

Flannery O'Connor's Translucent Settings

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Place can be transparent, or translucent: not people.
Eudora Welty¹

Striking settings – Grand Canyon – and breathtaking views – the glory of a sunrise or the peace of a sunset – in nature as well as in art often create an unforgettable experience. Flannery O'Connor, herself an accomplished painter and cartoonist, says in her essay 'Writing Short Stories': "a good many fiction writers ... paint, not because they're good at painting, but because it helps their writing. It forces them to look at things."² She was fully aware of the importance of creating in her fiction a general locale and a particular physical location, described in minute details, and she was convinced of the truth the epistemological *adage nil in mente nisi prius in sensibus*.³ I see O'Connor's settings as a special area of interest in her art, where precision is of paramount importance for a depth dimension to shine up. In the following I shall try to present a number of typical O'Connor settings as examples of focal points, where immanence and transcendence meet, where the particular becomes translucent.

1. Welty, Eudora, 'Place in Fiction' in *The Eye of the Story*, New York, Random House, 1990, p. 121.

2. O'Connor, Flannery, *Mystery and Manners*, eds Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, p. 93. Hereafter cited in the text as MM plus page reference.

3. 'Nothing in the mind unless it was first in the senses.' In 'Writing Short Stories' she says that the writer must exercise "the time and patience ... required to *convince through the senses*." (MM 91; my emphasis.)

In her seminal essay 'Place in Fiction' Eudora Welty insists on the importance of the description of particulars so that "place can be seen"⁴ and she argues that "fiction depends for its life on place"⁵ also as a means of defining character. Rather surprisingly for Welty she states that place can be transparent, or translucent. What she means by this translucency she defines later in her essay: "From the dawn of man's imagination, place has enshrined the spirit; as soon as man stopped wandering and stood still and looked about him, he found god in that place; and from then on, that was where the god abided and spoke from if ever he spoke."⁶ Here Welty indicates, I think quite indisputably, the possibility of divine presence in place. In an earlier essay on 'The Reading and Writing of Short Stories' Welty asked why some great stories keep spellbinding readers. It is because they are "apocalyptic" and "because they keep their power of *revealing* something" and with D.H. Lawrence she "thinks the *transcending* thing is found *direct through the senses* [my emphases]."⁷

Like Eudora Welty and D.H. Lawrence, Flannery O'Connor was convinced that the non plus ultra for her writing was "translating her attentive eye into sensory detail for her fiction,"⁸ since "the things we see, hear, smell, and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all" (MM 197). On the basis of this primary experience the writer creates a setting, a country, a universe that is unmistakably his/her own. O'Connor's multifarious settings are in the final analysis renderings of the same country which should lead the character to a recognition of his/her 'true country', as it happens to Mrs. Shortley at the moment of her death: "her eyes like blue-painted glass, seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country."⁹ To O'Connor the word country "suggests everything from the actual countryside that the novelist describes, on to and through the peculiar characteristics of his

4. Welty, Eudora, *op.cit.* p. 116.

5. *Ibid.* p. 118.

6. *Ibid.* p. 123.

7. Welty, Eudora, 'The Reading and Writing of Short Stories' in Current-Garcia, Eugene & W.R. Patrick, eds, *What is the Short Story?*, Glenview, Ill., Scott, Foresman and Comp., 1961, pp. 109, 111, 113.

8. Freeman, Mary Glenn, 'Flannery O'Connor and the Quality of Sight: A Standard for Writing and Reading' in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 16, 1987, p. 26.

9. O'Connor, Flannery, *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, New York, The Library of America, 1988, p. 305. Hereafter cited in the text as CW plus page reference.

region and his nation, and on, through, and under all of these to his true country, which the writer with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute" (MM 27).

