil (a love charm of sorts) is actually fraught with a narcissistic desire for control. The Other becomes a mirror of the self, her loving and admiring gaze providing the ego with the unity and coherence it lacks. In the story, Parker’s feelings for Sarah Ruth reveal his lack of transparency to, and of mastery over, himself. Love, instead of bringing fulfillment, gives way to resentment and frustration: “Not knowing why he continued to stay with a woman who was both ugly and pregnant and no cook made him generally nervous and irritable, and he developed a little tic in the side of his face” (519). This merging of seduction and violence seems to characterize both the mystery of Parker's sexuality and the tattooing ethos.

4. The third stage of the process takes place at the end, after Parker has had the figure of Christ imprinted on his back. Even though his relation to the Icon has changed, in ways that remain mysterious to him, his return home is the occasion to make good on the
promise of the tattoo, to win his wife's loving submission. But Sarah Ruth does not want to recognize him, and asks his name:

“Obadiah,” he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts (528).

In the description of this — fleeting — epiphany of completeness, the use of the same formulaic phrase — “arabesque of colors” — as above gives the passage a sense of closure and the successful completion of a process. The addition of the edenic “garden” takes the aesthetic unity of the creation on Parker’s back one allegorical step further, into an embodiment of the workings of Grace — the “arabesque” might hint at another form of “needle work”, Oriental carpets which in the Muslim tradition represent Paradise with its “trees and birds and beasts”. Moreover, the image that operates the transposition of the notion of completeness from the physical to the spiritual realm, from body to "soul" — the metaphor of the “spider’s web” — cannot but draw our attention. On a first level, it alludes to the complex interweaving of tattoos on Parker’s back; then it also connotes the threads connecting the various parts of the individual’s existence, which make up his "soul". Not least importantly, it is a textual metaphor, pointing self-reflexively to the organic unity and weaving of the short story itself, which has just found its coherence and center in this revelation. The transparency resulting from the infusion of skin with light is also that of the literary palimpsest, bringing to light an intertextual network focused on Flannery O’Connor’s other stories.

The diverse tattoos, as listed mainly on page 514, create both a composite picture and a decomposition of the body. “He had a tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, hawks on his thighs, Elizabeth II and Philip over where his stomach and liver were respectively.” Since each image roughly corresponds to an organ or body part, it almost acquires the dimension of a metaphor, sometimes entertaining a motivated relation with the covered item. Apart from the Queen and Prince Consort of England, who do not seem too intimately connected with the digestive organs they adorn (except perhaps in the ancillary position one holds to the other), the idea of muscular strength and savagery unites the wild animals with the muscles. The tattooed body becomes a blazon of the real body, in the Petrarchan and Elizabethan acceptance of the term “a description of a woman’s beauty in the form of a list of her excellent physical features” (Gray 46): each attribute is often defined by means of a fanciful comparison. The result is ambivalent: extravagant praise is conflated with a quasi-sadistic dismemberment of the body of desire; the parts somehow fail to add up, like Parker’s images, which "lived inside him in a raging warfare" (514).

These skin-deep pictures may be endowed with the humorous charge of Arcimboldo’s parodic visual blazons; they may also evoke (inter)textual blazons. The tiger on the shoulder might be a reminiscence of Henry James’s Beast in the Jungle (1903), whose story of a mediocre man waiting for a revelation that finally comes when it is too late must have influenced “The Enduring Chill”. Word echoes of the latter may be found in the description of another tattoo: “There emblazoned in red and blue was a tattooed eagle perched on a cannon” (512), as against “But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend” (382). The adjectival reference to the blazon, the color scheme, and of course the bird imagery, allow us to consider a connection between the two passages. The Buddha made in Japan (523) might be a reminiscence of one section of “The Enduring Chill”, where Asbury attends a meeting on Buddhism under the
influence of his friend Goetz, who had been in the service there (359). The peacocks
Parker has on his knees (523) remind the reader of the central role these birds have in
“The Displaced Person”, and in O’Connor’s life at Andalusia, as mentioned in her essay
“King of the Birds”, in Mystery and Manners.

As a matter of fact, the first revelation, which triggered off Parker’s passion for tattoos,
happened at a fair, in circumstances similar to the apparition of the androgyne in “A
Temple of the Holy Ghost” (245).

