THINKING THROUGH

Aquinas

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Aquinas

Essays on God, Humanity, and Christ

FREDERICK
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Published by Word on Fire Academic, an imprint of
Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
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Interior art direction by Nicolas Fredrickson, typesetting by Clark Kenyon,
cover design by Cassie Bielak, Rozann Lee, and Michael Stevens.

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ISBN: 978-1-68578-107-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023917514

For Boyd and Holly Taylor Coolman

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Preface

I had been teaching theology for almost a decade—and had written and published enough to be awarded tenure—before I dared to publish something on Thomas Aquinas. My hesitation had multiple causes.

The first was the immense scope both of writings by Thomas and of writings about Thomas: How could one master such a vast corpus? After all, I had chosen to write my dissertation on Julian of Norwich in part because she had written only one book (albeit in two versions) and, particularly when I was writing on her (the early 1990s), the body of serious secondary literature on her was not very large. With Thomas, the case was quite otherwise, and there was always the fear of having missed something, either something Thomas himself had written or something crucially important that had been written about him. And we all know that the greatest fear of every academic is that of having overlooked the key primary text or the epoch-making essay on a topic.

The second was my fear that I did not have a "proper" Thomistic pedigree, by which I mean that the people from whom I had learned Thomas Aquinas (James Clayton at the University of the South, George Lindbeck at Yale Divinity School, and David Steinmetz and Stanley Hauerwas at Duke University) were not known primarily as experts on Thomas and—a fact even more damning in the eyes of some—were not even Roman Catholics. I had a nagging suspicion that my reading of Thomas was somehow dangerously homegrown and might be deficient in its grasp of Thomist fundamentals.

The third was that Thomas himself seemed tame and, dare I say it, just a tad boring. He represented Scholastic officialdom,

and one point of studying writers like Julian of Norwich had been to crack open the narrow canon of what counted as theology in the Middle Ages. Even Bonaventure, though a Scholastic, seemed preferable, with his weird numerology and proximity to Francis of Assisi (surely one of the most untamed figures in Christian history). While there were things to be learned from reading him, Thomas hardly seemed like a suitable thought partner if one wanted to engage in cutting-edge theology. He was undeniably important, but was he really all that interesting?

But I did eventually write something on Thomas, mainly because a good friend prevailed upon me to do so for a volume he was co-editing. Then, after a few more essays, I published a selection of texts from the *Summa theologiae* with accompanying commentary, much of which had been originally written to help the students to whom I assigned these texts as readings.[1] Working through these texts, rendering them in what I hoped was readable English, teasing out Thomas's distinctions and trying to explain his terminology—all of this helped me begin to think that maybe I did understand Thomas and that one didn't need to read everything in order to understand something. Requests for essays on Thomas from people who were not close friends, some of whom I had never even met, further suggested to me that perhaps I had something to say about Aquinas that was worth reading and that Thomas was himself perhaps not simply important but also interesting. Over time, the body of essays I have written on Thomas has grown to the point where it seemed appropriate to collect some of them into a book. I have lightly revised them, occasionally adding references to helpful scholarly work that has appeared since their original publication.

1. *Holy Teaching: Introducing the "Summa Theologiae" of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005). A second, revised and expanded edition has since appeared as *The Essential "Summa Theologiae": A Reader and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

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The first essay, "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing," serves as an overture to the collection as a whole, both as a kind of summary statement of how I approach Thomas Aquinas and as an *apologia* for my dubiously pedigreed, homegrown form of Thomism. The writer Flannery O'Connor and her self-description as a "hillbilly Thomist" serve in the essay as a way of developing a version of Thomas that might be called broadly Augustinian.[2] Looking back at this essay, I find a number of themes and emphases that recur throughout my writing on Thomas. There is the attempt, without sacrificing the principle that grace perfects nature, to highlight the way in which grace might also violently disturb nature. There is an embrace of a strongly apophatic reading of Thomas that takes him at his word when he says that we know better what God is not than what God is. There is an emphasis on Thomas's use of *argumenta ex convenientia*, a form of argument whose importance and fundamentally "aesthetic" character was first suggested to me by George Lindbeck in his seminar at Yale on Aquinas. There is a conviction that, while Thomas's theology is not "Christocentric" in the sense that, say, Karl Barth's is, Jesus Christ truly is central to Thomas's thought. There is also the strong sense that what Thomas attempted theologically in his day must necessarily be carried out in a quite different way in our own. The remainder of the essays in this volume, in various ways, unpack what is said in this first essay.

The first section of essays covers topics roughly corresponding to the First Part of the *Summa*—namely, the task of theology and God's nature and activity. Essay 2, "Aquinas, Contemplation, and Theology," engages the philosopher Jonathan Lear's reading

2. The name "The Hillbilly Thomists" has since been adopted by a group of Dominican friars who play a combination of old-time string band music and original compositions (e.g., "Bourbon, Bluegrass, and the Bible") that I believe show a similar Augustinian sensibility. See the Hillbilly Thomists, *Living for the Other Side*, CD baby, 2021, compact disc.

of Aristotle in order to explore the kind of knowledge Thomas thinks theology is. Lear's interpretation of Aristotle helped show me that the one whom Thomas called "the Philosopher" was actually, despite his seeming abstractness, asking fairly fundamental questions about what we are doing when we inquire and answered those questions in ways that remain helpful today. This helped me see that Thomas is similarly asking fundamental questions, and his thought is not wedded to an outdated metaphysical system but to a dynamic tradition of inquiry.

Essay 3, "*Praeambula Fidei*," began as a talk given to seminarians at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and is a fairly basic presentation of what Thomas says about how what we know about God through natural reason (e.g., his "five ways" of demonstrating God's existence) relates to what we know about God through revelation. Of course, even a "basic presentation" of this topic leads one into a minefield of controversy since it raises issues of nature and grace, the foundations or lack thereof of Christian truth claims, and the very possibility of demonstrating God's existence. I find that, over time, I have grown friendlier to the claim that one can demonstrate the existence of what people call "God," though I have also grown more convinced that what one has accomplished in such a demonstration is something more modest than some people—both theists and atheists—think it is.

The fourth essay, "God as Author: Thinking Through a Metaphor," might at first glance seem only tangentially related to Thomas Aquinas, who comes up for discussion mainly in the section discussing the history of the metaphor of God as an author. Other thinkers, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, seem to feature as or more prominently. But in fact, the entire project of the essay arose from my attempt to explain to students how Thomas understood the nature of the God-world relationship. As one does when teaching, I was casting about for a metaphor or analogy that might shed some light on the topic when I

landed on the way in which the action of a novel is—or ought to be—accounted for by the agents within the novel, but the novel as a whole must be accounted for by an author who is (typically) not an agent within the novel. This seemed to be a helpful metaphor to my students, and the more I played with it, the more interesting I found it. As Thomas himself shows, it is often when we are trying to figure out how to teach something we think we know that we come to understand it better ourselves. I would add that I am no longer as confident as I was in that essay that world-building fictional narratives are exclusively modern phenomena that are found only in the novel.

The fifth essay, "Imagination and Theology," was originally given as a paper at a conference titled Imagination and the Mediation of Religious Truth organized by Marianne Servaas at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and gives an account both of Thomas's understanding of human knowing and of the capacity and limits of that knowing when it comes to God. As sometimes happens, I had committed to presenting a paper on Thomas on a particular topic, only to discover that what he had to say on that topic did not seem particularly interesting. As also sometimes happens, further inquiry revealed that even though what he had to say might not fit with our modern expectations (in this case, the expectation that "imagination" is a key faculty of human creativity), it was pretty interesting on its own terms (in this case, as a way of understanding how human beings inhabit the world). One of the joys of reading Thomas (or really any thinker of the past) is having our sense of what is and is not "interesting" challenged.

The second section of essays covers topics found in the Second Part of Thomas's *Summa*—namely, human action as virtuous and vicious. Essay 6, "The Unity of the Virtues and the Journeying Self," was originally written for a *Festschrift* for my teacher Stanley Hauerwas and deals with the vexing question of whether

one can have one virtue without having all the other virtues as well. This question received an almost universal answer of "no" in the ancient and medieval worlds and has in the modern era received an almost universal answer of "yes," since it seems overly perfectionist to demand, say, that one be temperate in order to be just (to say nothing of whether the virtue of justice requires supernatural charity). What Hauerwas helped me see was that behind the question of the quality of our actions is the question of the quality of our selves (what he calls "character"). The language of "virtue" is concerned first not with doing good or bad actions but with becoming good or bad people, and the ancient and medieval impulse to say that the virtues must be connected reflects the conviction that a virtuous self must be a unified self.

