

# Through the Veil: Flannery O'Connor, Dante, and Me

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The American writer Flannery O'Connor, a Southerner and a Catholic, was apt to talk about literature in medieval terms. She often referred to the “anagogical” meaning of her stories, and in one lecture she invoked the four levels of medieval exegesis as a standard for modern literature:

The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called the anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the *literal* level of the sacred text: one they called *allegorical*, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called *tropological*, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called *anagogical*, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included the most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to

cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have a chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. (*Mystery* 72–73, italics added)

This statement is impressive both for its audacious leap backward and for the sophistication and precision with which it appropriates its medieval terms. O'Connor refers to three distinct applications to which four-level exegesis was put in the Middle Ages: 1) Scripture; 2) nature; and 3) secular literature, as implied in her resurrection of this scheme for modern writers.

O'Connor's endorsement of a theological reading of secular literature brings to mind Dante's controversial statement, in his letter to his sponsor Can Grande della Scala, supporting a theological interpretation of the *Commedia*. Although Dante's authorship of this letter has been contested, it remains an important medieval application of Scriptural exegesis to secular literature. The passage first broadly distinguishes literal from allegorical senses of the text, then delineates allegorical, moral, and anagogical levels of meaning within the allegorical sense:

[T]he sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, "of more senses than one"; for it is one sense that we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic. And this mode of treatment, for its better manifestation, may be considered in this verse: "When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judaea became his sanctification, Israel his power." For if we inspect the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt in the time of Moses is presented to us; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace is presented to us; if the anagogical, the departure of the soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is presented to us. (In Singleton 86–87)

In applying Scriptural interpretation to Dante's poem the letter was making a bold claim—expanding on Aquinas, who reserved fourfold exegesis for the theologian, not the poet. In O'Connor's own day, this statement was the basis of the American Dantist Charles Singleton's redefinition of Dante studies by calling for a theological interpretation of the *Commedia*.

Regardless of Singleton's claims for studying Dante, O'Connor's interest in medieval exegesis raises an interesting set of questions. What occasioned O'Connor's call in the mid-twentieth century for a four-level interpretation of literature? What are the implications of such criticism for O'Connor and her contemporaries? What can the interpretation of Dante contribute to a reading of O'Connor? O'Connor's medieval literary theory sprang from her immersion in the Neo-Scholastic and New Critical currents of her place and time and from her Catholic understanding of the predominantly Protestant South. O'Connor, moreover, worked in a cultural milieu that developed its own understanding of Dante, the looming literary ancestor of every Catholic writer.<sup>1</sup> The constructions of Dante by Allen Tate and Charles Singleton in the 1950s resonate in revealing ways with O'Connor's own literary medievalism. Like Dante, O'Connor pursued figural allegory—that is, typology—rooted in actions related across history. However, as a four-level reading of her short story "The Artificial Nigger" will demonstrate, this fidelity to history compelled O'Connor to dramatize salvation in the modern South through more "startling" imagery than Dante used in an age of faith.

## I

O'Connor's anagogical impulse must be seen in the contexts of the Neo-Scholasticism and the New Criticism dominant in American

<sup>1</sup>The study of Dante in America has a distinguished history, extending from the appointment of one-time Mozart librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte to Chair of Italian at Columbia University in the early nineteenth century, to the founding of a Dante club at Harvard (later the Dante Society of America), to Longfellow's long-awaited translation of the *Commedia* (1867), to T. S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's resurrection of Dante as a major influence on English po-

literary study in the mid-twentieth century. Originating with Pope Leo XIII's call at the end of the nineteenth century to revive the Thomistic synthesis of Christian thought and natural theology, Neo-Scholasticism encouraged Catholic scholars like Jacques Maritain and William Lynch to apply the Thomistic analogy of being to literary analysis. It conspired with a widening Catholic strain in American and English modernism (T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, O'Connor, and her friends Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Robert Lowell) to bring Christianity near the center of literary discourse. As John Updike remembers the 1950s, "If Christianity was not precisely 'in,' the Middle Ages certainly were," and "it is not too much to say that a certain *chic* attached to Thomists like Jacques Maritain . . . and to Christian poets of a requisite agonized quality, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and St. John of the Cross" (848). Reflecting this Christian spirit, the New Criticism of the 1940s and 50s, which emphasized the organic unity of literary forms, was premised upon faith in a universal order and the dream of a social one. The leading New Critics were all practicing Christians, and among the movement's originators, poets John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate were Southerners who could glimpse in traditional Southern society—with perhaps some backlighting from the high Middle Ages—an aesthetic social alternative to the onslaught of industrialization and commercialism.<sup>2</sup>