Parker was fourteen when he saw a man in a fair, tattooed from head to foot. Except
for his loins which were girded with a panther hide, the man’s skin was patterned
in what seemed from Parker’s distance—he was near the end of the tent, standing
on a bench—a single intricate design of brilliant color. The man, who was small and
sturdy, moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of
men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own.
Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes
(513).

The tattooed man, a fair freak of another sort, represents the meeting point of two
mutually exclusive realms: body and image, microcosm and macrocosm, just as the
androgyne was a cross between the masculine and feminine. But somehow the two
overlap, and can be superimposed: the same form of awareness seizes Parker and the
little girl in “Temple”, an understanding about self that is not devoid of sexual
connotations — an obvious coming to terms with gendered identity in one case, an
“uplifting” arousal in patriotic disguise in the other. The Christic connotation of the
androgyne spills over to the tattooed man, for he embodies the Cosmic Man, or Parker’s
“true country” — another possible reading of the raising of the flag. A further common
point is the image of the androgynous artist, gendered yet beyond the limitations of
gender, which some critics have found in “Temple” (Gordon 163-164) and which could
also inform the tattooed body’s double status as subject and object, active and passive
incarnation.

The passage might also point to a further intertextual inscription, that of “The Displaced
Person”, a tale in which the beautiful tails of peacocks become a revelation of the
patterns of the universe, and take a Christic dimension. An ironic counterpoint between
the Catholic priest’s rapt contemplation of the peacock , and Mrs McIntyre's
preoccupation with the burden of the “D. P.” establishes the parallel between the bird
and the foreigner, as two images of Jesus. “Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a
green-gold haze over his head”, to which the priest responds by “Christ will come like
that!” , while the owner of the place says, referring to Guizac, the Polish refugee, “He
didn't have to come in the first place” (226). Parker is, in a sense, a peacock, both in his
initial narcissism and in his quest for the perfect design that will reflect the glory of
creation, a world to which Christ gives its final, organic unity . A further connection
between the two stories is provided by Parker’s accident (520), a variation on Guizac's
murder under the wheels of a tractor (234). But the meaning of the two episodes is
reversed: whereas Guizac may be taken to be Christ in disguise, a test for the other
characters, who unwittingly embodies the sacrificial dimension of this identification in
the from of a dissociation between the witness and the symbol, in “Parker’s Back”, the
tractor accident brings about a call and revelation to the hero, and makes him literally
bear witness, repealing the dissociation.

Another such variation on, and positive rewriting of, an earlier text can be identified in
relation to Wise Blood. Parker shares with Hazel Motes, the protagonist of this narrative, a
feeling of being constantly followed, of having someone at his back. Readers of the novel therefore have a tendency to interpret Parker's intuition in the light of Motes's final conversion, as a sign that he is "Christ-haunted" too. But the ultimate connection between "Parker's Back" and Wise Blood is the little mummy in the local museum, which gradually becomes a parodic symbol of the New Jesus of the Church Without Christ. This "shrunken man" had been warped out of shape by "some A-rabs", to become "about three feet long. He was naked and a dried yellow color and his eyes were drawn almost shut as if a giant block of steel were falling down on top of him" (Wise Blood 57). This figure, presumably inspired by Edward Munch's painting The Cry, unites the connotations of torture, skin color, the grotesque, and an identification with Jesus Christ: it might be seen as the parodic prototype of both the androgyne and Parker. It seems that, as O'Connor's art developed, she gradually moved from purely parodic views of the Incarnation in a godless world to more positive symbols, the last and most beautiful of which is Parker's back.

Taking this cue, it seems as if "Parker's Back" was the story that recapitulated and gave coherence to the whole of O'Connor's œuvre, or allowed to see the coherence beyond the fragmentation of the novels and stories. Parker's skin and "Parker's Back" recapitulate visually and textually the major Incarnational symbols, shedding a more positive light on them, evolving from a rather negative theology to a more affirmative one. The Signifier and Signified — man and God — of the former Incarnational symbols are finally united. Just as the tattoo of Christ endows the various heterogeneous designs with organic unity, the last story could be seen as the crowning piece, which potentially transforms a collection of writings into a “body of work” stamped with the image of Jesus. And in a final, implicit rejection of Sarah Ruth's iconoclasm, the text also recapitulates the iconic dimension of Flannery's art, since the other stories are mainly recalled through their visual elements.