Already in the early days of O'Connor criticism Robert Fitzgerald¹⁰ and Carter Martin¹¹ drew attention to the importance of her description of the countryside and her often violent settings. Some critics were "overwhelmed by the lack of beauty in the landscape,"¹² others described her landscapes as Edenic and her cities as hellish and evil.¹³ According to Jack Dillard Ashley "nature, like the hostile human intruders, frequently functions as a scourge to punish O'Connor's characters and prepare them for grace"¹⁴ and Flannery O'Connor herself stated that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace."¹⁵ No matter how one views O'Connor's settings, they are not there 'for their own sake' since the writer "selects every word for a reason, every incident for a reason, every detail for a reason, and arranges them in a certain time-sequence for a reason" (MM 75). For O'Connor "the artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality" (MM 157).

The writer, the reader – and certainly also the characters in O'Connor's fiction – have to develop what she called a 'habit of art', which is "the way one learns to look at things, a habit of depth perception" (MM 64). The reader "who is developing the 'habit of art' must train his eyes to the disciplined observation of detail, developing the skill of seeing the surface while at the same time peering into the depths."¹⁶ As I will show below many of O'Connor's characters come to see and experience depth

10. Fitzgerald, Robert, 'The Countryside and the True Country' in Harold Bloom, ed., *Flannery O'Connor*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1956, pp. 19-30.

11. Martin, Carter W., *17ze True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1969.

12. Chow, Sung Gay, "'Strange and Alien Country': An analysis of Landscape in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *17ze Violent Bear It Away*' in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 8, 1979, p. 36.

13. E.g. Cleary, Michael, 'Environmental Influences in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction' in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 8, 1979, pp. 20-34.

14. Quoted in Nancy B. Sederberg, 'Flannery O'Connor's Spiritual Landscape: A Dual Sense of Nothing' in *17ze Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 12, 1983, p. 22.

15. Quoted *ibid.* p. 23.

16. Freeman, Mary Glenn, *op.cit.* p. 30.

in the settings that surround and even form them, others do not reach insight, they can only see 'nothing.' 'Short-sighted' characters can see and understand nothing, nature "can tell them no thing which they wish to know because they cannot penetrate its physical presence to the spiritual reality which it is."¹⁷ Flannery O'Connor was aware of this fact and accordingly she adapted her technique to it, since "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (MM 34). She needed to find narratives, a language, settings and characters which could draw the reader into the depth dimension of the universe. Flannery O'Connor used among others typological narratives from the Old and the New Testament, in which flashes of divine redemptive power are revealed. In the Old Testament she found theophanies, which are characterized by clearly described settings in which Jahweh makes himself known. The most striking ones are Jahweh's revelations to Moses in the burning bush episode and on Mount Sinai where Jahweh revealed himself in the cloud. In the Old Testament the typical elements in Jahweh's theophanies are summed up as follows: "These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice" (Deut 5.22). The Old Testament theophanies prefigure similar New Testament revelations of the divine nature of Jesus. Most prominent is the theophany which occurred in the transfiguration of Jesus. It is important for our understanding of O'Connor's use of these theophanies to notice the ingredients in these happenings. There is the setting on an elevation or a mountain, there is the fire, there is the cloud, there is the bright light and there is a voice from the cloud.

Another New Testament concept used in connection with divine revelation is called 'epiphany,' when the divine nature of Jesus shines up e.g. for the shepherds and the wise men who recognize God in the poor child Jesus. James Joyce took over and changed the concept of epiphany as an important element in his understanding of art. For him it designated the moment when something normal becomes translucent. In his early novel fragment *Stephen Hero* Stephen defines the concept as follows: "By an epiphany he meant a *sudden* [my emphasis] spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a

17. Nancy B. Sederberg, *op.cit.* p. 21.

memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments."¹⁸ In the pre-Joycean biblical sense the revealing power lies with the spiritual godhead. Here the subject is more passive, and it is in this sense that O'Connor lets her characters experience epiphanies. As Carol Shloss observed, O'Connor "tended to emphasize a divine movement—human response pattern, whereby people are no longer agents of epiphany through the movements of their minds but the recipients of some great and even unsought knowledge."¹⁹ Settings and especially landscapes seemed to O'Connor particularly conducive to "showing grace working through nature" (MM 197).²⁰ Michael Cleary described O'Connor's depiction of the country as 'the touchstone' which "is often the locale for a religious epiphany which O'Connor has termed a moment of grace."²¹ In the following I shall first analyse three settings from O'Connor's fiction to show how she uses them as "the concrete dramatization of what the writer has perceived in depth."²² After that I shall highlight three images of translucency which play a particularly prominent role in her fiction: the peacock's tail, the treeline and the sun.