Essay 7, "Conversion, Coercion, and Persuasion: Thomas Aquinas on the Will," has never been published, originating as a lecture given at the Catholic Theological Society of America and then, in significantly revised form, at Yale Divinity School. In it, I look at Thomas's account of the will and how this relates to issues of consent, coercion, and persuasion, suggesting that modern concerns about consent face difficulties in distinguishing coercion from persuasion because they lack an account of the good toward which the will is properly ordered. I hint at the end that such a distinction may require a robust and even normative account of the good.

Essay 8, "Sin: A Reading of *Summa theologiae* 1-2.71.6," was written as an introduction to Thomas on the topic of sin and the importance of intention in his account, but it also sought to show that Thomas's account of intention means that sin can only be discerned within the context of a life that is extended in time. In this way, it is something of a companion piece to the fourth and sixth essays, both of which try to think of the self "narratively" in order to make sense of Thomas's views on the relation of divine and human action. "Narrative" is not a category that

Thomas makes much explicit use of, and certainly not in his account of the human person. But one of the things I have learned over the years is that in trying to understand Thomas and to use his thought for theological purposes, one is not obliged simply to repeat his categories.

The ninth essay, "Wine, Women, Kings, and Truth," was the first piece I ever published on Thomas, written for a volume on political theology. I agreed to write it not simply because of the importuning of William Cavanaugh but because I thought that by focusing neither on Aquinas's account of law nor on his treatise on kingship, but rather on his discussion in his *Commentary on John* of Jesus's exchange with Pilate and his odd little quodlibetal question on the relative strength of wine, women, kings, and truth, I might actually come up with a different angle on Thomas on politics. Working on this essay helped me see that though the *Summa theologiae* is Thomas's masterwork, there is much to be gained by reading around in his other works. It also forced me at the outset of writing on Thomas to face up to some of his limitations—limitations that we all have due to our situatedness in time and space.

The third section of essays covers topics found in the Third Part of the *Summa*—namely, Christology and the sacraments. Essay 10, "Incarnation, Redemption, and the Character of God," shows the importance of *convenientia* or "fittingness" in approaching the controverted topic of the motive of the Incarnation—the question of whether, if Adam had not sinned, God would have become incarnate. I tried to show in this essay that Thomas's position is not exactly what is often taken to be the "Thomist" one, and that perhaps Thomas and John Duns Scotus are not so clearly opposed to one another as is sometimes claimed.

The eleventh essay, "Taking Up and Taking Down: Ellacuría, Aquinas, and the Crucified People," brings Thomas into conversation with Latin American liberation theology. Once again, his

notion of *convenientia* is placed in the foreground. This essay, which began life as a lecture at the Society of Christian Ethics and has not been published previously, seems to displease people on both the Thomist side (who are suspicious that I grant too much to Ellacuría) and the liberationist side (who feel that I am too critical of Ellacuría and insufficiently critical of Thomas). Having two different and in some ways opposed groups think you're wrong is not an indication that you're right—you may just be comprehensively wrong—but in this case, I do think that I have brought Thomas and Ellacuría into a mutually correcting and enriching dialogue on the important topic of how we think about the necessity of Christ's Crucifixion for our salvation.

Essay 12, "'That the Faithful Become the Temple of God': The Church Militant in Thomas's *Commentary on John*," is another fairly early essay on Thomas, which largely consists of combing through a single work by Thomas to see what it has to say about the Church. The potential tedium of reading such an exercise is, I hope, somewhat alleviated by my attempt to enlist Thomas in helping us reflect on what, alas, remains a pressing issue in the Church: how to maintain the creedal affirmation that the Church is "holy" in the face of the manifest failures of the Church, both in her individual members and in her institutional structures.

The thirteenth essay, "'The Body of Christ is Made from Bread': Transubstantiation and the Grammar of Creation," is, like essay 8, a close reading of a single article of the *Summa*, which is in turn a grammatical exegesis of a piece of Christian speech. Of course, every article of the *Summa* presumes many other articles (in this case, Thomas's discussions of creation and natural change), and Thomas's grammatical inquiries are simultaneously metaphysical inquiries, so this essay in some ways ends up touching on everything Thomas has to say about everything. And it is fitting that it is an article on the mystery of the Eucharist that is

the occasion for displaying the interconnectedness of Thomas's thought, since it is this mystery of which Thomas is purported to have said at the very end of his life, "I receive you, price of my soul's redemption; I receive you, food for my journey. For love of you I have studied, watched, and labored. You have I preached; you have I taught."[3]

Essay 14, "Augustine and Thomas in Modern Catholic Rhetoric," forms a coda to this collection. Implicit throughout all the essays is the question of how one goes about using Thomas for contemporary purposes. This essay looks at one way of doing this that I judge to be particularly unhelpful: the rhetorical use of Thomas as a trope for optimism (with Augustine forming the opposite, pessimistic pole). In the course of writing this essay, I discovered that this was not only a false presentation of Thomas (and Augustine) but was also one of very recent vintage. In a sense, this essay returns to the project sketched in the first essay in the collection: the reconciliation of Thomas and Augustine that I call (with tongue only slightly in cheek) hillbilly Thomism.

A homily that I had the honor of preaching at St. Thomas Aquinas parish in Baltimore on their patronal festival forms a coda to the entire collection, an acknowledgment that though Thomas was a theologian, he was so for the sake of being a preacher, and the content of his preaching was the wisdom of the cross.

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I have titled this collection *Thinking Through Aquinas* because this is what I have tried to do in these essays, and this in two senses.

First, I have tried to think through Aquinas in the sense of trying to figure out what he is saying and why he says it. In each of these essays, I have tried to follow Thomas's arguments, to

3. Guillaume de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, ed. Claire le Brun-Gouanvic (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), ch. 58.

grasp his distinctions, and to see the point in what he is arguing. Though Thomas is, in my estimation, an extremely clear thinker and writer, he is also an extremely subtle and sophisticated one, and one must sometimes wrestle with the text in order to understand it. Moreover, his terminology is sometimes unfamiliar, and his thought world is even less familiar. He presumes a Scholastic culture that is quite alien to modern readers: a set of disputational practices and a body of authoritative texts that every participant in that culture would know but that are *terra incognita* to us. Thinking Thomas through requires the labor of thinking ourselves, to the degree that we can, back into that world. These essays are in a sense the residue of my own struggle to understand Thomas.

Second, I have tried to think through Thomas Aquinas in the sense of viewing a range of theological questions with Thomas as my "lens." I think this, more than adherence to a particular set of positions, is what makes one a "Thomist," though I suspect some Thomists would disagree with me on this.[4] Thomas is not the only or even the best[5] thinker that the Catholic tradition has produced, but he is certainly a first-rate thinker, and in trying to grasp what Thomas thinks on a particular issue and why he thinks it, one simultaneously finds oneself understanding the issue better, spotting potential dead ends, grappling with the tradition up to and including Thomas, confronting difficulties, and engaging in a host of other things one must do to do theology well. So, I think through theological questions by thinking through Thomas, even when I do not end up thinking what Thomas thinks. Because I have found this so worthwhile an endeavor, I offer these essays as an encouragement to others to think through Thomas.

One of my initial hesitations about ever writing on Thomas was my sense of him as a "safe" and even boring thinker, and

4. Of course, Thomas himself was supremely unconcerned with whether he or anyone else was a "Thomist."

5. Upon being named "America's Best Theologian" by *Time* magazine, Stanley Hauerwas responded, "'Best' is not a theological category."

that doing focused work on him was never going to lead me to do exciting, creative theology. Over twenty years of thinking through Aquinas has shown me how ill-founded this fear was. It was ill-founded because there is probably no better recipe for theology that boringly repeats the common wisdom of the day than to set out to be exciting and creative. Thomas's theology is, in fact, immensely exciting and creative, not because it sets out to be such, but because it seeks to be faithful to a tradition that is vast and varied in its attempt to speak of the mystery of divine love, and in being faithful it joins its own voice to that vast variety. In thinking through Aquinas, we join him in the adventure of *sacra doctrina*—holy teaching—as we seek to hand on to others the fruits of our own contemplation of the divine mystery.