Nevertheless, the end remains ambiguous, and this "optimistic" reading might have to be relativized by irony. After all, the story does not conclude on an apotheosis, but on a misunderstanding and a broom beating. If Parker really hoped for the image that was going to keel over his wife, as a sex aid of sorts for his marriage, his disillusion measures up to his expectations. But the actual process of inscription of the tattoo on his back, with the patience and slight pain involved, seems to have changed his attitude. The final rejection by Sarah Ruth creates the grotesque image of the painted back full of welts, and a grown man crying like a baby (529-530). The wavering between bathos and pathos seems to imply a double-edged irony: on the one hand, the deflation of the character's pretenses and possible arrogance; on the other, a full identification with the figure of Christ, in all its aspects: the baby of the Nativity, the suffering sacrificial victim, and the reigning Pantocrator on the defiled Icon. The rise-and-fall is also a fall-and-rise, in a symbolic image into which “everything has risen and converged”.

Word and Icon

The already-quoted debate between Parker and his wife on his return home revolves around the comparative status of word and icon in the religious field. One of the phrases Sarah Ruth uses should attract our attention, due to its intransitivity and ambiguities. “God don’t look” can have two meanings, the patent one being pursued in "No man shall see his face" (529). The alternative sense is that God does not see, or watch human beings,
that he does not have an effective place in their lives. In a way Protestant (or Calvinist) iconoclasm, a phonocentrism according to which God is Word and not apprehended through the senses, is dangerously close to the Manichean heresy, which denies the Incarnation in establishing an absolute divide between the realms of the spirit and the flesh. Catholic doctrine, on the contrary, states that the power of the creative Word is felt through its effects, cosmogonic and moral. The Word is made visible, and a two-way exchange between Creator and creature can be established. Most literary critics agree that this dogma also informs a theory of language, and that artistic creation in some manner duplicates the processes of “capitalized” Creation. Human language, in the aesthetic sphere, is endowed with a part of this productive, performative power; conversely, this power can be traced back from the work to the source. Here the imagination and the visionary dimension of language have a part to play.

Peacocks and gardens on the skin, tractors and burning trees in the text, are part of a network connecting the two levels of Creation, divine and artistic, “Parker’s Back” becomes both a microcosm of Creation, and a microcosm of Flannery O’Connor’s works, thanks to visual correspondences conveyed through the iconic capacity of language. This potentiality of the verbal imagination is used not only by O’Connor, but also by the Bible itself, in contradiction with Sarah Ruth’s narrow perception. Moses’ Burning Bush, in Exodus, is the antetype to Parker’s burning tree (520): both are occasions for a calling and conversion. This typological reading is of course ironical: Parker’s tractor accident can only parody the epic, spiritual greatness of Moses’ direct confrontation with God, yet the former’s conversion is also endowed with a prophetic dimension by duplicating the sacred episode. The passage is ambivalent, a form of respectful parody hailing to the “realism of distances” O’Connor advocated. In similar fashion, the eerie correspondences between Parker’s organs and the tattoo on the surface of his skin seem to unite, in the same mix of double-edged parody, the inside and outside of the body, microcosm and macrocosm. Thanks to his tattooed “foreign parts”, Parker becomes a contemporary embodiment of the medieval world picture, one of whose key images was the archetype of the Cosmic Man, often superimposed to Jesus himself.

Furthermore, there is no incompatibility between word and image on Parker’s skin: he has a tattoo of his mother’s name on a heart (513), a few obscenities are scribbled on his abdomen (514). The very technique of “tracing” (523) the image of Jesus is analogous to writing. The artist’s cue “You don’t want all the little blocks, though” (523), while alluding to the compartmentalized aspect of the Byzantine original, might also remind the reader of block letters. Parker’s back could best be described as “mixed media”, a combination of word and image, sacred and profane... organically unified through a network of correspondences whose cornerstone is Jesus. The text itself is such a mix, in conformity with the classical injunction “Ut pictura poesis”: it is a word-image of an image or, more accurately, the story of an image. The plot endows the tattoo with a spiritual dimension, thereby conferring it the status of an Icon. Moreover, it combines the medium of verbal art, time, with the immediacy and permanence of the image: on the levels of form and content, the story balances time and timelessness, the sublunar and the eternal.

