Chapter I

Introduction

Art, whether it be that of primitive man or of modern man, is an expression of the human need to make sense of the mystery of existence and of man’s relationship to the world. It is an intimate and authentic record of the spiritual condition of man. Even art that is not overtly ‘religious’ is such a record. The most ancient works of art and of literature display man’s questing spirit, perpetually seeking newer and more radical ways of transcending the limitations of experience and expression. One might say that all art concerns itself with the destiny of human beings as beings that find themselves in the world, confronting choices and decisions that might make or mar their lives. Perennial questions about man’s place in the universe, about his relationship with the universe, and his relationship as a thinking and self-conscious being to other human beings have formed the focus of art and literature throughout the centuries, whatever the cultural context or historical epoch. One has to look at great works of literature, religion, and philosophy in the light of these questions in order to understand man’s unique way of being and behaving in the world. All religions offer insightful visions of man’s place and function in the world. This vision forms the basis of a set of affirmations and injunctions designed to bring about a harmonious relationship between desire and achievement, thought and action, intention and practice. These, then, are the questions that prompt the ideas and analyses contained in this dissertation. My attempt has been to take the work of Flannery O’Connor as an instance of the human aspiration to make of human acts, desires, and intentions a way of being in the world that expresses the essence of Christian charity and compassion. It is my contention
that her work not only thematizes the challenge and the continuing task of Christian witnessing, but also self-consciously embodies such an engagement in its own narrative predilections and conduct. My argument thereby demonstrates the validity and good faith of O’Connor’s repeated claim that, for her, to be a Christian and to be a writer are not irreconcilable. She went so far as to say that she was a writer precisely because she was a Catholic. What this means, in fact, is that her experience as a writer, as a Catholic, as a Christian, as a Southerner, as a human being is all of a piece, harmonious and congruent. It is hoped to show that the essential preoccupations of her writing are, at once, universal and uniquely localized. Her texts do not merely set out to talk about Christian charity or tell a story, which contains examples of such an ideal, but are actual instances of Christian charity in its very narrative orientations. In the remaining part of this chapter I shall attempt briefly to characterize the universal as well as particular contexts of her work. This is essential because, though my discussions in the forthcoming chapters indicate the very unique and creative ways in which her texts conceive and execute their intentions, it is equally important, at the very outset, to give due recognition to the traditions of artistic and spiritual practices that decisively influence and inform the tasks and objectives of her writing.

It is a commonplace of O’Connor criticism to note that she is a Catholic writer. In saying this we should make sure that we do not merely dismiss her with a label, but engage with the religious problematic that is indicated by the terms ‘Christian’ and ‘religious.’ As an important twentieth century writer whose works are profoundly and essentially religious in both scope and method, her works draw upon many centuries of religious writing that precedes her own.

Scripture itself offers an ideal and moral analogue of what narrative could be. It is meant to survive and be efficacious through the centuries. Its word is always fresh and ready to go into
action. This readiness of the scriptural text, this perpetual youthfulness, this incessant creativity is precisely what makes it continuously as well as differently but nonetheless efficiently valid for all human experiences and for all times. A scriptural text is, in this sense, very similar to mythical narrative. Mythical narrative displaces from historical or actual events their specificity of cultural and temporal reference in order to make it universally valid and appealing. A mythical narrative transcends and survives history because of this quality. But, whereas myths tend to simplify and to abstract, the scriptural text is valid both because of, and in spite of its historicity. Thus, large parts of the Bible are both history as well as religious revelation. It is the miracle of finding the workings of the divine here and now in the events and experiences of everyday life that constitutes the power and beauty of texts like those of Flannery O’Connor. O’Connor situates herself very much as a storyteller. She mainly wrote short stories all her life. As a Christian writer for whom Jesus Christ is the supreme model and ideal of the life of charity and compassion her lineage as a teller of tales finds in Christ its most accomplished and illustrious ancestor. Christ himself, in the account of his life that we have in the gospels, emerges as a consummate storyteller. His response to the moral, political and spiritual dilemmas of his listeners very often took the form of a story rather than of a disquisition. His parables meet the demand for subtle and compassionate thinking through concrete instances rather than through abstract reasoning. These stories are culturally very specific and topical. But they provide access to truths and intentions that speak to the listeners transcending time, history and culture. This combination of the allegorical and the realistic, the general and the particular, is itself a reflection both of the mystery of his own being as both human and divine, Son and Father, and of his own promise of salvation for sinner and saint alike. There is evident, in this series of reflections, the possibility of spiritual, salvific transformation. This is the sense
in which both the manner and the matter of his parables become spiritually efficacious. These texts approach the human being directly and efficaciously, bringing about the dawning of enlightenment and self-fulfilment. Conceived of in this way, Christ’s parables, therefore, provide the model of efficacious story telling and become the model for O’Connor’s own art.

