

PRAISE FOR
UNDERSTANDING THE HILLBILLY THOMIST

“Fr. Damian Ference has provided a substantive look into the philosophical underpinnings of the homespun fictional stories published by the fervently Catholic and intensely intelligent Flannery O’Connor. He adeptly systematizes the core influence of Thomistic philosophy and theology in O’Connor’s down-to-earth wisdom as she presents it within her narrative art. His scholarly work is a great contribution to the understanding of one of America’s most influential authors, who used the incarnate human experience to expand the soul’s ability to receive the mystery of transformative grace.”

—Bishop Edward Malesic, Diocese of Cleveland

“This is the book on Flannery I’ve been waiting for without knowing it: a serious investigation of the Thomistic inflections and foundations that give form to O’Connor’s fiction. Undertaken without the academician’s tedious jargon, but always substantial and stimulating, *Understanding the Hillbilly Thomist* allows these friends across the centuries to clarify one another. Ference’s cross-pollination cultivates our own depth perception, inviting us to adhere to the heart of reality which both beheld so unflinchingly.”

—Joshua Hren, founder of Wiseblood Books, author of *Infinite Regress and Contemplative Realism: A Theological-Aesthetical Manifesto*

“There is no one so well-versed in Flannery O’Connor’s philosophical background as Fr. Damian Ference. In his attentive exploration into Flannery’s art and the thought behind the

work, especially her reading and absorption of Thomas Aquinas, Fr. Ference illuminates the soul of O'Connor's fiction. This book accomplishes all its goals: readers understand more about O'Connor's stories and her Thomism, befriend these intellectual giants, and walk away with increased gratitude for the gifts of God."

—Jessica Hooten Wilson, author of *Giving the Devil His Due: Flannery O'Connor and The Brothers Karamazov*

"Congratulations to Fr. Damian Ference, who has written a fine Flannery O'Connor volume undertaken with the parameters of Thomism, the first study of its kind. Ference neither understates nor overstates St. Thomas' fundamental role in shaping O'Connor's literary genius. His approach also means that O'Connor's work is studied—unapologetically—within the context of her deep Catholic faith, just as it should be. Fr. Ference's book is not to be missed by anyone with an interest in, and appreciation for, O'Connor's writing."

—Henry T. Edmondson III, author of *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism*

"*Understanding the Hillbilly Thomist* introduces readers to the intellectual universe of one of the twentieth century's most interesting American Catholics. With the clarity of a gifted teacher, Fr. Ference demonstrates how the philosophical vision of St. Thomas Aquinas grounded Flannery O'Connor's confidence in her own sensory powers as a narrative artist—freeing her fiction from sentimental piety and helping her to imagine grace at work in the strangest places, from snorting hogs and tattooed skin to the smug ladies and violent misfits who fill her stories."

—Edward P. Hahnenberg, Jack and Mary Jane Breen Chair in Catholic Theology at John Carroll University

“For over half a century, the Hillbilly school of Thomism counted but one member, and one whose ears for music were made of tin, unlike every subsequent member of the school. Flannery O’Connor was friends, it is true, with a convent of Dominican Sisters who lived some hundred miles up the road from her home in Milledgeville, Georgia. Her readers might well wonder by what possible right she could ever have styled herself a Thomist, even in jest. Not for a moment does Fr. Damian Ference pretend that O’Connor was something she was not: a scholarly exegete of the Angelic Doctor. What he does instead is to show how much O’Connor’s narrative art was shaped by her study of Aquinas and of mid-twentieth century Thomists such as Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. Fr. Ference’s love for his subject is evident from the outset. It is also infectious. In simple, straightforward prose, and with reference to a wide variety of texts, he provides a highly insightful presentation of the ‘Thomistic inclinations, indications, intuitions, presumptions, and themes,’ in his words, that inform O’Connor’s writing. Fr. Ference helps readers to see how much the comic charity of the first and the greatest of the Hillbilly Thomists originates in clear, tough-minded judgment”

—John C. McCarthy, Dean and Associate Professor of Philosophy at Catholic University of America

“In this extraordinary book, we finally meet Flannery O’Connor the philosopher. Fr. Ference leads us to a deeper and richer understanding of O’Connor’s fiction by examining its philosophical and theological underpinnings in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and others. Whether you are a longtime fan or a new reader, there are profound insights here for anyone who wishes to appreciate one of the greatest fiction writers of the twentieth century.”