O'Connor's fiction emerges at the crossroads of these Neo-Scholastic, New Critical, and Southern currents. Maritain's definition of art as a rational habit or craft seeking perfection in both the object and the practitioner, which O'Connor consciously pursued, would seem to uphold the New Critical enshrinement of artistic form. O'Connor said

<sup>2</sup>Murphy identifies the meeting of New Critical and Thomistic principles in O'Connor's artistic vision (416–17). Giles explores the influence of Neo-Scholasticism on Tate and O'Connor (197–209, 358–67). Eagleton discusses the aesthetic and social ideals of the New Criticism and argues that, ironically, the movement became entrenched as an aesthetic corollary to the reigning technocracy, a rational code that would grant literary study the pro-

that the kind of fiction she wanted to write was, like Hawthorne's, closer to poetry—the genre favored by the New Critics—than to the traditional novel (*Mystery* 45–46, 50). At the same time, however, Neo-Scholasticism elevated O'Connor to an analogical vision that would require “more violent means” than “the technical expertness bequeathed by the new critics” to communicate to a modern audience (*Mystery* 46). O'Connor's relationship to the South was also more complicated than that articulated by the Agrarians Ransom and Tate. For O'Connor the organic wholeness of Southern culture did not appeal to a nostalgic medievalism but rather to an active Scholasticism. The elaborate social manners, the history of slavery, the trauma of defeat and Reconstruction, and the shared *mythos* of Scripture—all these made the South a mirror of the individual soul whose experience of grace she sought to dramatize. O'Connor's South has a typological compression: in a half hour, she claimed, one could ride “from places where the life has a distinctly Old Testament flavor to places where the life might be considered post-Christian. Yet all these varied situations can be seen in one glance and heard in one conversation” (*Mystery* 209). What she referred to as her Southern grotesques—racists, misfits, prophets—exist in a theologically haunted culture where “belief can be made believable” and “the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement” (*Mystery* 208, 45).

Despite their differing conceptions of the South, O'Connor shared with Tate a religious faith and an interest in Dante. In 1951, two months after his conversion to Catholicism, Tate delivered a pair of lectures at Boston College that set forth the imaginative polarities through which he understood his new faith: “The Symbolic Imagination: The Mirrors of Dante” and “The Angelic Imagination: Poe as God.” Tate argues that Poe's imagination divorces the intellect from the natural world, and “[w]hen neither intellect nor will is bound to the human scale, their projection becomes godlike, and man becomes an angel” (443). In contrast to Poe, Tate's hero Dante is the exponent of the symbolic imagination, which “[brings] together various meanings at a single moment of action” and “conducts an action through

analogy, of the human to the divine, of the natural to the supernatural, of the low to the high, of time to eternity” (Tate 412).<sup>3</sup>

Tate makes two key points about Dante that are particularly revealing of O’Connor’s fictional method. First, in characterizing Dante’s imagination as symbolic Tate assumes a fourfold interpretation of the *Commedia* and argues that the strategic level is the tropological, that is, the level concerned with moral action. Dante’s accomplishment is the pursuit of a “line of action” (412) moving from the physical to the transcendent; in his approach to eternity, Dante requires a physical body in motion. (By contrast, the angelic imagination is a kind of exegetical short-circuitry that leaps immediately from the literal to the anagogical.) Even when pilgrim Dante attains sight of the three circles of the Trinity, he is still in motion and in the central circle sees the human image. Tate’s second point about Dante is that he makes the “spatial reality” (409) of the supernatural credible by reflecting the image of the natural world. Tate studies the mirrors through which Dante’s vision at different stages of his journey reflects backward and forward. The approach to God is a series of turnings from reflections to realities, but the perfected reality itself appears as “the sensible world turned inside out” (427). The anagogical vision is never totally fulfilled but always glimpsed from a mobile and dramatic perspective: “The high order of the poetic insight that the final insight must elude us, is dramatic in the sense that its fullest image is an action in the shapes of this world” (431).