Yet, in his quest for the right religious subject that would seduce his wife, Parker rejects the idea of a word-picture:

He thought of an open book with HOLY BIBLE tattooed under it and an actual verse printed on the page. This seemed just the thing for a while; then he began to hear
her say, “Ain’t I already got a real Bible? What you think I want to read the same verse over and over for when I can read it all?” (519).

This humorous passage might be interpreted as a form of *reductio ad absurdum*, poking fun at the failure of literalism. A picture of a word is a tautology, just as a picture of the Word itself is absurdly reductive. In a way, an art that would not interpret the Word is useless. What the apostolic tradition does for the understanding of the Bible in Catholic dogma, is paralleled in artistic creation by the necessary recourse to imagination in order to find new images that lead back to the original: a derivation from Scripture that yet points back to it. In this defense and illustration of art in general, and O’Connor’s literary art in particular, the synthetic power of the image as both visual shock and support for meditation is emphasized. Parker’s back could then be compared to a medieval manuscript, a sacred text written on a parchment of animal skin, supplemented with illuminations, in the double acceptation of the word: illustrations and visionary symbols of an anagogical nature. What obtains is a sort of reflection of O’Connor’s writing technique, its masterful use of the polysemy of words and striking images, converted into spiritual symbols, like the variation on the Holy Ghost in “The Enduring Chill”.

Tattooing in the text can be read as an allegory of the writing process. Joyce Carol Oates has established a parallel with Kafka’s “The Penal Colony”, a short story in which the punishment for transgressing laws consists in being tattooed those laws on the back with a machine. The usual result was death (Oates 44). The similarities with “Parker’s Back” are numerous, especially since the last tattoo represents God, the Father, the source of the Law. The pain of the inscription could also provide a link with the instrument of torture. Yet the description of the process in O’Connor’s story is far less terrible than Kafka’s, as confirmed by the fact that the Pantocrator represents the Son instead of the Father; even though Jesus is seen as a stern Master of the Universe, holding the Book, he also blesses mankind. The ritual is less a punishment than a transfiguration, a rebirth. So, whereas the notion of cruelty Oates detects can definitely be applied to most other stories, this one offers a more positive, even sensuous, vision of writing.

The inscription process starts with a back-washing, a hygienic precaution which evokes both a cleansing ritual and the preparation of a white page (thereby transforming Parker’s back into a “paperback” edition). The instruments described on that page (523), the artist’s electric needle as well as the sticks, pins and soot of other practitioners, resemble the pen and ink of the writer. Parker’s vigilance, contrasted to his habit of sleeping under the needle, may be a mixture of artistic awareness and spiritual awakening, as suggested by the mention of the owl, a traditional symbol of wisdom, on the tattooist’s own head (521). The slight pain involved, “just enough to make it appear worth doing” (513) is quite remote from the deadly torture in “The Penal Colony”, even though a touch of sadism or masochism may be detected. Actually the distribution of the artistic impulse between Parker and the tattooist, who mirror each other, may hint at the split, in the body of the story, between the narrator and the character. The cruel or sadistic component of this relation, often described as a one of the primary characteristics O’Connor’s works, is particularly toned down in this work.

The tattoo “artist”, as both painter and scrivener, is also associated with the divine figure, in a metafictional comment. The finishing touch of the drawing is the pair of eyes, “all-demanding” eyes that speak, call out to the reader or viewer. As Parker had been leafing through the catalogue, the image had given him a sign:
He continued to flip through until he had almost reached the front of the book. On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK." (522).

33 The sense of revelation, of election in this passage reminds of Augustine’s famous “Tolle, lege” (Take and read): a voice that enticed him to take the Bible and open it at random, to find a passage that put the final touch to his conversion (Saint-Augustin 175). Here the process is inverted: instead of a voice directing to the Book, a voice coming from an image reproduced in a book proffers a call(ing). Once more the relation between the two episodes is of reverent parody: the inversion recalls the distance between the sacred type and worldly character, yet the repetition aims at bridging the gap, in a reverse reading that points back to the source (Parker flipped through the book backwards). Whereas the Word had informed the creation of the Icon, here the Icon silently voices the Word, in a call to the character’s intuition and imagination.