In the opening paragraph of her first novel *Wide World* Hazel Motes, the main character, looking out of the train window observes the following scene: "The train was racing through tree tops that fell away at intervals and showed the sun standing, very red, on the edge of the farthest woods. Nearer, the plowed fields curved and faded and the few hogs nosing in the furrows looked like large spotted stones" (CW 3). From his vantage point Haze observes – impressionistically – the foreground as racing tree tops, the middle ground as spotted stones and

18. Joyce, James, *Stephen Hero*, ed. by Theodore Spencer, New York, New Directions Paperback, 1963, p. 211.

19. Shloss, Carol, 'Epiphany' in Bloom, Harold, ed., *Flannery O'Connor*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p. 69.

20. Ralph C. Wood has argued that for O'Connor as a Catholic writer "nature and grace are inseparably united" since she sees "the whole created order through the clarifying and transforming lens of the Incarnation." Review of Edward Kessler, *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of Apocalypse* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986) in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 15, 1986, p. 89.

21. 'Environmental Influences in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction' in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 8, 1979, p. 34.

22. Freeman, Mary Glenn, op.cit. p. 26.

the far horizon as the red sun on the edge of the woods. A detailed description of a three-dimensional picture of a sunset with the red sun touching the treeline in the distance as typical elements. The opening of chapter 3 of the novel depicts a dark evening sky above the township of Taulkinham: "The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky" (CW 19). O'Connor's laconically short last sentence stands in striking contrast to the long clause preceding it with its well-drawn picture of the universe as a construction site. But as Haze observes, none of the people of the town pursuing their shopping needs are aware of the grandeur arching above them: they are blind to its beauty. Mary Glenn Freeman has drawn attention to the fact that O'Connor in the revision process of *Wise Blood* took heed of her literary adviser Caroline Gordon's comment that she could not 'see' Haze in the scene in chapter 13 after the patrolman had pushed Motes' car over the embankment.²³ O'Connor's change for the published version proves her attempt to add greater depth to the scene and show its effect upon Haze. After the original sentence: "Haze stood for a few minutes looking over at the scene", where 'the scene' is not particularized in any way, she added: "His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (CW 118). This is the moment that brings about his self-recognition.

The title of the story 'A Circle in the Fire' harks back to the Old Testament Book of Daniel, where three Jews were thrown into King Nebuchadnezzar's 'burning fiery furnace', because they denied worshipping his gods. They stayed unharmed 'in the midst of the fire' because an angel looking 'like a son of the gods' had cleared a circle in the fire for them, which led to Nebuchadnezzar's acceptance of their God, Jahweh [Dan 3.11-28]. Flannery O'Connor ends her story on a note of no harm to the three 'hungry' city boys Powell Boyd, Garfield Smith and W.T. Harper who had intruded upon Mrs. Cope, a typically pos-

23. Ibid. p. 32.

sessive O'Connor farmer. The vigilant observer of the power game between the boys and Mrs. Cope is the child who "could see the column of smoke rising and widening unchecked inside the granite line of trees. She stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" (CW 251). The 'granite line of trees' links the ending of the story to its very beginning: "Sometimes the last line of trees was a solid gray blue wall a little darker than the sky but this afternoon it was almost black and behind it the sky was a livid glaring white" (232). The angry and threatening atmosphere created by the trees and the sly is echoed in Mrs. Cope's state of mind: she "worked at the weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (CW 232). Mrs. Cope paranoiacally feels under constant threat, be it from the weeds, from a hurricane, from fire – or from the three boys. Her woods are de-scribed as a "fortress line of trees [which] was a hard granite blue" (CW 247). Though they seem strong the child experiences the sky behind them as more powerful: "The child thought the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through (CW 232). The sun actually breaks through, and Mrs. Cope is aware of the glory of the sunset. She tells the child: "Get up and look at the sunset, it's gorgeous. You ought to get up and look at it." The child, who *can* see, reminds Mrs. Cope of her blind fixation: "It looks like a fire. You better get up and smell around and see if the woods ain't on fire"" (CW 233). A few minutes later they are all "looking at the sun which was going down in front of them, almost on top of the tree line. It was swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods" (CW 241). In spite of the spectacularity of the sight Mrs. Cope does not come to recognize its deep meaning. A little later when "the sun burned so fast that it seemed to be trying to set everything in sight on fire" (CW 241) Mrs. Cope is still unable to see the true significance of the sun: it does not actually set anything on fire – that is the only thing she *can* sense. The text underlines that 'it seemed' or it looked 'as if', thus indicating that the importance of the fire of the sun is a different one. The next morning the power of the rising sun is tuned down, it is now only "a white hole" of "pale gold" "like an opening for the wind [the spirit] to escape through" (CW 247). The moment of new insight [grace] has