Tate’s lectures parallel Charles Singleton’s influential interpretations of Dante that began to appear in the 1950s, most notably his *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (1954). Relative to Dante’s commentary in the letter to Can Grande, Singleton proposes that Dante’s allegory is not the “allegory of the poets,” in which meaning comes from the literal level alone, but rather the “allegory of the theologians,” in which other meanings come “‘through the thing the letter signifies,’” that is,

<sup>3</sup>Tate cites Maritain’s *The Dream of Descartes* (1944), an attack on Cartesian dualism, as his source for “the doctrine of angelism, as a force in the modern

through reality itself (90–92).<sup>4</sup> According to theological allegory, things and events have a deep structure. In effect, Singleton is arguing that Dante's way of writing the *Commedia* was modeled upon "God's way of writing" as evidenced in Scripture and in nature (15–16). God, a medieval exegete would claim, "writes into" the events of the Old Testament the types fulfilled in the New. Likewise, God "writes into" a human life the meanings that will be fulfilled in the afterlife. Through these typological relationships, Dante's journey in the afterlife is linked to his journey in this life; thus can Dante accomplish his purpose, expressed to Can Grande, "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity" (in Singleton 93). "The main allegory of the *Divine Comedy*," Singleton writes, "is thus an allegory of action, of event, an event . . . which in its turn reflects, (*in facto*), another event. Both are journeys to God" (92).

The resonance and expansiveness that Tate and Singleton, following the letter to Can Grande, find in the action of the *Commedia* cut against the dominant strain in the tradition of allegorical reading.<sup>5</sup> Adopted from classical interpretive models, traditional allegory assumes a vertical structure premised upon the disjunction between lit-

<sup>4</sup>For Chiarenza, Singleton's accomplishment was not total originality but insistence on interpreting the poem in its medieval theological context, in opposition to the predominant romantic and conservative critics who fixated on the passionate and political content of the poem while ignoring its theological dimension (10–14). Singleton's thesis has certainly been challenged (see for example Freccero 184–89), but its influence has been profound in defining the terms of the debate.

<sup>5</sup>The exegesis of Tate and Singleton compares with that of their contemporary Northrop Frye, who also saw fourfold interpretation as a living presence in modern criticism. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) Frye outlines five phases of symbolism that parallel the levels of medieval exegesis. Frye's intention is to distinguish an anagogical level that is separate from any specific theology and divorced from the sensible world. "The anagogic view of criticism," he writes, "thus leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life and reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (122). Frye's anagogic phase is Tate's reviled ange-

eral and spiritual meanings (Quilligan 27–29). Allegory does not usually posit any intrinsic connection between the story’s action and its profound significance: action is passed beyond—expended—at the highest levels of meaning. As Michael Murrin has demonstrated, from antiquity through the Renaissance, allegory functioned as *veiled* speech wherein the poet obscures truth in order to admit its gradual disclosure to those prepared to receive it. Giovanni Boccaccio and Sir John Harington, for example, “never contended that the events behind their stories were themselves allegorical, for they believed the poet made allegory out of events” (Murrin 109). In other words, traditional allegory functions within the literal level and makes no claims on history outside the text. Dante’s figural allegory, based on typological relationships across history, serves as a corrective to this dominant conception; it is an allegory, as Singleton puts it, of “this *and* that” rather than “this for that” (89). The letter to Can Grande makes explicit what is already dramatized in the *Commedia* itself: the typological fulfillment in Dante’s text of narrative strains rooted in the Bible, Virgil, and Dante’s historical context. Dante’s meanings exist not *behind* the veil but in the process of moving through it, reverberating in its folds.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, O’Connor said that what makes a story work is “an action or a gesture” on “the analogical level,” “*both* in character and beyond character,” suggesting “*both* the world and eternity” (*Mystery* 111, italics added). O’Connor shared with Dante the distinction of being a figural allegorist, building allegory upon a typological conception of history, based in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> But if Tate proposed a school of Dante in modern literature, O’Connor was only a skeptical adherent:

I am often told that the model of balance for the novelist should

<sup>6</sup>Quilligan has challenged the vertical conception of allegory by redefining the genre, from the perspective of the reader, in terms of a horizontal experience whereby “meaning accretes serially, interconnecting and criss-crossing the verbal surface long before one can accurately speak of moving to another level ‘beyond’ the literal” (28). Quilligan’s definition accommodates not only Dante’s figural allegory but expands the significance of the literal level of less figural allegorists like Spenser as well (101–21).

<sup>7</sup>Desmond explores the metaphysical foundations of O’Connor’s biblical

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 thirteenth century, when that 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 has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself. (*Mystery* 49)

Projected upon contemporary reality, that inner balance will never yield the majestic reflections between heaven and earth that Tate celebrates in Dante. The image in the contemporary mirror would be less clear, and more shocking.

## II

O'Connor's exegetical terms can be tested through a reading of her story "The Artificial Nigger" (1955). This story's relatively peaceful climax and explicit denouement expose meanings that are more compressed in other O'Connor stories; moreover, "The Artificial Nigger" makes reference to Dante and, like the *Commedia*, is about an instructional journey. Mr. Head takes his grandson Nelson, whom he has raised, on a day trip to Atlanta from their home in rural Georgia. The grandfather conceives of this journey as a "moral mission" (250) to break the grandson's cockiness and teach him respect. Nelson, who was born in Atlanta, is at first unperturbed by the prospect of the city, and Mr. Head struggles to portray a place of danger, fear, and "niggers" that only an elder can navigate. But they are not long in Atlanta before Mr. Head has lost both their lunch and their way, exposing himself to Nelson's mockery and disdain. Mr. Head takes drastic measures to reduce the boy's pride. While Nelson is napping, the grandfather hides. The boy awakens and, thinking himself abandoned, darts madly down the sidewalk and knocks down an elderly pedestrian, who screams for the police. When Mr. Head denies his relationship to Nelson, Nelson

descends into a brooding hatred that is unbroken until the two encounter, in a white suburb, the battered lawn statue of a black man—an “artificial nigger.” The spectacle of the statue melts their differences, and Mr. Head and Nelson go home reconciled.

Imagery from the *Commedia* adds another dimension to the plot sketched above. On the vigil of the Atlanta journey, Mr. Head resembles “one of the great guides of men” as if “[h]e might have been Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante” (250). The conceit develops as the plot advances: the train conductor overseeing their passage has the face of “an ancient bloated bulldog” (253); the passengers’ limbs are stretched over the seats in various infernal contortions; Mr. Head leads Nelson in circles, always “to the left”—like Dante in Hell—around a domed train station; and by sticking Nelson’s head into a sewer hole, he shows him “how the world was put together in its lower parts” (259).<sup>8</sup> But if this is the story’s apparent allegory, it is not its real one. Mr. Head’s association with Virgil is of course ironic: he is no guide but the primary object of instruction. And the inferno that unfolds through Dantean imagery is really a projection of Mr. Head’s own prejudices. Showing Nelson the city is in large part showing him urban black society at a distance close enough to instill fear but detached enough to maintain segregation. The city and hell alike are reifications of the grandfather’s racism. This inferno is not the dramatic space of moral judgment—as Tate characterizes Dante’s—but rather the angelic projection of a mortal Head. The social fact of segregation defines the parameters of Mr. Head’s inferno—he points to a table of blacks sitting apart in the dining car to show how “They rope them off” (256)—but his image of damnation is blackness, not segregation itself.