***

I have spent a couple of decades thinking with Thomas as my companion, but he has hardly been the only one. Colleagues at Loyola University Maryland and elsewhere—too many to mention by name—have been my companions as well. But two in particular stand out and must be named: Boyd Taylor Coolman of Boston College and Holly Taylor Coolman of Providence College. Boyd is one of the founders of the Boston Colloquy in Historical Theology and remains one of its prime movers. This annual gathering is an exquisitely curated conference of superb papers in late ancient and medieval theology, with generous amounts of time for discussions that are somehow—shockingly—free of academic grandstanding. I have had my horizons expanded by my annual participation in this colloquy. Holly, along with Gilles Mongeau, SJ, founded the Aquinas Studium, which meets each summer for a week of prayer, fellowship, and close reading of selected texts of Aquinas on a particular theme. The time spent with fellow lovers of St. Thomas is intellectually stimulating,

informative, and incredibly fun (my family refers to it as "Aquinas Summer Camp"). Both Boyd and Holly have become not only co-laborers and colleagues, but friends who have welcomed me into their home and into the life of their sometimes chaotic and always interesting family. They exemplify that virtue that Thomas called *amicitia*, by which wise persons share their pleasure with those among whom they dwell. In gratitude for the *amicitia* they have shown to me, I dedicate this book to them.

Prologue

On Being a Hillbilly Thomist

1

Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing

THE PICTURE OF A PERFECT THOMIST GENTLEMAN

There are certain things one expects of a good Thomist. He or she will highly prize reason, believing that human nature, though somewhat damaged by sin, on the whole functions quite well, and that assiduous application of human reason forms the basis on which it is possible to enter into dialogue with those who do not accept the Catholic faith. In contrast to the Augustinian/Protestant pessimism about human nature, the Thomist affirms the fundamental goodness of human nature and reason. Therefore, when confronted by some variety of unbelief—whether it be atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, or Protestant—the good Thomist will wield the weapon of logical rigor deftly but also serenely, knowing that the doubter's greatest enemy is his or her own natural reason. As the early-twentieth-century Thomist Walter Farrell said concerning Thomas's five ways, "The philosopher who, for reasons best known to himself, decides to challenge these proofs has entered a war of cosmic proportions; fortunately for himself, he cannot win."[1]

The commitment of good Thomists to reasoned argument means that they will be rhetorically austere and not prone to

* Originally published as "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing: On Being a Hillbilly Thomist," in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the 21st Century*, ed. Jim Fodor and Frederick Bauerschmidt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2004), 163–83.

1. Walter Farrell, *A Companion to the Summa*, vol. 1, *The Architect of the Universe* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1941), 44.

passionate exhortation. With human nature and reason on their side, they have no need to inflame the emotions in order to bend the will. Indeed, the more dispassionate the discussion, the more the truth will be made manifest. Good Thomists can afford to be gentlemen. The climate of their discussions will be, as John Courtney Murray put it in a different context, "cool and dry, with the coolness and dryness that characterize good argument among informed and responsible men."[2]

Murray's phrase is so vivid that it can be too easily forgotten that Murray himself expressed doubts about the effectiveness of such arguments in what he, in the 1950s, already called the "post-modern" context.[3] Perhaps we live in a world in which informed and responsible men are in short supply, since cool and dry argumentation does not seem to be leading us to any sort of consensus about the "Ultimate Questions," and Murray frankly acknowledges that "the tradition of reason, which is known as the ethic of natural law, is dead."[4] Integral to modern pluralism "is the skeptic or agnostic view that it is useless or illegitimate even to ask 'Ultimate Questions.'"[5] And yet Murray, himself a good Thomist gentleman, in the end echoes Farrell's optimism that the "tradition of reason" will ultimately triumph, perhaps by a kind of resurrection from the dead, albeit one foreordained by nature. This is particularly the case with regard to knowing the truth, but it is also the case in the realm of practical reason; people are "by nature . . . natural law jurists" because "they reach the essential imperatives of their own nature and know them to be

2. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 7. Speaking of the description of Aquinas's style as "dry," A.-D. Sertillanges compares it to Egyptian art or the metopes of the Parthenon and says, "A writer must be dry in that sense, if he is to say much in few words, and not put an obstacle between the mind and the truth" (*St. Thomas Aquinas and His Work*, trans. Godfrey Anstruther [London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne (no publication date, but *Imprimatur* 1932)], 111).

3. For Murray's clearest analysis of "post-modernism," see *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 101–21. Murray's description is roughly equivalent to what Flannery O'Connor calls "nihilism."

4. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 293.

5. Murray, 128.

unthwartably imperative—however much they may subsequently deform them, and destroy their proper bases, by uninformed or prejudiced reflective thought."[6]

Such serene, unpolemical, gentlemanly convictions seem to accord with the tone of Thomas's own writings. The disputational form taken by the *Summa theologiae*, as well as other of Thomas's works, seems to be a bit of dialectical window dressing; though the form is that of an argument, the tone is "cool and dry." Thomas rarely evinces anger or resorts to sarcasm or employs any rhetorical technique to defeat his enemies. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to conceive of Thomas as *having* any enemies. Standing on the common ground of reason, intellectual opponents are in fact partners in the common search for truth. As Thomas O'Meara has put it, "His writings reveal a sense of tranquility: an appreciative contemplation of the structure of the cosmos is joined to a calm openness to all that exists."[7] Even if one is unwilling fully to endorse A.-D. Sertillanges's statement that Thomas "is hardly an 'author,' or even a 'man' but rather a channel connecting us directly with intelligible truth,"[8] it does seem that Thomas, too, is a perfect Thomist gentleman.

But without denying the serenity of Thomas's writing, I want to challenge the assumption that the substance of his writing consists in his cool, dry tone and that he really does write as if he were a "direct channel to intelligible truth." Put more concisely, does Thomas's theological conviction that "grace perfects nature" necessarily manifest itself in the pragmatic conviction that even nonbelievers are always at root open to reasoned argument? Is gentlemanliness the "substantial form" of Thomism? Or is it rather an accident of the particular context in which he wrote?

6. Murray, 317.

7. Thomas Franklin O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 36.

8. Sertillanges, *St. Thomas Aquinas and His Work*, 109.

And if the latter is the case, might "Thomism" look and sound quite different in our quite different context?

In attempting to address these questions, I will invoke the aid of the American novelist and short story writer Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964),[9] who once wrote to a friend that everyone who had read her novel *Wise Blood* "thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression . . . that I am a hillbilly Thomist."[10] Anyone familiar with O'Connor's work knows that it is quite ungentlemanly, not to mention unladylike, and that nothing could be further in tone from the writings of Thomas than O'Connor's stories, in which atheist prophets blind themselves, sweet old grandmothers get shot, and clever girls get their artificial legs stolen by itinerant Bible salesmen. But perhaps a modern follower of Thomas Aquinas, taking as her audience "the people who think God is dead,"[11] would write not with the serenely ordered cadences of the *Summa theologiae* but something more akin to the shocking, grotesque syncopations that one finds in O'Connor's novels and short stories.

HILLBILLY THOMISM: MYSTERY AND MANNERS

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born and lived most of her life in the American South, including the last thirteen years when

9. The secondary literature on O'Connor, like that on Aquinas, is voluminous. For an account of her life, which is particularly interesting for the way it interweaves it with accounts of the lives of three other American Catholic writers (Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Walker Percy), see Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

10. Flannery O'Connor to Robie Macauley, May 18, 1955, in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 934. The remark is typical O'Connor—a humorously self-deprecating recognition that, in an upcoming television interview, she wants to come across as erudite and intelligent but "will probably not be able to think of anything to say . . . but 'Huh?' and 'Ah dunno.'" At the same time, O'Connor is an author for whom the comic often serves as a delivery device for truth.

11. O'Connor to "A.," August 2, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 943. The woman identified in the published version of O'Connor's letters as "A." was Elizabeth Hester, to whom O'Connor addressed some of her most theologically searching letters. Hester, who briefly converted to Catholicism under O'Connor's influence, was also a longtime correspondent with Iris Murdoch. Her identity was finally revealed upon her death by suicide in 1998.

her health was ravaged by lupus, which killed her at the age of thirty-nine. Her status as a "regional writer" was established at the outset: she stood in the line of William Faulkner and Eudora Welty and excelled in the subgenre of "Southern-grotesque" or "Southern-gothic." Indeed, so grotesque were her characters that many of her early readers took her for a misanthropic atheist and missed the profound influence that O'Connor's Roman Catholicism had on her writing, an influence that was made abundantly clear with the publication of her letters in 1979. In many of these letters, she responds to misreadings of her stories that see them as fundamentally nihilistic. To one correspondent she wrote, "My stories have been watered and fed by Dogma,"[12] and to another, who had claimed to see affinities between her writing and existentialist authors, she wrote, "My philosophical notions don't derive from Kierkegard (I can't even spell it) but from St. Thomas Aquinas."[13]

But in what sense did Flannery O'Connor consider herself a Thomist? While she once described herself as "a Thomist three times removed," by which she meant "one who doesn't read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis,"[14] she clearly *did* read Aquinas, as well as having him mediated through secondary sources, particularly through Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, which she mentions on numerous occasions in her letters.[15] Yet hers is not

12. O'Connor to Thomas Mabry, March 1, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 929.

13. O'Connor to Helen Greene, May 23, 1952, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 897. O'Connor also saw connections between her identity as a southerner and her identity as a Catholic. She writes in an essay, "There are certain conditions necessary for the emergence of Catholic literature which are found nowhere else in this country in such abundance as in the South" ("The Catholic Novelist in the South," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 854).