—Jennifer Frey, Dean of the Honors College at the University of Tulsa, host of the *Sacred and Profane Love* podcast

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS
OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S NARRATIVE ART

FR. DAMIAN FERENCE

FOREWORD BY
THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, OP

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*To Sr. Mary Kevin Clutterbuck, OP, and the
Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne,
Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer*

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Foreword

Thomas Joseph White, OP

Flannery O'Connor is marked by a gentle but persistent twofold alienation that appears both in her personal letter-writing and in her fiction. One is the alienation of a devout Catholic who is aware of the inner distance between her own vision of the world and the ambient ethos of secularization and religious oblivion emergent in the modern American culture of her time. She perceived the expression of this modern stance of religious indifference in everyday culture but also was attuned to it from the intellectual formation she received at university and by reading deeply in the Catholic tradition. The other form of alienation she exhibits is, paradoxically, typically modern in kind: that of persons seeking explanatory meaning and existential orientation against the backdrop of a world in which the metaphysical certitudes of a bygone era seem to have faded into shadows and become irretrievable, at least for many people. Her art may be thought of as an attempt to tell the truth about both of these forms of alienation simultaneously: of modern people seeking meaning, not sure if and where it might abide, and of people finding an unforeseen resolution to the mystery of life in the revelation of the Holy Spirit, one that introduces a new separation of the human being from the world. Holiness has "separation" as one of its root meanings, and the characters of Flannery O'Connor's work are frequently borne away to the separation of life in God by grace that comes in forms that are both violent and comic.

Why should we say that her work is comic? In a sense, her characters are typically comic and tragic all at once. They are comic in part due to their narrowness and provincialism (expressive of our own), which they embody in slightly caricatural

ways. These limitations, however humorous, still have sharp edges. The stories of O'Connor can cause our souls to bleed, even if the bloodletting may be good for our health. They are funny, but the humor cuts deep. They are also tragic in that these same limitations, which are many-sided and impressive, often lead to horrific or violent outcomes. However, this, too, is very human and perhaps especially so. Her characters evoke our own vulnerability, and it is precisely here—when, for example, one has a stroke due to the verbal abuse of a child (“Everything That Rises Must Converge”) or another is humiliated by a savvy charlatan (“Good Country People”)—that the work of the Spirit emerges. Tragic events have an abyssal feel to them in the fiction of O'Connor, but they never have the last word. Rather, they are like openings in the gulf of human existence that the Holy Spirit is seen to be entering, moments of brutal clarity where the truth can enter and come home to the character and to the reader. Indeed, the ironies that emerge in this space, between where the character is in his or her tragedy and where God is in his action of mercy, is comic in tone. God makes use even of our follies and blindness to realize our salvation and his epiphany of mercy and power in the service of the truth of Christ.

O'Connor's life was marked by the study of theology and philosophy, not in an expert way, but in a deep way that is required of anyone, including an expert, if that study is to have any real impact in the world. She was a reader, and she read works about Aquinas, and of Aquinas. Fr. Damian Ference has done us a wonderful service in this important work, *Understanding the Hillbilly Thomist*, uncovering and exploring with clarity and depth the Thomistic influence on Flannery O'Connor's work. He understands her philosophical influences well, having visited her original library in Andalusia Farm to see the books she actually read. He shows the deep imprint in her thinking of the vision of Étienne Gilson and his diagnostic characterizations of the modern age, as contrasted with the theocentric humanism of

Aquinas. Fr. Ference helps us appreciate her sacramental vision of reality, a world in which physical things can be the bearers, signs, and instruments of grace communicated to a world previously unaware of God. He shows that O'Connor's notions of God the Creator, of providence, and of the human being as a spiritual animal are deeply marked by the Catholic Scholastic tradition. Most especially, he does all of this while appealing to the stories themselves, and in the process he makes the stories more intelligible, even as he connects them to her letters and personal essays.