The drama through which Mr. Head experiences damnation and salvation as social realities, not self-serving categories, constitutes the real analogical trajectory of the story. The Dante references do not in them-

<sup>8</sup>Asals (88–90), Giannone (91–95), and Hays are three critics who have explored the Dantean imagery in “The Artificial Nigger,” all usefully but not in

selves constitute an allegory; rather, they are allusions suggesting that, like the *Commedia* and like the Bible, the story can be read mystically and figuratively.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the name “Head” initiates a simple allegory of personification (Head represents intellect divorced from soul) overpowered by the story’s larger historical and spatial framework. If the outer map of Atlanta is torn by Mr. Head’s dissections, its inner life enacts mysterious connections. These connections appear through precisely the kind of “mirrors” Tate identifies in Dante. The story is framed by images of the moon—the first reflected in a mirror, the second direct—and images of Mr. Head’s and Nelson’s faces in windows regularly reinforce their kinship in spite of the characters themselves. Such reflections restore a broken world to its proper dimensions and integrity. In the dining car, “great spaces of the rolling view were caught in miniature in the sides of the coffee pots and the glasses” (256). A reflection also subverts Mr. Head’s social segregation. When a “huge coffee-colored man” walks past Mr. Head on the train, the two men, black and white, are unwittingly connected when “the light from a sapphire ring on the brown hand . . . reflected in Mr. Head’s eye, but he did not look up nor did the tremendous man look at him” (255).

When Mr. Head denies Nelson, they both feel separation for the first time. Neither understands reconciliation because, always at loggerheads and socially complacent, neither had ever experienced separation. Under the pressure of the boy’s “steady hate” the grand- father enters “a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect, and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end” (267). This is total otherness (a place lacking relation): Mr. Head experiences damnation as a world without reflection. It is the blackness he has repressed, returning as the very system of segregation he erected against it, a segregation that now

<sup>9</sup>In Quilligan’s terms, the *Commedia*, along with the Bible, are the “pretexts” of O’Connor’s allegory, anterior texts that guide “not only the interpretation but the possibilities of the allegory” (98). “[A]ny text which offers a legitimate language in which to articulate the sacred can become a pretext,” Quilligan

divides him from his own blood. By refusing to drink from the same water spigot as his grandfather, Nelson makes it clear that the segregation at large in society has permeated the family unit. Nelson is mentally “frozen around his grandfather’s treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present at the final judgment” (267). Both characters enter Dante’s universe insofar as they can understand their real situation in terms of ultimate judgment. However, both are mistaken in perceiving judgment as irredeemable by moral action; that is, rather than considering their lives in the light of eternity, they consider themselves already dead.

It is the “artificial nigger” that brings the characters to life and fulfills the story’s tropological level. The statue is a typical racist icon and a common enough ornament on white property, primarily in the South, prior to the Civil Rights movement:

the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow fence that curved around a wide lawn. The Negro was about Nelson’s size and he was pitched forward at an unsteady angle *because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked*. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon . . .

It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. *He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead.* (268, italics added)

Such is the warped white image of the downtown blacks but situated in the suburbs amid “big white houses . . . like partially submerged icebergs in the distance” (267). The allusion to the frozen innermost circle of *Inferno*, the place of betrayers, is convincing here because it reflects at once the inner experience of the characters and the full spatial reality of Southern society. The cracked “putty” that had once connected that statue to the wall recalls the “putty-colored” (258) train station—the touchstone of their downtown tour—from which Mr. Head and Nelson are themselves unhinged and at sea. In both cases the unhinging is not

only physical: it is an unhooking from intended meanings. Adrift in the city, Mr. Head has taken unexpected turns in his moral mission. Detached from the wall, the Negro statue is cut loose into a flux of signification. The relationship between the statue's unstable meaning and the travellers' wayward itinerary echoes an analogy at the beginning of the *Paradiso* between an artist's formal intention and God's plan for his creatures:

To be sure, even as a shape often does not accord with the intention of the art, because the material is deaf to respond, so the creature sometimes departs from this course, having the power, thus impelled, to swerve toward some other part. (1:127-132)

The crucial distinction is that the intentions of both the statue and Mr. Head's journey are erroneous, and it is precisely by swerving from their intentions that Mr. Head and the statue align with their true course. The statue "was meant to look happy," but its disintegration gives it "a wild look of misery instead" (268).