34 When the tattooist finishes his work, he similarly demands Parker’s attention. “‘Now look,’ he said, angry at having his work ignored.” (525). The metafictional vision implicit in this passage is that art is both a call and a calling, the interpellation of the artist, and that of his/her public. Such a vision recalls O’Connor’s own conception of the artist as prophet: “It seems to me that prophetic insight is a quality of the imagination … There is the prophetic sense of ‘seeing through’ reality and there is also the prophetic function of recalling people to known but ignored truths” (Conversations 89). The element of reluctance, or resistance to the calling, is another common point between Parker and Old Testament antetypes.

35 If art is an interpellation, it is also a self-fashioning. Parker, as an artist, transfigures his body: the bright arabesque of colors sublimates the skin, so that in the end the flesh reaches a state of transparency, of openness to the light of the spirit. Parker becomes a sort of stained-glass man, in all the senses of the word. Just as the beauty of a church window comes from its taints, the stain and the Fall of man shatter his complacency and make him depend on God’s Grace. Parker therefore fulfils Paul’s prediction “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (I Corinthians, 13). The body becomes a transfigured icon, a testament of grace. Yet this conception, even if it can be read in the text, remains a subjective image in “Parker’s Back”, distanciated by the inner focalization. But a closer reading of the passage on page 528 would strengthen rather than weaken the Biblical parallel. It is when his wife, barring him entrance to their home, forces him to pronounce and acknowledge his Biblical names — a typological imprint — that Parker feels the light pouring through him. In a way, the image is activated by the word, and the two main cultural representations of the Christian divinity as Word and Light are united.

36 Could we go as far as to say that, in her fictional testament, O’Connor (re)traces the existential and theological trajectory of her art? A creation born of frustration, nurtured in suffering, transformed by discipline into a spiritual self-fashioning (Bleikasten 18)? A sublime euphemization of a skin rash— lupus, the predatory red wolf — into a work of art and worship of the sacred (Bockting 38)? But why privilege the “back”?

37 On the level of the story, Parker’s back is of course the only remaining space on his body for such a finishing touch. More metaphorically, Parker had always had the impression that God was at his heels: long views gave him the feeling that someone was “after him” (516), another parallel with Hazel Motes in Wise Blood; then during the vision he had on
the moment of his tractor accident, a sort of dissociation of sensibility in which he felt beside himself and out of his shoes (a conversion narrative, Paul’s way to Damascus), “he appeared to see [the sun] both places as if he had eyes in the back of his head,” (520); finally, when his wife asked who was there, “Parker turned his head as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer” (528). If men bear the imprint of God, the calling, from birth, they often do not want to acknowledge it. This repressed dimension of the psyche is forever at the back of their heads, and they go to great lengths to find what was there from the beginning, just as Ulysses returns home after twenty years, or Jonas takes the circuitous way of the whale’s belly to finally accept his prophetic calling. One could almost say that in O’Connor’s fiction the Freudian unconscious contains the mark of the Maker, and that the often violent return of the repressed is the coming out of the God within. In this sense, Jesus is both inside and outside the subject, which creates a novel form of the Uncanny. The tattoo is therefore not so much an imprint as an expression, the revelation of a address in invisible ink, or encre sympathique.

A mark on the back is inaccessible to a single mirror; the “artist” has to resort to a complex reflexive apparatus to let Parker see the tattoo. “He propped one mirror, four feet square, on a table by the wall and took a smaller mirror off the lavatory wall and put it in Parker’s hands. Parker stood with his back to the one on the table and moved the other until he saw a flashing burst of color reflected from his back” (523). It seems that the back of a person stands beyond the immediate narcissistic impulse, that it is the least individual part of a man, reaching either towards the anonymous or the universal. Repossessing the back might give a feeling of completeness, just as it may reveal the power of the absolute. In this sense, the beautiful baroque image of the twin mirrors points at a form of vertigo — endlessly repeated reflections — but also opens vistas to infinity. In another allegory, art could be compared to this double mirror, a reflection of both nature and the artist, the inside and the outside. It represents a gradual discovery of the hidden, unconscious mystery that dwells at the back of appearances, through the imitation of these appearances. Perhaps O’Connor’s famous “realism of distances” is best apprehended through this distorted mimesis, an indirect process in which discovering the right angle of vision is of the essence, in which the natural and supernatural are found to mirror each other.

If we agree that “Parker’s Back” can be considered as one of Flannery O’Connor’s summae artisticae, recapitulating, like the procession of freaks in “Revelation” (508), her most remarkable creations and the impetus behind her literary enterprise, we can detect in this testamental work a shift from a “negative theology” centered on the grotesque and scathing irony, to a more “positive” theology celebrating the beauty and complexity of creation, and leading to the sublime of harmonious revelation. This move was announced by other stories, like “The Artificial Nigger” or “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”, but is fully realized only here, in spite of the remaining ambiguity and irony. This shift from Sarah Ruth’s ruthless worldview to Parker’s more life-asserting one was surely influenced by the author’s impending death. Yet it might also give us a foresight of new potentialities in her art, of a persona that we could call “the impossible Flannery”, and who might have been a poet.
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NOTES

1. André Bleikasten pursues this inroad into Lacanian territory by stating that Parker’s desire for the perfect image represents “his late awakening to the exorbitant demands of narcissism. By tattooing his skin, Parker, one might argue, attempts to phallicize his body, to turn it into a living fetish” (Bleikasten 12).

2. To a certain extent, the Pantocrator’s gaze on Parker’s back fulfills, in a microcosmic way, the function of Teilhard de Chardin’s Omega Point. It is the Center of Convergence that attracts and informs all thinking — here, visual — monads in an evolutionary process that will “over-animate”, without destroying, them (Trémontant 78). Whatever O’Connor’s religious opinions about this not-too-orthodox theory, she was able to draw on its imaginative, artistic potentialities, as proved by the title of her story and collection “Everything That Rises Must Converge”.

3. The definitions of verbal communication as “digital” (arbitrary relation between Signifier and Signified, active decoding, use of the imagination) and of images as belonging to an “analogical” mode of communication (Vanoye 41-43) could lead us to consider the ekphrastic dimension of the story as a final attempt to incarnate the word into an analogy, or anagogy; to raise the level of understanding from plot to contemplation.
4. “There is, then, a sadistic quality to the narrator, who acts as an archaic superego, a primitive internalized image of the parent forcing the characters through the triadic ritual of sin, humiliation, and redemption by wit as well as plot structure” (Katz 57).

5. “I think the writer of grotesque fiction [...] is looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees” (Mystery and Manners 42). Even though this definition is concerned with the grotesque as creative distortion at the interface between two realms of being, the physical and the spiritual, the optical apparatus that is evoked can be compared to that of “Parker’s Back”. The distortion of appearances created by the pressure of the supernatural both confirms and transcends the mimetic principle, reminding the reader of a fun-house mirror, a cruder version of the twin reflectors of the last story.

ABSTRACTS

Cette nouvelle tardive, où un homme se fait tatouer un Christ byzantin sur le dos pour séduire une épouse fundamentaliste et iconoclaste, peut se lire comme un codicille testamentaire sur la profonde relation entre le verbe et l’image dans la prose de Flannery O’Connor. La véritable Odysée de Parker en quête de son épanouissement personnel, se transforme en méditation réflexive sur la nature de la création artistique, épouse la dimension iconique de la prose visionnaire de l’auteur, et constitue l’une des illustrations les plus harmonieuses de sa notion d’« art incarné ».

Le corps tatoué devient un palimpseste abouti, une surimpression intertextuelle de sources telles que la Bible, des précédents littéraires et iconographiques, et le corpus même d’O’Connor. Alors que le procédé d’inscription cutanée peut se comparer à une « allégorie de l’écriture », la force de révélation et d’interpellation de l’image renvoie à l’idéal d’un art religieusement engagé, destiné à ébranler la suffisance du destinataire. Malgré l’ambiguïté de la fin, la spécificité de cette nouvelle nous semble résider dans la transition opérée entre une « théologie négative », vision du monde sans pitié, et une célébration plus positive, libérant les potentialités poétiques, jusque-là passablement réprimées, du style de Flannery O’Connor.

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