What results then is an animated and passionate work that serves to greatly advance our understanding of this most enigmatic and religiously forceful of modern American literary authors. We are greatly in debt to Fr. Ference for his book, as we are as well to Flannery O'Connor, who has helped us to resolve so many human mysteries by the pregnant symbols of her fiction, even as she has also helped us enter more fully into others of divine origin.

Acknowledgments

I was first introduced to Flannery O'Connor in a poetry workshop taught by George Bilgere at John Carroll University in the spring of 1998. Dr. Bilgere had each of us write two original poems per week that semester, and during each class he would pick one of our poems and ask another student to read the chosen poem aloud; then, we would “workshop” it. One memorable week, my poem was chosen, and, after a classmate had read it aloud with an unmistakably horrified look on her face, Dr. Bilgere said, “Damian’s poem sounds like Flannery O’Connor.” I assumed this was a compliment, but I wasn’t sure who this Flannery O’Connor guy was. My interest piqued, I wrote his name in my notebook. That evening, I was surprised to learn that this Flannery O’Connor guy was in fact a woman. That summer, I began making my way through her short stories and then her novels, enjoying her narrative art but also aware that there was a depth of meaning to her fiction that, at that time, was beyond my understanding.

Two years later, I began reading O’Connor’s essays and lectures in *Mystery and Manners* and her letters in *The Habit of Being*, and I quickly came to understand that this woman who thought of herself as “a hillbilly Thomist” was, in fact, a devout Catholic, an intellectual juggernaut, a postmodern prophet, a narrative artist whose brilliance was matched only by her humor, and a most faithful friend. As it turned out, Flannery O’Connor had befriended a community of Dominican sisters who operate homes for terminal cancer patients (which was founded by the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne), with one of them located in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio.

My mom was a resident at Holy Family Home when I was reading *The Habit of Being* and repeatedly encountering letters in

which O'Connor mentioned a Sr. Evangelist and the Dominican sisters who ran Our Lady of Perpetual Help cancer home in Atlanta. So, one afternoon while visiting my mom, I told her nurse, Sr. Kevin, about this book I was reading and how the author mentioned what I thought was her religious order. In her unmistakable New York accent, Sr. Kevin said, "Are ya readin' Flannery?" Surprised that she knew O'Connor's name, I told her that I was, and Sr. Kevin informed me that when she was a young sister, she had worked at the home in Atlanta and knew Flannery, and had even visited Andalusia a few times. The next time I came to see my mom, another Dominican nurse on the floor, Sr. Benedict, having heard of my conversation with Sr. Kevin a few days earlier, told me that she, too, knew Flannery from her time in Atlanta as a young sister. Something was going on here.

A few months after these conversations about Flannery with Sr. Kevin and Sr. Benedict, my mom died; it was a little over a year before I would be ordained a priest. As much as it stung, I figured this loss was somehow part of God's mysterious plan for me, especially the part about two Hawthorne Dominicans who knew Flannery O'Connor and who took great care of my mom in her final days in this life and helped prepare her for the life to come. Upon my ordination, I received some gifts from the Dominican Sisters—a few copies of *A Memoir of Mary Ann* (Flannery wrote the introduction), some original pictures of Mary Ann (a girl diagnosed with terminal cancer who miraculously lived years longer than expected with the Dominican sisters in Atlanta), and even a couple of photographs of Flannery herself. Again, something was going on here.

At my first parish assignment, I ran an intergenerational summer book club. We would read all sorts of books during June, July, and the first part of August, and I managed to fit two O'Connor stories into the mix, to the joy of some of my fellow readers and to the disappointment of others. The more I read O'Connor, especially with others, the more I understood her.