passed unrecognized by Mrs. Cope, and now the destructive fire ignited by the boys takes its toll and shows its effect upon her as "the face of the new misery" (CW 250).

In 'A View of the Woods' their radically different view on the woods leads to the deaths of Mary and her grandfather, Mr. Fortune. Though Mr. Fortune, who boasts of being a man of progress and who wants a future town named after him, is led to a moment, where insight was possible, he does not want to see the signs that the setting signals nor does he want to listen to Mary's warnings. Right from the beginning of the story O'Connor underlines the importance of the woods by personifying them: "The red corrugated lake ... was bordered on the other side by a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to *walk across the water* [my emphases] and continue along the edge of the fields" (CW 525). Mary "stared across the lot ... to the sullen line of black pine woods fringed on top with green. Behind that line was a narrow gray-blue line of more distant woods and beyond that nothing but the sky, entirely blank except for one or two threadbare clouds. She looked into this scene as if it were a person" (CW 537)²⁴. Apart from the personification we have recognizable elements of a significant setting: 'the line of woods,' 'the line of more distant woods,' 'nothing but the sky' and 'threadbare clouds.' Their significance, however, is beyond Mr. Fortune: "The old man looked across the road to assure himself again that there was *nothing* [my emphasis] over there to see" (CW 537). Later, in the afternoon, Mr. Fortune is alone in his room and he tries to understand, what it is that Mary sees in the woods:

The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, *as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before* [my emphases]. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. (CW 538)

24. In her article on 'Flannery O'Connor's Spiritual Landscape' Nancy B. Sederberg draws attention to the prominent element of personification in O'Connor's fiction: "the natural landscape becomes personified as an active force which either presages or actually perpetrates the characters' confrontations with their moment of grace. The most pervasive image O'Connor employs is the penetration of some natural barrier, usually a tree line, by an agent such as a swollen red sun, or even a bull/bullet, creating a gaping bloody wound or hole" (op. cit. p. 21).

Mr. Fortune had for an instant the experience of being in the presence of mystery, triggered by his view of the woods, but to him it is a hallucination and when he closes his eyes, his blindness of perception is punished with the sight of 'hellish red trunks.' The next morning the sky "was an unpleasant gray and the sun had not troubled to come out" (CW 540). As in 'The Circle in the Fire' this is a sign that the moment of insight has passed unrecognized. Again the trees are personified to witness Mr. Fortune's 'inadvertent' killing of Mary and his own fatal heart attack. "Then he fell on his back ... On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (CW 546). The 'mysterious dark files' march 'away into the distance' leaving the dying Mr. Fortune behind, isolated and desperate. At this point I think it is interesting to quote part of the interpretive discussion about 'A View of the Woods' that O'Connor had with her friend 'A', who had thought of Mary's father, Mr. Pitt, as a Christ symbol. O'Connor answered in her letter of December 28, 1956: "I had that role cut out for the woods. ... the woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. They walk across the water, they are bathed in a red light, and they in the end escape the old man's vision and march off over the hills. ... Part of the tension of the story is created by Mary Fortune and the old man being images of each other but opposite in the end. One is saved and the other is damned [sic]" (HB 189-90).

While Mrs. Cope and Mr. Fortune do not understand the signs of transcendence in nature other characters do and experience moments of deep insight or 'grace.' In some of O'Connor's stories the peacock is an integral part the setting and the glory of its ocellated tail is often a sign that a character is being offered a moment of insight. The priest in 'The Displaced Person' experiences such a moment: "The cock ... raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack ... 'Christ will come like that!' he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping" (CW 317). The use of the words 'transfixed' and 'gaping'²⁵ indicates that the priest is 'beyond' himself at this moment of divine presence in nature.

25. The same words are used in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus (Jn 19.34, 37).

O'Connor's description of the priest here is similar to that of fourteen-year old Parker in 'Parker's Back' at his first moment of transformation in the presence of the tattooed man at the fair (CW 658).

The other two prominent examples of translucency, the treeline and the sun, are often closely interconnected. In my comments on 'A Circle in the Fire' and of 'A View of the Woods' I have already mentioned the importance of the interaction between the treeline and the sun as an intersection between the immanent setting and its transcendent meaning. Douglas Powers has drawn attention to the importance of treelines in O'Connor's fiction. He painted twenty pictures with O'Connor treelines²⁶ and gave the following explanation of his enthusiasm for them: "In time I came to think of the treelines in O'Connor's fiction as zones of tension, a phrase used to describe the treelines of nature found in certain mountain ranges. ... conditions above which no trees can grow. Flora has changed as elevation has increased, but the final treeline is abrupt."²⁷ Douglas Powers' information that the final change between trees and naked rock in nature is 'abrupt' is interesting, because that is precisely what characterizes O'Connor's treelines: they are indicative of a 'sudden' break-through of the transcendent in the immanent, which may lead to a character's flash of insight, much in the same way as an 'epiphany' is a sudden spiritual manifestation. The morning light has such an effect upon Parker in 'Parker's Back': "The sky had lightened slightly and there were two or three streaks of yellow floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the sky-line. Parker fell back against the door as if he had been pinned there by a lance" (CW 673). In *The True Country* Carter Martin had already argued that "the sun represents ... the light of God, to be accepted but not forced."²⁸ Nancy Sederberg summarizes that "the sun always emerges as a personification of God's patient power against the puny projections of man's pride."²⁹

26. They were exhibited in the Martha J. Dillard Mary Vinson Memorial Library, Blacclbridge Hall, during the 'Habit of Art' Conference held between April 13 and 16, 1994 at Georgia College, Milledgeville, Ga. Six of them had previously been reproduced in vol. 20, 1991 of *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, pp. 55-60.

27. Powers, Douglas, 'Flannery O'Connor's Treelines' in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 20, 1991, p. 54. The treeline is also called 'timber line.'

28. Op. cit. p. 183.

29. Op. cit. p. 28.

In O'Connor's second novel *The Violent Bear It Away* the sun plays an important part in helping the main character, young Tarwater, along in his final stages towards acceptance of his calling as a prophet. In the penultimate chapter he says "he would have liked for [the sun] to get out of the sky altogether or to be veiled in a cloud" (CW 465) since he feels its impact so strongly. "The sun, from being only a large ball of glare, was becoming distinct like a large pearl, as if sun and moon had fused in a brilliant marriage" (CW 465). In the last chapter, when "the sun, red and mammoth, was about to touch the treeline" (CW 474), he finally gives in and accepts his calling and the command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (CW 478).

The most direct description of a 'vision' triggered by the setting is to be found in the final section of 'The Revelation,' where the protagonist [Mrs. Turpin] "bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs. ... Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson, ... A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge³⁰ extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. ... In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile. ... In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah" (CW 653-54).

Though the explicitness of this example is atypical I want to conclude with this instance of O'Connor's incarnational art, where the setting for a character who clearly belongs to the group described by O'Connor as 'almost blind' and 'hard of hearing' in an instant of insight – grace – becomes both translucent and 'personant.'

30. The image is reminiscent of the rainbow as Jahweh's sign of contract with Noah (Gen 9.13) and of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28.12).