14. O'Connor to John Hawkes, April 20, 1961, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1149.

15. Her claim that she read the *Summa theologiae* for twenty minutes each night before bed is quite possibly a joke (see her Letter to "A.," August 9, 1955, in *O'Connor*: *Collected Works*, 945), but she did go to the trouble to obtain a copy of *De veritate* in order to read what Aquinas had to say about prophecy (see her Letter to "A.," December 25, 1959, in *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald [New York: Vintage Books, 1980], 367). And while the mere presence of books in a personal library is no sure indicator of their influence, O'Connor did own several Aquinas anthologies, including Pegis's *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* and Gilby's *Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts*. See Lorine M. Getz, *Flannery O'Connor: Her Life, Library and Book Reviews* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1980).

the Cajetan-tinged philosophical Thomism of Maritain, nor the Thomism of the Twenty-Four Thomistic Theses, nor is it the strict-observance Thomism of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange. Above all, it is not the "rabbinic Thomism" that argues by way of citations from the *Summa*. Rather, it is the broad Thomistic humanism that was the shared inheritance of the Church from the *doctor communis*. In a letter to a college student troubled by religious doubts, O'Connor summed up her own beliefs:

> I believe what the Church teaches—that God has given us reason to use and that it can lead us toward a knowledge of him, through analogy; that he has revealed himself in history and continues to do so through the Church, and that he is present (not just symbolically) in the Eucharist on our altars. To believe all this I don't take any leap into the absurd. I find it reasonable to believe, even though those beliefs are beyond reason.[16]

This summary of "what the Church teaches" certainly has a broadly Thomistic cast to it: natural knowledge of God, analogy, revealed knowledge of God, and even transubstantiation. And the "three times removed" character of it—Thomas mediated through the common tradition of the Church rather than Thomas as the object of intensive study by specialists—might seem sufficiently unsophisticated to warrant the "hillbilly" epithet.[17]

Yet I would propose that there is something still more distinctively Thomist in O'Connor's work. This is the conjunction of what she calls "mystery" and "manners." She writes in an essay, "The mystery . . . is the mystery of our position on earth, and

16. O'Connor to Alfred Corn, June 16, 1962, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1166.

17. My own experience is that one only writes of Thomas with fear and trembling because there is always some Thomist lurking around the corner, ready to leap out and demonstrate that you have focused too much on the *Summa theologiae* and ignored the Aristotelian commentaries or, even worse, your Latin is so poor that you have failed to appreciate Thomas's use of the ablative absolute in a particular passage. Of course, one might respond that Thomas himself dared to interpret Aristotle without knowing Greek, making him perhaps a "hillbilly Aristotelian."

the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery."[18] O'Connor names as "mystery" the irreducibly ungraspable reality that is at the heart of our existence: "Our life is and will remain essentially mysterious."[19] Despite our attempts to capture the essential in concepts, "it is not answerable to any of our formulas. It doesn't rest finally in a statable kind of solution. It ought to throw you back on the living God."[20] At the same time, we never encounter mystery in itself but always in conjunction with "manners"—not only the stylistic manner of the artist but also those highly particular traditions that accumulate like sediment over time and that structure our lives and make them livable in the face of mystery. As she notes in one of her essays, "Somewhere is better than anywhere. And traditional manners, however unbalanced, are better than no manners at all."[21] But manners are not simply a hedge against the annihilating presence of mystery. Indeed, without the backdrop of manners—culture, tradition, custom, dogma—mystery cannot appear. As O'Connor writes to a friend, "For me a dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind."[22]

O'Connor believes that this conjunction of mystery and manners is something alien to modern people. We like our mystery neat, without dilution by manners. We prefer "spirituality" to "religion," with its overlay of dead customs. We are fascinated by the exotic customs of other cultures while at the same time thinking that we are somehow beyond all that sort of thing. As O'Connor puts it, the modern writer is asked "to separate

18. Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 124.

19. O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 816.

20. O'Connor to Sister Mariella Gable, May 4, 1963, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1182–83.

21. O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the South," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 856.

22. O'Connor to "A.," August 2, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 943.

mystery from manners . . . in order to produce something a little more palatable to the modern temper."[23] Yet in separating them, we lose both, and thus we have the modern world, bereft of both mystery and manners, transcendence and tradition.[24] Those who still cleave to manners as the door into mystery inevitably appear to be "hillbillies" in the eyes of the modern world, no different from O'Connor's backwoods prophets. They lack the sophistication (or sophistry) needed to strip themselves of manners in order to be cosmopolitan global citizens.

Aquinas does not make much use of the term "mystery" apart from formulae such as "the mystery of the Incarnation" or "the mystery of the Trinity."[25] Nor does he speak often of "manners" (*mores)*, though he speaks frequently of "custom" (*consuetudo)*. Yet in Thomas, we find the same constellation of convictions that O'Connor indicates with her language of mystery and manners. Creation's rootedness in incomprehensible divine mystery is at the heart of Thomas's thinking. Our natural reason knows God best when it knows God as unknown: "The highest human knowledge of God is that which knows that it does not know God, inasmuch as it knows that what God is transcends whatsoever we conceive of him."[26] At the same time, Thomas devotes meticulous attention to human "manners." The Second Part of the *Summa theologiae* is devoted to the virtues and vices that give structure to human cultural life, and in the Third Part of the *Summa*, Thomas pays

23. O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 803.

24. See her Letter to "A.," August 2, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 943–44: "Henry James said that the young woman of the future would know nothing of mystery or manners. He had no business to limit it to one sex."

25. Thomas offers little sustained reflection on the term "mystery." Apart from the formulaic use (as in speaking of "the mystery of the Incarnation" or "the mystery of the Trinity"), he seems to use the term, following the Greek usage, as a synonym for "sacrament."

26. *De potentia* 7.5 ad 14. As Karl Rahner comments on this passage: "It affirms that even in the beatific vision that which is known of God is known as the incomprehensible. The ultimate human knowledge of God is attained only when its character of mysteriousness is most forcibly displayed: supreme knowledge is knowledge of the supreme mystery as such" ("The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth [New York: Crossroad, 1982], 59).

equally careful attention to the customary speech of the Church regarding the mystery of the Incarnation. These are the things that form the backdrop against which mystery appears.

It is Thomas's conviction that it is only in the conjunction of transcendent mystery and human tradition and teaching that justice can be done to either. God's transcendence must be articulated in teaching and embodied in tradition in order for us to know the divine mystery as an abyss of light (to use Josef Pieper's phrase) that gives us life rather than an annihilating abyss of darkness. Yet those teachings and traditions, because they are instances of human language, must always be understood as articulations of a truth that transcends them and to which they are ultimately not adequate. As Thomas says, the human language with which we attempt to say something about God "leaves the thing signified as uncomprehended, and as exceeding the signification of the term."[27] In O'Connor's terms, dogma is not an end in itself but a gateway to the contemplation of the divine mystery. Or, as Gregory the Great put it—in a passage quoted by both Aquinas and O'Connor—"Holy Scripture, in its manner of speaking, transcends all knowledge, because in one and the same utterance, while recounting an action, it discloses a mystery."[28]

To conceive of the conjunction of mystery and manners as being at the heart of Thomas's thought runs against the grain of what was, at least in years past, a prevalent image of Thomas. Thomas has been associated with a kind of apologetic

27. *Summa theologiae* 1.13.5. To put it in Thomas's typical language, our speech about God is true according to the *res significata* (i.e., we know that we can say true things about God) but not according to the *modus significandi* (i.e., we cannot know the *way* in which these things are true).

It is worth underlining here that Thomas holds this radical inadequacy of language to be the case not only in what later thinkers would call "natural" or "philosophical" theology but in "revealed" theology as well. A good example of this is the discomfort he feels (shared by Augustine before him and Barth and Rahner after him) with the dogmatic language of "persons" used in reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Though firmly embedded in the tradition of the Church, the language of divine "persons" can be misleading if taken in the ordinary sense of "person." See *Summa theologiae* 1.29.4.

28. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 20.1. Cf. O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 863, and Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10.

rationalism—someone who thought that one could, by the exercise of reason, come to know quite a lot about God. In this view, what Thomas is primarily interested in are the things that reason can tell us about God and the world; the economy of salvation is given a peripheral place, which accounts for the way in which Christology is "tacked-on" to the end of the *Summa theologiae*.[29] According to this view, his chief *intellectual* (as opposed to devotional or homiletical) interest in Scripture and doctrine is in applying the tools of reason to them in order to forge a system that can draw conclusions with scientific certainty.[30] Not surprisingly, such a view of Thomas finds him far more interesting as a speculative metaphysician than as a theologian.[31]

This view of Thomas is increasingly rejected. On the one hand, numerous interpreters of Aquinas, while still approaching him primarily as a philosopher, stress the profoundly apophatic character of his thought, taking with absolute seriousness what he

29. The charge can be found in various places. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* [1967], trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 15–21. With regard to the structure of the *Summa theologiae*, and particularly the place of Christ, the debate in the past fifty years has been a busy one. For a discussion of these debates, as well as yet another constructive solution, see Jean-Marc Laporte, "Christ in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*: Peripheral or Pervasive?" *The Thomist* 67, no. 2 (April 2003): 221–48.

30. For one example of this image of Thomas, see Adolf von Harnack:

> Thus the theological science of the thirteenth century can be described as the submitting to dialectical-systematic revision of ecclesiastical dogma and ecclesiastical practice, with the view of unfolding them in a system having unity and comprehending all that in the highest sense is worthy of being known, with the view of proving them, and so of reducing to the service of the Church all the forces of the understanding and the whole product of science. (*History of Dogma*, vol. 6 [3rd ed., 1900], trans. Neil Buchanan [New York: Dover, 1961], 154.)

This characterization of Harnack's is not materially different from that of the neo-Scholastic Ludwig Ott: "According to the teaching of St. Thomas, theology is a true science, because it uses as principles the securely founded basic truths of Divine Revelation and draws from these new knowledge (theological conclusions) by a strict scientific method and unites the whole in a closed system" (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch [Cork: Mercier, 1958], 1).

31. On the other hand, there are also philosophers who greatly admire Thomas on questions of philosophical psychology but reject his metaphysics. Anthony Kenny, for example, says of such venerable elements of "Thomist metaphysics" as the real distinction between essence and existence and the account of God as *esse ipsum subsistens* that "even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charges of sophistry and illusion" (*Aquinas* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980], 60).

says about the fundamentally mysterious nature of God.[32] On the other hand, there has been a significant reassessment of both the depth and originality of Thomas's engagement with Scripture and doctrine.[33] In other words, central to Thomas's work is reflection on the mystery of God and the scriptural manner of speaking of that mystery.[34] Thomas is not interested simply in the scientific ordering of discrete bits of revealed "data"; rather, he seeks to discern the way in which the mystery of God is revealed in the *modo conversationis* or manner of life of Jesus of Nazareth, a manner of life that is not subject to *a priori* judgments of necessity precisely because it is the historical revelation of the divine mystery. There is a kind of dovetailing between the historical contingency of Jesus's life and the mystery of God because neither is subject to rational deduction.

While we do not find in Thomas the kind of appeal to "narrative" that became popular among theologians in the last part of the twentieth century, we ought not to underestimate the importance to Thomas of the concrete events narrated in Scripture, not simply as data upon which reason operates, but as in its totality

32. An early classic in this regard is Josef Pieper's *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays* [1957], trans. John Murray and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1999). Another example would be Brian Davies's *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), which is deeply influenced by Herbert McCabe's view that "when we speak of God, although we know how to use our words, there is an important sense in which we do not know what they mean" (Herbert McCabe, "Appendix 3: 'Signifying Imperfectly,'" in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. and trans. Herbert McCabe [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964], 3:104).

33. The significance of Thomas's official title at Paris—*magister in sacra pagina*—began to be recovered by scholars in the middle of the twentieth century. As Marie-Dominique Chenu wrote in 1950, "The *Summa* is embedded in an evangelical soil. By no means is this the result of some sort of devotion aiming to retain piousness within its rational systematization, but because therein is provided the law itself of its genesis" (*Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, trans. A.M. Landry and D. Hughes [Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964], 233). For two more recent works in English that seek to undermine the view of Thomas as primarily a philosopher with a peripheral intellectual interest in Scripture and doctrine, see Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), and Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

34. These two emphases on Aquinas as an apophatic theologian and on Thomas as a scriptural theologian converge in the work of the scholars associated with the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht. An introductory survey of "Utrecht-Thomism" can be found in Jozef Wissink, *Thomas van Aquino: De actuele betekenis van zijn theologie* (Zoetermeer, NL: Meinema, 1998).

a figure or image of the divine mystery.[35] As Thomas says in his commentary on John's Gospel, "The teaching of the Father is the Son himself."[36] What is offered for belief is not "data" but the figure of Christ rendered in the Gospels—a figure that, by the beauty of its "fittingness (*convenientia*)," draws one's will to assent to its truth even though that truth is beyond the grasp of reason. As Thomas himself says of theology, "The manner of proceeding of this discipline must be a narrative of signs, which serve to confirm faith."[37] Thus Thomas's theology serves as a kind of commentary on the narrative figure of Christ, pointing us to the mystery revealed in Scripture's manner of speaking and Christ's manner of life.

ARGUING IN THE CULTURE OF NIHILISM: SHOUTING TO THE HARD OF HEARING

Of course, whatever the agreement they may have regarding mystery and manners, the works of O'Connor and Aquinas are inflected quite differently. And this is not simply because Aquinas is a theologian and O'Connor a fiction writer; the difference is deeper and has to do with audience or, more precisely, the context in which they are writing.

O'Connor was a self-consciously modern—indeed, even "modernist"—writer, with Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and, later in life, Marcel Proust as literary heroes. More importantly, she was conscious that she was writing for an audience that did

35. Nicholas Healy makes the point that Thomas's emphasis on the literal sense of the biblical text can be seen as a commitment to the primacy of the narrative sequence of events over all conceptual explication of those events. "Spiritual interpretations make connections between events and things that often break up the narrative structure of revelation. This is certainly permissible, even necessary, but the diachronic structure of God's actions in the world from Genesis to the Book of Revelation must take precedence over the synchronic explication of those actions" (*Thomas Aquinas*, 43).

36. *Super Io.* 7.2.1037.

37. *Super Sent.* 1, prologue, 1.5.

not share her perspective on mystery and manners. She wrote to a friend,

> One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for.[38]

One might ask, however, if a professed Thomist shouldn't be able to surmount this difficulty by seeking a common basis in the truths of natural reason. After all, Thomas could enter into dialogue and disputation with Jews and Muslims who rejected the Incarnation. But as O'Connor sees the matter, she is in a fundamentally different situation from someone in the thirteenth century. It is not simply that modern people don't share her convictions regarding Christ. Rather, the modern world lacks even the sense that there is some choice to be made between existence and nothingness, good and evil. As O'Connor puts it, "If you live today, you breathe in nihilism."[39] We live in an age in which "the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them." O'Connor goes on to add, "This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead."[40] By contrast, even when he writes *contra gentiles*, Thomas is not writing for those who think God is dead.

Thus, O'Connor's writing must inevitably be inflected differently than that of an author writing in the thirteenth century, and

38. O'Connor to "A.," August 2, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 943.
39. O'Connor to "A.," August 28, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 949.
40. O'Connor to "A.," July 20, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 942.

this inflection is one that gives her writing an extremely unstable or off-balance feel. Writing of Dante she says,

> I am often told that the model of balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory and paradise. There can be no objection to this, but also there can be no reason to assume that the result of doing it in these times will give us the balanced picture that it gave in Dante's. Dante lived in the 13th century when the balance was achieved in the faith of his age. We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from the felt balance inside himself. There are ages when it is possible to woo the reader; there are others when something more drastic is necessary.[41]

While O'Connor shares the theological worldview of Dante and Aquinas, her relationship to that worldview is somewhat different. Religious faith is no longer woven into the fabric of a shared culture; rather, it has been interiorized. Whatever "felt balance" the writer achieves interiorly will not externalize itself in "balanced" writing precisely because there is no language shared between author and audience in which such a balance can be expressed.