When I started teaching philosophy at Borromeo Seminary a little while later, two of my best students (who are now priests) asked if I would offer an independent study on “O’Connor and Philosophy” for them, and I obliged. In addition to reading selections from O’Connor’s fiction and prose, our course included a pilgrimage to O’Connor’s Milledgeville, where we visited her farm, her parish, and her grave at Memorial Hill Cemetery. I remember praying there for her, but I also remember praying for myself and for whatever kind of work I was being called to in terms of O’Connor scholarship, figuring that she might be out of purgatory by now and might have some mysterious hand in my future.

When I was assigned to doctoral studies, I had three major decisions to make. First, I had to figure out where to study; second, I had to figure out my topic; and third, I had to find a director who would take an interest in my topic. I had studied with the Jesuits in college and never with the Dominicans, but after considering the connection between the Hillbilly Thomist and the Dominicans, I chose the philosophy faculty at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, known simply and affectionately as the Angelicum. Seeing that it had been almost a decade since I had earned my licentiate from The Catholic University of America, I needed a new thesis topic, and, led by what I take to be the power of the Holy Spirit and Flannery O’Connor herself, I felt called—truly, an intellectual vocation—to write a dissertation on the philosophical foundations of Flannery O’Connor’s narrative art, as it was a major void in O’Connor scholarship. But then came the tricky part: finding a director. As it turned out, around the same time that I arrived in Rome, the man who would become my director—a Georgia native, a convert to the faith (spurred on in part by his reading of O’Connor), a Dominican friar, and a member of a bluegrass band called the Hillbilly Thomists—happened to be starting his new assignment in the Eternal City as well, as the new director of the Thomistic Institute. I wrote Fr. Thomas Joseph White, OP, to explain my project and to ask if he would

consider directing my dissertation. His response came quickly and in the generous and humble formulation of “How could I refuse?” I took Fr. White’s *fiat* as confirmation of the intellectual mission that had been given to me. Something indeed was going on here, and that something is called divine providence.

I figured that the best way to write about Flannery O’Connor would be to write like Flannery O’Connor, so I adopted her strict schedule, writing from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. (O’Connor wrote on Sundays too, but she was dying of lupus and she knew it, so she gets a pass for working on the Lord’s Day.) I wrote my first two chapters at the Casa Santa Maria, but as I was finishing up my research for my third chapter, COVID-19 hit. The pandemic sent me—wearing a mask and dragging seventy-five pounds of books in two suitcases and a carry-on bag—back to Cleveland indefinitely. There is a little place back home called Casa Wojtyła where I spent my days away with three brother priests, and thanks to their kindness and understanding, I wrote my third chapter at the dining room table under quarantine. Eventually, we were allowed back into the seminary, and with the help of Mr. Alan Rome, I set up a little writing station in the loft of our library, where I wrote my fourth chapter during the summer months. Upon returning to the Casa Santa Maria, I wrote my fifth and final chapter in the fall, staying faithful to O’Connor’s strict writing schedule, whether I wrote one paragraph in a day or three pages. I mention this discipline of writing for three uninterrupted hours per day because I am convinced that while one does need a minimal degree of intelligence to write a dissertation, the truth is that discipline, mortification, and work ethic are what actually get the job done. Like the Grandmother in O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” you need to write as if someone is there to shoot you every minute of your life—at least I do.

Speaking of work ethic, it is a gift that I received from my dad, Eddie Ference, who was an elevator mechanic. He left high

school early, joined the Navy, and fought in World War II; if he were alive today, he would think it funny that I have a doctorate in philosophy, but he would also be happy and proud. My mom, Joan Ference, never knew me as a priest, let alone a philosopher, but she was dedicated to the truth, and she taught me at a very early age to love it, respect it, and tell it. I echo the words of Gillian Welch: “I had a real good mother and father.” (I have a good brother and extended family too.)