The "artificial nigger" demonstrates some of the features of mainstream, nonfigural allegory. Severed from its prosaic, racist intention, the grotesque statue manifests the attributes that Murrin associates with allegory's memorial function: it is "strange and unusual," "vivid and dramatic," and it even evinces, in its chipping and cracking, something of the allegorist's liberty to "disfigure an image, painting it in glaring colors, covering it with mud, or staining it with blood" (80). Arising "like a cry out of the gathering dusk" ("Artificial Nigger" 268), the statue is analogous to the human voice, and as such it affirms the essential oral nature of allegory, which seeks communication with and response from an audience (Murrin 121). O'Connor endorsed this dimension of allegory when she expressed her need to "shock" the reader: "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*Mystery* 34).

However, by grounding its meaning in Southern history, in the *Commedia*, and in Scripture, O'Connor makes the statue much more than memorable and demonstrative. Its wild, broken look is a skewed image

of Beatrice's face near the end of the *Purgatorio*, which, like the statue, conveys religious meaning through her eyes (reflecting the two natures of Christ) and her smile (signifying Divine Love). "Turn, Beatrice, turn your holy eyes upon your faithful one," sing the Muses representing the theological virtues, "who has moved so many steps to see you. For grace do us the grace to unveil to him your mouth, that he may discern the second beauty which you conceal" (31:133-38). In O'Connor, the statue's "chipped eye" points to the suffering human face of Christ, and the smile is not the "second beauty" "unveiled" to Dante but itself a minstrel veil—now being removed—concealing the actual humanity and suffering of Southern blacks. By lifting the veil, O'Connor brings Dante to bear upon "the problem of the color line" that W. E. B. Du Bois foresaw in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as "the problem of the Twentieth Century." "Leaving, then, the world of the white man," Du Bois announces, "I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, the struggle of its greater souls" (vii-viii). In O'Connor's story the veil is not the screen that the nonfigural allegorist, as Murrin explains, arbitrarily erects in front of the truth; rather, it is an actual social barrier through which, and against which, O'Connor witnessed the historical operation of grace. Within this veil, Mr. Head and Nelson glimpse "a great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (269). The same action of mercy consumes Mr. Head's pride, and he feels at once both his depravity—extending from the original sin of Adam to his own denial of Nelson—and his salvation. He feels "ready . . . to enter Paradise" (270).

Readers have puzzled over the role of the statue in the resolution of the story's conflict. In her letters O'Connor supplied two crucial clues: "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger," she wrote, "was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (*Habit* 78); she also called the artificial nigger "a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself" (*Habit* 140). These two statements provide the terms of a theological interpretation that Singleton's reading of Dante can help clarify. The theological dimension begins with the Heads'

identification of the agony beneath the statue's smile. Through their own suffering they are able to "read into" the statue, so that we can say, with Dante, "it is one sense we get through the letter [or statue], and another we get through the thing the letter [statue] signifies." The mystery of black experience is "written into" the racist icon, beyond the intentions of its human artificer. Also, O'Connor suggests, the mystery of human redemption is written into African-American experience and its unveiling offered to those least predisposed to share it. Thus in a four-fold reading the story's resolution might go as follows. Literally, Mr. Head and Nelson are reconciled before a smiling but miserable "artificial Negro." Allegorically, O'Connor establishes a connection between the suffering of the black race and the suffering of Christ. The tropological or moral level pushes the allegory toward social action: the Heads' reconciliation signifies the abolition of all human segregation, to reflect the cosmic order that, as Dante writes in the *Paradiso*, "binds together and unites the earth" (1:117). Anagogically, O'Connor dramatizes what Dante refers to as "the departure of the soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory." That O'Connor was aware of the theological depth of her story is evident in her admission that "there is a great deal more in it than I understand myself" (*Habit* 140).

Spurred by the availability of Aristotle's *Politics* and by a more activist impulse, thirteenth-century exegetes put special emphasis on the tropological level, yielding Scriptural interpretations relevant to politics and secular government (Manning 52). Resurrecting exegesis in the South of the 1950s, O'Connor gravitated toward similar kinds of meanings not from activism but from a felt understanding of the South's tragic racial history as a still unfolding drama. But "The Artificial Nigger" suggests what O'Connor meant when she said that the attempt to play Dante in the twentieth century would not necessarily produce Dante's "balanced picture." The smile of agony is O'Connor's peculiar answer to Beatrice's smile and the South's dark mirror of eternity.

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