As is well known, Thomas held that all arguments, including theological arguments, proceed on the basis of commonly accepted premises.[42] In some cases, where the premises of a valid argument are either self-evident or have been made evident by prior arguments, truth is clearly manifested to reason in such a way that reason cannot withhold assent: reason cannot deny the Pythagorean theorem without ceasing to be reason. However,

41. O'Connor, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 820.

42. See *Summa theologiae* 1.1.8.

there are cases where reason does not incline to either side of an argument, because the premises are not evident, and such is the case with those arguments that have to do with the nature of God. In those cases, the "wooing" of belief depends on our ability to recognize goodness where we cannot recognize truth. Thomas writes,

> Hence our understanding is determined by the will, which chooses to assent to one side definitively and precisely on account of something that is enough to move the will, though not enough to move the understanding, namely, because it seems good or fitting [*bonum vel conveniens*] to assent to this side. And this is the disposition of one who believes, as when someone believes the utterance of a person because it seems to him appropriate [*decens*] or useful.[43]

In the case of belief, what draws the will to move reason to assent is the perception of the good or fitting—*bonum vel conveniens*. This category of "fitting" is woven through the Third Part of the *Summa theologiae*; confronted with the mystery of God incarnate, we discern a goodness or fittingness that attracts the will no less inexorably than truth attracts reason.

Yet even in this case, there must be some shared sense of what constitutes goodness or fittingness in order for an argument *ex convenientia* to persuade. The perception of *convenientia* requires a sense of harmonious balance, an ability to see the way in which various contingent factors come together (*con-venire*) to form an object of compelling beauty. Thomas recognizes the analogy between aesthetic and theological persuasion in his commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* when he writes,

43. *De veritate* 14.1.

> Poetic knowledge is of things that, on account of a lack [*defectum*] of truth, cannot be grasped by reason, and therefore reason must be seduced by certain likenesses. Theology, however, is about things that are above reason. Therefore the symbolic mode is common to both, because neither is proportioned to reason.[44]

Both poetry and theology exert a symbolic appeal that compensates for the disproportion or imbalance between reason and what is aesthetically represented.

But according to O'Connor, this sense of balance, this ability to see goodness, much less to perceive truths of reason, is precisely what the modern world has lost, or rather, this is what has come to lodge within the interior space of personal artistic vision. But this is a forced confinement, which O'Connor refuses and meets with counterforce: "Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to *achieve* one by being a counterweight to the prevailing heresy."[45] Lacking a shared language of goodness or balance with which she can "woo" her readers, she sets out to shock.

> When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.[46]

The imbalance in O'Connor's writing is everywhere evident

44. *Super Sent.* 1, prologue, 1.5 ad 3.

45. O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 862.

46. O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 805–6.

and is usually identified by the description "grotesque." At times, O'Connor seems annoyed with this description of her work, thinking it superficial and misapplied.[47] At other times, she acknowledges her use of "freaks" as a way of addressing the modern reader, in whom the sense of evil—and consequently the sense of good—has become "diluted" or is completely absent. Her stories are peopled by large and startling figures of both good and evil: child molesters, thieves and murderers, backwoods prophets, vacuous liberals, and pseudo-sophisticates. Her stories often end with a violent death or with a violent realization that one must endure the rest of life with crushing guilt or chronic illness. In Hazel Motes, the protagonist of her novel *Wise Blood*, we find a figure who is grotesque in the strict sense of the term: a fantastic combination of nihilistic atheism and evangelical fervor in a single figure.

O'Connor's characters are also "grotesque" in the etymological sense of the term: they emerge from the grottoes of her interiorized "felt balance." This felt balance is the concurrence of mystery and manners, transcendence and tradition, that she shares with Aquinas but not with the contemporary culture of nihilism. Indeed, for the modern world, the convergence of mystery and manners is itself a grotesque figure. In a world that lacks a language of truth or goodness or beauty, the mystery of God incarnate appears not as "balanced" or "fitting" but as ugly and horrific. In contrast to the fitting contingencies that Aquinas reads in Christ's manner of life, O'Connor's stories offer seemingly random violence that accompanies unexpected revelations. Perhaps she hopes that if goodness and beauty cannot themselves be perceived, then they might be glimpsed in their shadows—the evil and ugliness of which the modern world seems so enamored.

O'Connor herself was still able to believe, to be drawn by

47. O'Connor wrote, "I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" ("The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 815).

beauty and goodness to the truth. She was still able to say, in a letter to a friend, that "you can't have a peacock anywhere without having a map of the universe."[48] But she thinks that the ability to read this map is lost to the modern world. In her story "The Displaced Person," an unnamed priest comes to visit the Polish refugees working on Mrs. McIntyre's farm. When he sees a peacock spread his tail, he stands "transfixed, his jaw slack" and says in a loud voice, "Christ will come like that!"[49] But Mrs. McIntyre, hard-headed modern businesswoman that she is, for whom the peacock is just "another mouth to feed,"[50] thinks him "an idiotic old man," and at the mention of Christ, her "face assumed a set puritanical expression and she reddened. Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother."[51] A woman like Mrs. McIntyre cannot see a map of the universe in either the peacock's tail or in Christ; she is, as Walker Percy would put it, "Lost in the Cosmos," and even more lost for not recognizing her lostness.

It is only when she is confronted by the death of her Polish worker in a random tractor accident—which she could have prevented but chose not to—that she begins to sense that she may not know where she is or where she is going. The priest returns to the farm to give the last rites to the dying worker. Seeing the priest leaning with the man's family over his crushed body,

> She only stared at him for she was too shocked by her experience to be quite herself. Her mind was not taking hold of all that was happening. She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she

48. O'Connor to "A.," November 25, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 971.

49. O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 317.

50. O'Connor, 289.

51. O'Connor, 317.

> watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance.[52]

The story ends with Mrs. McIntyre abandoned by the rest of the workers on the farm, suffering a nervous breakdown and living her last days alone with no visitors except the priest, who comes weekly to feed the peacocks and to "sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church."[53]

For O'Connor, this is a story of the way in which grace works in a world that can no longer be wooed by beauty. The thriving farm that Mrs. McIntyre seeks to build comes crashing down like the Tower of Babel, and in the end, "nothing survived but [the priest] and the peacock and Mrs. McIntyre suffering."[54] Beauty is still present, in both the peacock and the teaching of the priest, but O'Connor does not seem to expect her audience to recognize that beauty or open themselves to its grace. Rather, she hopes that the grotesque fate of Mrs. McIntyre will act upon her readers as a disturbing grace, leaving them frightened, like the women at Jesus's empty tomb. But, in retrospect, O'Connor felt the story was unsuccessful precisely because her audience was unable to see the collapse of Mrs. McIntyre's world into suffering as the possibility of her redemption. "I missed making this clear but how are you going to make such things clear to people who don't believe in God, much less in Purgatory?"[55]

One always risks misunderstanding when shouting to the hard of hearing. O'Connor once wrote that "unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication and communication suggests talking inside a community."[56] But what community can O'Connor find with her audience?

52. O'Connor, 326.
53. O'Connor, 326.
54. O'Connor to "A.," November 25, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 971.
55. O'Connor, 971.
56. O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 844.

Certainly not the Christian community, but also not even the human community, since modern people have lost "even the sense of the human itself."[57] O'Connor seeks to communicate mystery in a world without manners, without the habitual ways of speaking and acting that make it possible for mystery to appear in a balanced and harmonious way. Yet she will not be deterred, for as a follower of Thomas, she seeks to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).[58] Though she once wrote that "the Church can't be identified with Western culture and I suppose the wreck of it doesn't cause her much of a sense of crisis,"[59] in practice she recognizes that a retreat from engagement with that culture would amount to a retreat into a dualism of mystery and manners. While the Church is not identical with Western culture, neither does it exist in isolation from it. The mission of the Church is not simply to speak *contra gentes* but to share in the apostolic movement *ad gentes*, a movement that was at the heart of Thomas's own vocation as a Dominican friar.

As O'Connor said, a hillbilly Thomist is likely to be mistaken for a hillbilly nihilist precisely because she seeks a way of proclaiming the Gospel through the guileful use of the nihilist's own idiom of distortion. But in robbing the modern world of its smug certainties, one might be seen as offering the abyss of nothingness rather than the abyss of faith. It is a risk O'Connor judges worth taking. She seeks to show that the human will cannot master the void, or even play safely within it, in order to open up the possibility that the void has already been mastered. She induces an awareness of lostness so that we may recognize ourselves as found.

57. O'Connor to Dr. T.R. Spivey, October 19, 1958, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1077.

58. When Thomas first introduces the phrase *gratia perficit naturam* in the *Summa theologiae* in 1.1.8, he glosses it with Paul's phrase from 2 Corinthians 10:5: "Take every thought captive in obedience to Christ."