I express my heartfelt thanks to my brothers and sisters of the Diocese of Cleveland for all their support and prayers, to her former shepherd Archbishop Nelson Pérez for assigning me to doctoral studies, and to her current shepherd, Bishop Edward Malesic, for allowing me to finish my academic mission, encouraging me to turn my dissertation into a book and taking great interest in my scholarship, and appointing me as the first Vicar for Evangelization in the Diocese of Cleveland.

When Bishop Robert Barron asked me to be a contributor to the Word on Fire Blog over a decade ago, I never imagined that one day there would be a Word on Fire imprint and that I would write a book for it on two of Barron’s *Pivotal Players*, but God’s providence is a strange and surprising thing. I am so very grateful to Bishop Barron and the Word on Fire family, especially Fr. Steve Grunow, Brandon Vogt, Matthew Becklo, Daniel Seseske, Jason Paone, Rozann Lee, and Cassie Bielak, for making this book a beautiful reality.

Special thanks go to my dear friends and former students who accompanied me on many memorable pilgrimages to O’Connor’s Georgia over the years. Reading an author’s work is one thing, but visiting her land is another, especially when that writer is from the South and you are from the North. My love, understanding, and appreciation of Flannery O’Connor and her narrative art only increased through repeated visits to her childhood home in Savannah and to Andalusia, her farmhouse in Milledgeville. I am forever grateful for the generous hospitality and fraternity of

Fr. Young Nguyen, the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish (O'Connor's home parish), and for the kindness of all his faithful parishioners, particularly the Campus Catholics of Georgia College and Ms. Louise Florencourt.

Although writing a book demands a great deal of solitude and isolation, it remains a communal act, and I am grateful to the following friends for discussing O'Connor's narrative art with me for this project: Dr. Beth Rath, Dr. Joel Johnson, Dr. Steve Brule, Fr. Pat Anderson, Fr. Mark Riley, Fr. Dominic Buckley, Fr. Alex Gibbs, Fr. John Paul Mitchell, Br. Tommy "Pranzo" Piolata, OFM Cap., and Mr. Gregg Stovicek. I would be entirely remiss if I did not thank my brilliant and humble friend Mr. Danny O'Brien, not only for his most careful proofreading of this work, but also for his helpful and clarifying comments, questions, and suggestions.

I reserve my deepest thanks for the Triune God who is and who was and who always will be. I hope and pray that this scholarly work gives readers a new or renewed sense of your glorious mystery. And to Our Lady, whose *fiat* made the Incarnation possible, thank you for being my friend and for always protecting me.

Abbreviations

CS: The Complete Stories

HB: The Habit of Being

MM: Mystery and Manners

NE: Nicomachean Ethics

PG: The Presence of Grace

PJ: A Prayer Journal

SCG: Summa contra Gentiles

ST: Summa theologiae

WB: Wise Blood

INTRODUCTION

Breaking a Remarkable Silence

In May of 1955, Flannery O'Connor was preparing to travel from her home in Milledgeville, Georgia, to New York City, where she would appear as a guest on the NBC television program *Galley Proof*, hosted by *New York Times* book editor Harvey Breit.¹ O'Connor was already a successful writer, having published her novel *Wise Blood* in 1952, and would eventually be regarded as perhaps the greatest Catholic fiction writer America has ever produced, but the occasion for her appearance on *Galley Proof* was the upcoming release of her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. As she anticipated the trip and interview, O'Connor mused in a letter to a friend about how she—a thirty-year-old female Catholic fiction writer with a southern accent—might be perceived by the national television audience. Amid a series of tongue-in-cheek speculations (her self-deprecating tone conveying an understandable mix of excitement and discomfort about stepping into the limelight) came the now-famous quip: “Everyone who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I’m a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I’m a hillbilly Thomist.”²

The fact is that O'Connor, an educated woman descended from a well-to-do Southern family and a committed religious

1. “Galley Proof: A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary Magee (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 5.

2. *HB*, 81.

believer, was neither a hillbilly nor a nihilist. But, in a turn typical of her wit, she conceded and repeated the first part of that imagined epithet (“hillbilly,” the part presumably more likely to scandalize or alienate the New York literary establishment) while making a point to reject the second part, which to her would be the more offensive misunderstanding. In other words: they could call her a hillbilly if they must, but “nihilist” was where she drew the line. Rightly understood, *Wise Blood* had painted a “terrifying”³ picture of a modern world marked by self-centeredness, disregard for mystery, and the subordination of reason. In narrating the personal journey of protagonist Hazel Motes—a wild detour through evangelical atheism culminating in a dramatic (and violent) spiritual awakening—O’Connor had in fact confronted and condemned nihilism forcefully and artistically, but not didactically. “A serious fiction writer,” she told Breit in her interview, “describes an action only to reveal a mystery.”⁴

While some 1950s-era readers may have been perplexed by the mystery of *Wise Blood*, it is no secret nowadays that O’Connor’s worldview, which she described as “Christian Realism,” was heavily influenced by St. Thomas Aquinas and her preconiliar, Thomistic-laden Catholicism.⁵ Her letters and prose are filled with generous mentions of the thirteenth-century Italian Dominican philosopher, whom she regarded with both the respect due to an intellectual hero and the warmth of a faithful friend. In August of 1955—a few months after calling herself a “hillbilly Thomist”—O’Connor said of Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*:

I read it for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed. If my mother were to come in during this process and say, “Turn off that light. It’s late,” I with lifted finger and broad bland

3. “Her picture of the modern world is literally terrifying” (Caroline Gordon, “May 15 Is Publication Date of Novel by Flannery O’Connor, Milledgeville,” in *Conversations*, 3).

4. O’Connor, *Conversations*, 9.

5. *HB*, 92.

beatific expression would reply, “On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes,” or some such thing. In any case, I feel that I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas.⁶

O’Connor’s personal library, currently housed in the Special Collections at Georgia College in Milledgeville, contains a complete edition of Aquinas’ *De Veritate*, but not an unabridged set of the *Summa*.⁷ However, the library does have O’Connor’s cherished (and marked up and underlined) copy of Anton Pegis’ *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, which includes almost seven hundred pages of articles from the *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, along with notes and commentary by Pegis. Knowing that this distilled compilation served as O’Connor’s primary reference on Thomism and was most likely the volume she read at bedtime helps explain another self-deprecating comment: in a 1961 letter to John Hawkes, O’Connor wrote, “I am a Thomist three times removed and live amongst many distinctions. (A Thomist three times removed is one who doesn’t read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis.)”⁸ This description demonstrates her intellectual humility, but it also suggests, accurately, that O’Connor, while not a trained philosopher, was nonetheless practically swimming in Thomism—her collection is replete with works by Aristotle, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Josef Pieper, Frederick Copleston, and Victor White, all of whom helped form her understanding of Aquinas and his thought. O’Connor read and understood these scholars, engaged with their ideas, and talked about them in her letters.⁹

6. *HB*, 93–94.

7. Arthur Kinney, *Flannery O’Connor’s Library: Resources of Being* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 15.

8. O’Connor, quoted in Kinney, *Flannery O’Connor’s Library*, 439.

9. Bennet notes, “Her most important tutors were the neo-Thomist heavyweights who shaped her understanding of modernistic numinousness” (Eric

In the following pages, I will argue that with varying degrees of directness—at times straight from the writing of St. Thomas himself; more frequently mediated through interpreters like Pegis and Gilson; gradually over time by continual “osmosis” from the wider community of Catholic philosophers formed by, explaining, and building on Aquinas; and perhaps most importantly, if hardest to define, through her upbringing in the preconciliar Catholic culture of her time—Thomism exerted a philosophical influence on O’Connor that is difficult to overstate and that sheds a great deal of light on her narrative art.¹⁰

To date, the vast majority of scholarship surrounding Flannery O’Connor has been carried out by English professors, literary critics, biographers, and theologians, with but only a select few approaching O’Connor’s work philosophically. The three most prominent philosophical commentators on O’Connor are the late Marion Montgomery, Henry Edmondson, and Christina Bieber Lake.¹¹ Brian Barbour’s 2018 essay on O’Connor and Thomism

Bennett, “O’Connor and the Dogma of Creative Writing,” in *Reconsidering Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Alison Arant and Jordan Cofer [Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2020], 222).