O’Connor’s works base themselves upon the promise of art’s capacity to participate in the unfolding of the human potential for attaining salvation. Salvation as freedom from both sin and effects of sin calls for the mediation of grace and compassion. Thus, it becomes the task of narrative to highlight both the need for grace and the descent of grace. But the paradox of the writer who would write of salvation and the possibility of salvation lies in the fact that in representing the outcome of grace the writer has to represent also the dereliction that calls for the gift of grace. Grace is not the reward and effect of justice conceived in human and rational terms. Grace is grace precisely because it comes when all hope for grace is lost. The ascription of sinfulness is an act that presupposes judgement. It presupposes the ability to throw the first stone at the adulterous woman of the gospel narrative. It is in this context and the dilemma that it poses for Christian narrative that we must examine the narrative strategies and insights of O’Connor’s texts.

The title of this dissertation needs some elucidation since the critical stance adopted in this study derives from the way in which I understand the relationship between theory and practice in O’Connor’s fiction. Theory here does not refer to a necessarily systematized mode of argument and demonstration such as would go into the making of a philosophically or theologically grounded aesthetics: her theoretical views are frankly derivative; she draws heavily upon scholastic aesthetics and the formalism of the New Critics. The scholastics showed her the essential character of art, its self-sufficiency, and its integration into the larger concerns of life,
both religious and philosophical. From the New Critics she learned the precise rules governing the internal organization of a literary work. Her theory is, therefore, much like the theories of the New Critics: a structure around which and in which close readings of text may be justified and performed. Theory in this sense is a set of premises and values that determined the structure and significance of narrative. This structure, as has been made clear, derives from the religious impulse. For O’Connor, art is an integral part of the religious dimension of human experience. As such, therefore, it bears on and is, in turn, shaped by the emotional and spiritual pressures—the anxieties, hopes and preoccupations—that describe the human universe. Art, just like the product of other occasions, is, for her, a valid and credible participation in the human being’s search for spiritual place and certitude. As a literary enactment of this quest conducted in the terms and categories of divine providence fiction can help bring salvation closer to man. But, in order to accomplish this it must not merely describe or advertise salvation, but must allow itself to be radically modified and remade by the salvific impulse of man. Thus narrative must find a way of transforming itself through Christian charity before it can hope to depict the life of the Good Samaritan. In other words, the creativity of a principle or theory can be made evident only by the way in which it determines and initiates efficacious action or praxis. Theory and practice in this mode of understanding constitute a ‘circle’ analogous to the hermeneutic circle of Biblical scholarship: no practice without theory, and no theory without practice. Salvation abolishes the distinction between having and being, desire and fulfilment.

In pursuit of this inquiry and argument the following chapters deal with three distinct phases of the problematic of the representation in O’Connor’s work. The focus of my research is the participation of art in the human quest for authentic existence and salvation. The chapters thematize the issue and look at the various ways in which the task of salvation transforms the
very mode of artistic representation. In chapter two my contention is that O'Connor sees art as a vocation that participates in and is an integral element of God's providential love for the world. As with the religious life, the artistic life is also a matter of providential inner calling. Neither the mere desire to be a writer nor the requisite skill is enough. Thus Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth discover not only that it is not a divinely ordained vocation for them to be artists, but that the calling of a businessman is just as worthwhile and creative in God's own scheme of things. Having established this aspect of art and the artistic vocation in O'Connor I go on, in chapter three, to look at the narrative strategies that are the direct consequence of the Christian understanding of art as spiritual vocation. These strategies are at once traditional and uniquely innovative. O'Connor's stories function as allegories of the constraints and perfection of a life of Christian charity. Thus they consistently present their leading characters in the likeness of Christ or prophetic figures. But these stories do more than merely project fictional analogues of vatic and divine functions. My readings of individual narratives show that O'Connor's narratives attempt to come to terms with the project of a life in which one treats one's neighbour as oneself and serves him as though he bore the image of Christ, moreover, they do this not just thematically but also self-consciously, placing all the resources of the storyteller's art at the service of this task. Such an analysis of O'Connor's stories inclines me to posit the existence in them of what I would call 'narrative compassion.' By this I mean to indicate the extraordinary ways in which O'Connor's narratives embody their own message of non-judgemental and unconditional Christian charity by developing modes of observation and presentation that avoid taking moralistic, self-righteous and judgemental attitudes towards the so-called 'villains,' 'sinners' and 'egotists' who populate her stories. Instead, they capture their characters in moments and events that reveal their sinfulness as existing simultaneously with their potential
for salvation. In the fourth chapter the argument is centred on a consideration of the ways in which art and representation themselves function in O'Connor's fiction as efficacious modes of salvation. Her work clearly moves away from the Old Testament interdict on representing God, and establishes a Christian dispensation, which sees in Christ the direct and total descent of the divine into the human order of things and experiences, and, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, the continuing promise and experience of such a descent, the practice and fulfilment of the Christian way of life. When Parker's wife thrashes the Christ-figure tattooed on his back, Parker himself receives the gift of newly participating in the mortification suffered by Christ himself for the sake of salvation of all mankind. It is in stories like this that O'Connor's fiction opens up the treasures of a life and its narrative presentation that bears witness to the redeeming and universal love of Jesus Christ.