59. O'Connor to Dr. T.R. Spivey, October 19, 1958, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1076.

GRATIA TURBIT NATURAM

If a hillbilly Thomist is likely to be mistaken for a nihilist, she is also likely to be mistaken, particularly by her fellow Catholics, for a Protestant. O'Connor mentions a review of her stories by "a priest who said that while my convictions may be Catholic, my sensibilities appeared to be Lutheran."[60] Presumably, what this reviewer meant was that she was overly pessimistic about human nature, thereby denigrating the goodness of creation, a sensibility Catholics often identify with Protestantism. As one pair of authors put the matter, at the heart of Protestant theology is a conviction about "the utter corruption of the human person as a result of the sin of Adam," with the result that "the individual, radically turned in on himself or herself and closed to any possibility of agapeic community, is locked into selfishness."[61] This is contrasted with Catholicism, which "has insisted in opposition to the darker views of the reformers that the human being, made in the image of God who is agape, remains in that image even after the fall and so is capable, even with great difficulty, of genuine other-directedness."[62] According to this view, we find in the case of Aquinas, with his belief that "grace perfects nature" (*gratia perficit naturam*), a particularly ringing endorsement of human life and culture and a deep sense that grace, while distinct from nature, is at the same time in continuity with nature. In Thomas O'Meara's words, for Aquinas, "grace is not a source of miraculous powers for curing cancer or handling poisonous snakes. Aquinas was little interested in the miraculous . . . but returned

60. O'Connor to "A." September 30, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 960.

61. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 30.

62. Himes and Himes, 31. A similar characterization (from a different spot on the spectrum of Catholic theology) is made by John M. Haas: "One of the errors that arose in much Protestant thought, and persists to our own day even in secular culture, is that the natural and the supernatural orders are opposed to one another. Because of the doctrine of the total depravity of man, classical Protestantism tends to look at fallen man as radically over against God" ("The Relationship of Nature and Grace in Saint Thomas," in *The Ever-Illuminating Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas: Papers Presented at a Conference Sponsored by the Wethersfield Institute* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999], 63).

again and again to the invisible Spirit of Jesus working in people powerfully but respectfully."[63] Here, the claim that "grace perfects nature" seems to become the claim that grace *respects* nature.

Things seem otherwise in the world of O'Connor. There is nothing respectful about a grandmother shot by a serial killer or a child drowned in a river while seeking the kingdom of God. In O'Connor's fiction, grace appears to be a profoundly disrespectful and disruptive force that might very well appear in the form of snake handling and cancer cures or, even more likely, in the form of snakes that bite and tumors that kill.[64] Rather than perfecting nature and bringing it to fulfillment, the grace in O'Connor's stories seems to *disturb* nature: *gratia turbit naturam*. Whereas Thomas says that "grace does not take away nature but perfects it, therefore natural reason should assist faith,"[65] O'Connor seems to be saying that natural reason hinders faith and, correlatively, faith overturns natural reason. Regarding the legal notion of "the reasonable man," O'Connor wrote to a friend, "Mine is certainly something else—God's reasonable man, the prototype of whom must be Abraham, willing to sacrifice his son and thereby show that he is in the image of God Who sacrifices His Son."[66]

63. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian*, 115. O'Meara also writes, "The entire [*Summa theologiae*] unfolds Aquinas' axiom, '*gratia perficit naturam*,' 'grace brings nature to its full destiny.' Cosmos and church, being and life, art and ecstasy do not point to death but to life; the Catholic mind . . . delights in the ways in which the Incarnation continues" (126).

64. For some insight on the workings of grace manifested in incurable cancer, see O'Connor's "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 822–31.

65. *Summa theologiae* 1.1.8.

66. O'Connor to "A.," November 10, 1955, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 968. While O'Meara claims that Thomas's theology is "the polar opposite of any fundamentalism" (*Thomas Aquinas: Theologian*, 116), fundamentalists are among O'Connor's favorite subjects, precisely because they offer us a Gospel that has no respect for our idea of what is reasonable, a Gospel that is, in fact, fanatical. Writing to Sister Mariella Gable, O'Connor said,

> About the fanatics. People make a judgement of fanaticism by what they are themselves. To a lot of Protestants I know, monks and nuns are fanatics, none greater. And to a lot of monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief you join the convent and are heard from no more; whereas if you are a Protestant and have it, there is no convent for you to join, and you go about in the world getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of

The example of Abraham evokes Kierkegaard far more than it does Thomas.

Does this mean that O'Connor's "hillbilly Thomism" is in fact an ersatz Thomism? Is it Protestant fideism in Thomist drag? There are two possible ways to address these questions. The first is to see if, in Thomas's account, grace is quite so "respectful" of nature as some have claimed; the second is to see if O'Connor really does pit grace against nature.[67] Is it possible to see grace taking the radically disruptive form that it does in O'Connor's fiction and still affirm the view that *gratia perficit naturam*?

The difference between Thomas and Calvin or Luther is sometimes said to be that, whereas the Reformers taught that human nature is "totally depraved" by sin, Thomas holds that it is merely "wounded" and retains its essential integrity. And it is certainly true that Thomas holds that the goodness of human nature is diminished by sin but not entirely destroyed,[68] and it is also true that he uses the language of the "wounding of nature" (*vulneratio naturae*) to describe this diminishment.[69] Yet he makes clear that this wounding is not on the order of a paper cut; rather, it constitutes the *destitutio* of nature.[70] In the order of being, the goodness of human nature retains its fundamental integrity, inasmuch as the fallen human person remains a rational animal (otherwise, sin would be impossible), but in the moral order, the diminishment of the natural inclination to good can proceed, as

> people who don't believe anything much at all down on your head. (May 4, 1963, in *Collected Works*, 1183)

O'Connor concludes her letter saying, "I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestants have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God and our obligation to him" (*Collected Works*, 1184).

67. A third approach would be to see if Catholic accounts of Protestant theological anthropology are accurate, or rather cartoonish caricatures.

68. See, e.g., *Summa theologiae* 1-2.85.2. One might adapt Aquinas's adage about grace and nature to state his position on the effect of sin on nature: *peccatum non tollit naturam, sed deficit*.

69. *Summa theologiae* 1-2.85.3.

70. *Summa theologiae* 1-2.85.3.

Aquinas says, to infinity.[71] The integrity of human nature imposes no limits on human depravity.

But even if we grant, in theory, that the human inclination toward virtue can asymptotically approach zero, is this in fact our situation? Thomas certainly says that human beings, even in the state of corrupted nature, can do particular good acts, such as building houses or (what is a far more significant moral achievement) having friends,[72] and we ought not to underplay Thomas's insistence on these things as genuine goods. At the same time, we should not overlook Thomas's statement that these are *particular* good acts; our doing of them is contingent and circumstantial and they do not move us toward our ultimate end. And whereas prior to sin human beings could fulfill God's commands in such a way as to be pleasing to God, after sin and without grace, this is simply impossible.[73]

Thomas does say something that is akin to the claim that grace is "respectful" of nature in *Summa theologiae* 1.62.5, where he writes, "Grace perfects nature according to the mode of that nature, just as every perfection is received in what it perfects according to its mode." Thomas says this in reference to the angels, whom God rewards with grace according to their natural

71. *Contra Gentiles* 3.12.7: "The natural tendency toward good can therefore be diminished infinitely through evil habits. Nevertheless it is never taken away totally, but always accompanies the nature that remains."

72. Thomas mentions building houses, along with planting vineyards, in *Summa theologiae* 1-2.109.2. The mention of friendship, usually overlooked by those commenting on this question, is in *Summa theologiae* 1-2.109.5.

73. *Summa theologiae* 1-2.109.8 ad 1: "Human beings can avoid each but not every sinful act, except by grace." In *Summa theologiae* 1-2.63.2 ad 2, Thomas says that sin, even mortal sin, is compatible with individual acquired virtues, since sin is an act and not a *habitus*. But in 1-2.65.1, he makes clear that acquired virtues must be guided by *prudentia* in order to be connected in what we might call a virtuous life. He further argues, in 1-2.65.2, that in order for prudence to operate correctly, a person must be properly disposed toward his or her ultimate end, and that this disposition can only be brought about by grace, through the infused virtue of *caritas*. Thus, it would seem that while all of the actions of a person in the state of corrupted nature are not themselves evil, such actions are in no way salvific. See also *Summa theologiae* 1-2.109.5, as well as Thomas's discussion in *Super Rom.* 14.3.1140 regarding Romans 14:23: "Whatever is not from faith is sin."

perfections, something that is not true of humans.[74] But with regard to human beings, he also says that "divine providence provides for everything in accordance with its mode."[75] We might say that, while grace is never a reward for the good that is in human nature, in observing the "way of being" (*modus*) of a nature, the grace bestowed by divine providence does show a certain "respect" for that nature. Grace cannot operate by external coercion (*coactio*) upon human nature precisely because to do so would be to destroy human nature, to which it belongs to act voluntarily. Put in the simplest terms, human beings do not have to become something other than human, whether angel or beast, in order to attain the vision of God.