10. Cf. Anton C. Pegis, *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Modern Library, 1948).

11. Montgomery was a professor of English at the University of Georgia and a friend and correspondent of Flannery O’Connor who authored two books on her: *Why Flannery O’Connor Stayed Home* (La Salle, IL: Sherwood, Sugden and Company, 1981) and *Hillbilly Thomist: Flannery O’Connor, St. Thomas and the Limits of Art*, vols. 1–2 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2006). He shares this memory: “When Dot and I were first married, we joined a group of senior faculty at the University of Georgia here, a little reading group. And we called ourselves the St. Thomas Aquinas and Rabbit Hunters Club. You have to remember we did actually hunt rabbits on occasion, and had little rabbit fries, as it were. But at any rate, we were reading this little volume here. We started with this. And I discovered much later that Flannery was reading the same work. And in my copy, it’s rather heavily underlined all through there. It’s called *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, and it is from the *Summa Theologica*. I went down to Milledgeville once and compared my copy to hers, and noted passages she had underlined, and some of them corresponded. It was very interesting” (Montgomery, in *At Home with Flannery O’Connor: An Oral History*, ed. Bruce Gentry and Craig Amason [Milledgeville, GA: The Flannery O’Connor-Andalusia Foundation, 2012], 59–60).

Edmondson is a political scientist and the author of *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O’Connor’s Response to Nihilism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002),

references Montgomery, but surprisingly he makes no mention of Edmondson or Bieber Lake. Barbour notes,

Despite its intrinsic importance, Flannery O'Connor's Thomism is not a topic that receives much attention. Nor is its existence much taken for granted or subsumed in the many exegetical discussions of her fiction. On what would seem to be an important, indeed central, topic, a remarkable silence obtains.¹²

This book seeks to break that “remarkable silence” by offering a thorough and long overdue treatment of the Thomistic philosophy upon which O'Connor's narrative art stands and with which her fiction may best be understood.¹³

In the fall semester of 2019, Eleonore Stump gave a public lecture at the Angelicum in Rome, and in the question-and-answer session following her talk, she mentioned that to her mind the greatest Thomist of all time was Dante.¹⁴ Like O'Connor, Dante was not a professionally trained philosopher or theologian but a narrative artist whose work was highly informed by the books that he read. In his introduction to Dante's *Inferno*, Anthony Esolen writes

and the editor of *A Political Companion to Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Henry T. Edmondson (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017).

Bieber Lake is an English professor but is well-versed in the history of philosophy, especially as it relates to Flannery O'Connor. She is the author of *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* and wrote a most important essay, “Future Flannery, or, How a Hillbilly Thomist Can Help Us Navigate the Politics of Personhood in the Twenty-First Century,” in Edmondson's *Political Companion*.

12. Brian Barbour, “‘His Trees Stood Rising Above Him’: Philosophical Thomism in Flannery O'Connor,” *Renascence* 70, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 245.

13. My approach to O'Connor's narrative art is that of the “intentionalist” rather than the “textualist” tradition. See Alison Arant and Jordan Cofer, “Recovering Interpretive Possibilities in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor: An Introduction,” in *Reconsidering Flannery O'Connor*, 5.

14. Eleonore Stump, “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: Creation, Science, and the Second Personal” (lecture, Thomistic Institute at the Angelicum, Rome, October 4, 2019).

the following: “For there are three principles regarding created things that I find fundamental to Dante’s view of the world and its beauty. . . . They are these: *Things have an end. Things have meaning. Things are connected.*”¹⁵ These three principles are all Thomistic in nature and, as we shall see, are all on display in the narrative art of Flannery O’Connor as well. In fact, one may argue that O’Connor’s project is to reject the antitheses of these three principles, particularly as they show up in modernity and postmodernity. Flannery O’Connor may not be the greatest Thomist of all time, but I argue that her contribution to the Thomistic revival of the twentieth century is indeed great.

This philosophical work is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1 offers a general introduction to Flannery O’Connor. I highlight O’Connor’s intellectual formation and present an overview of her vocation as a narrative artist and then offer an account of the unique relationship between philosophy and literature. In chapter 2, I address the metaphysics of Flannery O’Connor’s worldview, beginning with God’s existence, then moving to a philosophical understanding of the goodness of God’s creation, while also explaining the nature of evil, O’Connor’s use of the grotesque, and how symbols operate philosophically in O’Connor’s fiction. The chapter concludes with a philosophical analysis of “The River.” Chapter 3 is devoted to O’Connor’s epistemology, starting not with the mind but with a general study of life—moving from vegetative, to sensitive, to intellectual life—then demonstrating the important distinction between *man as knower* and *man as thinker*. Special attention is given to O’Connor’s own underlinings in Pegis’ *Introduction*, evidently her primary source for understanding Thomistic epistemology, with specific emphasis on the role of the senses in the process of knowing. The most original philosophical argument in this book comes in reading Betty Edwards’ *Drawing on the Right Side*

15. Anthony Esolen, introduction to Dante’s *Inferno* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), xvii.

of the Brain through a Thomistic lens and then applying her thesis to O'Connor's Hillbilly Thomism. This chapter also includes a defense of O'Connor's philosophical attraction to Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit who proved to be one of O'Connor's great intellectual heroes. Chapter 3 concludes with a philosophical analysis of O'Connor's "Parker's Back." The fourth and final chapter explores O'Connor's ethics, beginning with a general understanding of the (natural and supernatural) end of man, and then showing how one achieves that end through the operation of the intellect and will, in accord with the natural law, through the practice of virtue, and with the help of friends. I then demonstrate how these Thomistic themes are on display in O'Connor's fiction as well as in her life, giving special attention to her understanding of natural law, human sexuality, and friendship. This chapter concludes with an analysis of O'Connor's longest short story, "The Displaced Person."

Walker Percy once wrote, "The thought crossed my mind: why not do what French philosophers often do and Americans almost never—novelize philosophy, incarnate ideas in a person and a place, which latter is, after all, a noble Southern tradition."¹⁶ Flannery herself presents a notable exception to Percy's "almost never" claim. For in Flannery O'Connor, the Hillbilly Thomist, we find an American narrative artist with a unique ability to novelize philosophy with tremendous effect.

I argue within these pages that although one may study O'Connor's fiction through a variety of intellectual traditions and interpretive lenses, the Thomistic tradition offers the most complete view of her artistic project, and that any other approach to O'Connor's work must contend with her ubiquitous Thomistic intuitions.

My hope is that Thomists in particular will come to appreciate the way in which O'Connor employs Thomistic philosophy as

16. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 382.

the foundation of her stories and come to see how her fiction can be a starting point for philosophy, especially in the classroom. In other words, this book seeks to give philosophical justification to O'Connor's literary art as a manifestation of philosophical ideas, showing that O'Connor's fiction matters to philosophy and that philosophy—specifically Thomistic philosophy—matters to O'Connor's fiction.

I hope that by becoming aware of certain Thomistic ideas that directly influenced O'Connor, along with others that are less directly expressed by her but no less illuminating, you will grow in your understanding and enjoyment of what's going on in her stories and how they work—the metaphysical premises that anchor them, the resources of meaning that O'Connor saw when she stared at the world around her, the “nature and aim” of her artistic choices—in short, that your own imagination will be better equipped to absorb and appreciate the brilliant narrative art of our Hillbilly Thomist.