But we should be clear about what this does and does not entail. We ought never to forget that the respectful *cooperation* of grace with the human will that makes human merit possible is founded on the prevenient *operation* of grace in which "the will is the thing moved and God is the mover."[76] Ultimately, grace is something added to human nature from outside, not something that grows from within it. In saying that grace "perfects" or "realizes the potential of" human nature, we should keep before our mind the analogy of a form perfecting matter or an agent perfecting that upon which it acts.[77] If Thomas's thinking has any sort of metaphysical lynchpin, it is that something that is in potentiality can only be actualized by something external to it. In the case of perfections realized within the order of nature, that upon which the agent acts must have some potential that can be realized and thus in some sense "anticipates" its own realization. But in the case of grace perfecting human nature, no such anticipation is possible precisely because the gift of grace realizes something that

74. See, e.g., *Summa theologiae* 1.108.8 ad 1.

75. *Contra Gentiles* 3.148.2.

76. *Summa theologiae* 1-2.111.2.

77. Thomas makes the analogy of form and matter in *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.149 and that of an agent perfecting a potential (in this case, fire perfecting water's potential to be hot) in *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.147.4.

is in excess of human nature's potential. So grace may "respect" human nature in the sense that the beatified human creature remains a human creature, but at the same time, nature is disturbed by grace, like the *aqua turbata* of the pool at Bethsaida (John 5:7), or Mary who, upon hearing the angelic greeting, *turbata est in sermone eius* (Luke 1:29). Thomas, whatever the coolness or dryness of his tone, never forgets that grace is a word at which we are disturbed, a word that stirs us to reach out beyond the confines of our nature.

O'Connor, in the same way, never forgets that grace aims at bringing human nature to fulfillment, not destruction. One might say that grace reveals the truth of our nature that has been obscured by sin. Writing to her friend Betty Hester after Hester left the Church, O'Connor says, "This means a narrowing of life for you and a lessening of the desire for life."[78] In losing that which is beyond our nature, we lose our nature. The difficulty in the culture of nihilism is at root not the loss of a sense of grace but the loss of nature. Just as modern culture wants its mystery without manners, so too it wants its grace without nature. Or, more precisely, it understands nature as an emptiness that is entirely subject to human manipulation; human nature is the object of self-actualization. For O'Connor, this spells death for nature. Cut off from grace, it cannot reach its destiny; cut off from its Creator, it cannot even exist.

At the same time that O'Connor believes that grace serves the flourishing of human nature by piquing our appetite for life, she also believes that "all human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."[79] *Gratia perficit naturam* does not exclude *gratia turbit naturam*; for just as form perfects matter by stirring it to act, "troubling" and "goading" it into actuality, so too grace perfects nature by disturbing it.

78. O'Connor to "A.," October 28, 1961, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1152–53.

79. O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, December 9, 1958, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1084.

Nature resists, just as matter resists taking on a new form in the artist's hands, but this resistance is not the last word. O'Connor saw her stories as embodying the deeply Catholic view that, unlike the case of angelic natures, grace acts upon human nature independent of whatever natural goodness might be found there. "Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical."[80] Grace perfects nature, and the sinfulness of the nature that grace perfects becomes, in O'Connor's hands, a testimony to the radical gratuity of that grace. In her stories, grace appears like the angel who disturbs Mary, in events that stand out in sharp relief: "This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity."[81] The arrival of grace is, for O'Connor as for Thomas, both totally right and totally unexpected because it is both in accord with and beyond our human nature.

HILLBILLY THOMISTIC COMMENTARY: *PRAESTET FIDES SUPPLEMENTUM SENSUUM DEFECTUI*

Flannery O'Connor only quotes Thomas Aquinas once in her fiction. In her story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," she puts Thomas's Eucharistic hymn *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum* into the mouths of two convent-schoolgirls, who sing it to mock the two teenage boys who have been invited over to entertain them on their weekend away from the convent. The boys, who have just treated the girls to a couple of hymns from the Church of God, are perplexed

80. O'Connor to John Hawkes, April 14, 1960, in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 1125. In this same letter, O'Connor indicates that she holds the typical Catholic view of the Protestant theology of nature and grace and distinguishes her own view from it: "In the Protestant view, I think Grace and nature don't have much to do with each other."

81. O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners*, 111. This is from remarks O'Connor made to introduce her reading of her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" at Hollins College, Virginia, in 1963.

by Aquinas's hymn, and after a moment of silence, one of them replies, "That must be Jew singing."[82] On the lips of the girls, the sublime theology of Aquinas becomes a tool to assert their own superiority, just as earlier they had, with shrieks of laughter, referred to each other as "Temple One" and "Temple Two," a reference to a lecture from an old nun at their school, who told them that if a boy were to "behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile," they were to respond, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!"[83]

At the heart of the story are not the two adolescent girls but the unnamed younger girl whose family they are visiting. When the two girls from the convent return after their evening at the fair with the boys, they tell the girl about the freak show they had seen: a hermaphrodite had exposed himself to the audience, but not before warning them, "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way."[84] As the child lies in bed, slipping into sleep, she imagines the scene with the hermaphrodite—the freak show taking on the characteristics of a backwoods revival and blending with the image of the body as a Temple of the Holy Ghost:

> She could hear the freak saying, "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit," and the people saying, "Amen. Amen."
>
> "God done this to me and I praise Him."
>
> "Amen. Amen."
>
> "He could strike you thisaway."
>
> "Amen. Amen."
>
> "But he has not."

82. O'Connor, 199.
83. O'Connor, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," in *O'Connor: Collected Works*, 202.
84. O'Connor, 206.

> "Amen."
>
> "Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?"
>
> "Amen. Amen."
>
> "If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen."
>
> "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost."
>
> "Amen."[85]

The story concludes with the girl going with her mother to return Temple One and Temple Two to the school, where she goes into the convent chapel and kneels to pray during the service of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament as they sing the *Tantum Ergo*. Looking at the Host, ivory colored and pure, she thinks of the freak show and the hermaphrodite saying, "This is the way He wanted me to be." Later, as she is returning home, she looks at the evening horizon: "The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees."[86]

O'Connor offers us here something normally absent from her stories: Catholic ritual and symbolism. And she places it in a complex juxtaposition with images of Protestant revivalism and the grotesque figure of the hermaphrodite. It is as if O'Connor is straining in the story to get at the very heart of the matter in depicting God's disturbing grace. She is reaching for the kind of distortion that will "make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts."[87] The image of the blood-red sun descending like a Host upon the earth

85. O'Connor, 207.

86. O'Connor, 208.

87. O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners*, 162.

reflects the pure ivory Host in the service of Benediction, which in turn reflects the freak show in the girl's imagination, where the hermaphrodite claims for himself the dignity of Christ's body: "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen." These images bounce off each other, disorienting us and yet conveying a sense of the immense importance of the identification of the freakish body of the hermaphrodite, whose very flesh violates all rules of order and division, with Christ's Eucharistic body. Faith supplies what the senses fail to perceive: the hermaphrodite's grotesque body is transformed by the grace of acceptance into an icon of purity. Thomas's hymn is freed from the confines of piety and smugness and becomes an exhortation to bow before the graced, freakish body, which has Christ as its head and which extends to the farthest reaches of the horizon. In this single instance, O'Connor takes up the mantle of Thomistic commentator and casts a light upon Thomas's thought that makes its familiar words cast unexpected and luminous shadows.

Why be a hillbilly Thomist? Perhaps because pieties like "grace perfects nature," when found on the cool, dry lips of informed and responsible men, sound to modern ears like religious business as usual and consequently of no interest. The culture of nihilism that O'Connor sought to address believes that it can have its grace without nature, its mystery without manners, its spirit without a freakish body to be transformed. O'Connor knows that for the culture of nihilism, the alleged arrival of God in our world changes nothing, because that world is a void in which the human will plays endlessly. But for O'Connor, it changes everything, to a degree beyond what we can imagine, precisely because the world is not a void but a creation that awaits the unexpected arrival of its maker. Thomas knew this. As highly as he prized human reason, he maintained that the event of the Incarnation, by which creation is brought to its proper end, is beyond the capacity for human deduction; it must therefore be announced in a way that

can be heard and seen as a gesture that is both totally right and totally unexpected. In the land of the hard of hearing and the half-blind, where we find ourselves today, it may be necessary to shout and draw large, startling figures if we seek, as Thomas sought, to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ.