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## Idolatry in All-Demanding Eyes: A Reading of Flannery O'Connor's *Parker's Back*<sup>1</sup>

Flannery O'Connor is one of the most puzzling and least conventional women writers of the American South, combining the rawest material with the most refined ways of expression – her surprising effects can hardly be described even through a list of contradicting superlatives. In her life, two pairs of almost crucifying opposites, seemingly incompatible drives can be observed: being a devoted Catholic and being a Southerner; being a prolific writer with a brilliant career and being in the constant proximity of death, due to the hereditary illness that eventually took her away at the age of 39. (The two opposites can be visually imagined on two rectangular axes, giving the shape of a cross.) Bearing such a personal cross, while writing, she had to keep it in balance with extreme caution, never allowing the weight of any of the four ends to pull her down. The mystery she celebrates is never direct or outspoken, to many readers it may even seem blasphemous. Her protagonists' search for the metaphysical experience gets manifested in their running away from it, the "moment of grace" she intends to grant the characters very often comes as a violent shock, and the price they have to pay for it is frequently no less than their lives. As Patrick Galloway points out in his essay "The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction", O'Connor's writings can be characterized by

cathartic bitterness, a belief in grace as something devastating to the recipient, a gelid concept of salvation, and violence as a force for good. At first it might seem that these aspects of her writing would detract from, distort or mar the fiction they are wrapped up in, but in fact they only serve to enhance it, to elevate the mundane, sometimes laughably pathetic events that move her plots into sublime anti-parables, stories that show the way by elucidating the worst of paths. What at first seem senseless deaths become powerful representations of the swift justice of God; the self-deluded, prideful characters that receive the unbearable revelation of their own shallow selves are being impaled upon the holy icicle of grace, even if they are too stupid or lost to understand the great boon God is providing them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All references to the text are made on the basis of the following edition: Flannery O'CONNOR: *The Complete Stories*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996, 510–530.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick GALLOWAY: "The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction", [cyberpat.com/essays/flan.html](http://cyberpat.com/essays/flan.html) Accessed: 30 August, 2023.

“Parker’s Back” is one of her last stories, written in 1964 and published posthumously in 1965. As Stephen Sparrow remarks in his essay on the story,

Caroline Gordon Tate [a friend and fellow writer] recalled visiting O’Connor in hospital shortly before she died and tells how O’Connor said she wasn’t supposed to be working but then smiled and pulled from under her pillow a notebook in which she said she was putting the finishing touches to something. What she was touching up was “Parker’s Back.”<sup>3</sup>

It is indeed touching to read this before touching the text. It might as well be seen as a gesture of “keeping in touch” with the dimensions of the birth of the story. But in the course of an encounter with O’Connor’s words, gentle touches might turn into flogging – she deliberately avoided all forms of sentimentality the same way in which she rejected didactic moralizing. She, nevertheless, was willing to discuss her writing method and *ars poetica*. In her collection of essays on the topic, *Mystery and Manners*, she openly talks about the risks of the writer who is at the same time a believer. Since in this paper I wish to focus on eyes, seeing and being seen, it might be helpful to quote an excerpt from the essay “Catholic Novelists” that deals with *sight*.

For the Catholic novelist, the prophetic vision is not simply a matter of his personal imaginative gift; it is also a matter of the Church’s gift, which, unlike his own, is safeguarded and deals with greater matters. It is one of the functions of the church to transmit the prophetic vision that is good for all time, and when the novelist has this as a part of his own vision, he has a powerful extension of sight.

It is, unfortunately, a means of extension which we constantly abuse by thinking that we can close our own eyes and that the eyes of the Church will do the seeing. They will not. We forget that what is to us an extension of sight is to the rest of the world a peculiar and arrogant blindness, and that no one today is prepared to recognize the truth of what we show unless our purely individual vision is in full operation. When the Catholic novelist closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result is another addition to that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous.

It would be foolish to say there is no conflict between these two sets of eyes. There is a conflict, and it is a conflict which we escape at our peril, one which cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith. We think that faith entitles us to avoid it, when in fact, faith prompts us to begin it, and to continue it until, like Jacob, we are marked.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Stephen SPARROW: “The Ultimate Heresy. The Heartless God in ‘Parker’s Back’ ”, mediaspecialist.org/ssultimate.html Accessed: 30 August, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Flannery O’CONNOR: *Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert FITZGERALD, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969, 179–180.

Problems of eyes, of being marked, as well as the conflicts between religious and secular ways of seeing are addressed in “Parker’s Back,” although the characters are far from being Kierkegaardian “knights of faith”<sup>5</sup> or radical atheists. They are plain and poor people, with simple and uneventful lives, without the flavor of uniqueness or extravagance. The similes alluding to food express this in a powerful way: the hero, O.E. Parker is “as ordinary as a loaf of bread”<sup>6</sup> and the skin on his homely wife’s face is “thin and drawn tight as the skin on an onion.”<sup>7</sup> Bread and onion make a very modest diet, still, in the context of the story, they seem to disagree in the course of digestion. (The wife is not much of a cook, either.) Although the two characters are relatively of the same social background, both of them coming from poor white Southern families (referred to as “white trash” in the vocabulary of some of Faulkner’s characters and rated below the black population), there is not much more in common between them. Sarah Ruth is the daughter of a “Straight Gospel preacher”<sup>8</sup> and her ethical norms are based on a literal, fundamentalist reading of the Bible: she is “sniffing up sin”<sup>9</sup> everywhere. O.E. (preferring the initials because he is ashamed of his Biblical name, Obadiah Elihue – references to a prophet and one of Job’s companions in the Old Testament) has a different moral framework: he instinctively would not object to all the pleasures that Sarah Ruth feels obliged to abstain from and regards as sinful. He had an initial spiritual experience at the age of fourteen (Richard Giannone observes that this “neatly divides his history in half” since at the time of the story proper, he is twenty-eight).<sup>10</sup> The spiritual awakening is caused by the sight of a man at a fair, whose whole body is covered with colorful tattoos: this fascinates Parker and, uplifted, he stares at the man with his mouth hanging open. Before this moment he had never had any sense of his own existence – from now on, he will seek for the wonder he witnessed to. The only way to satisfy his hunger for fascination is through having tattoos of his own: one by one, he collects the various colorful images on his body after leaving school at age 16, doing odd jobs to have the money to pay for them. When his mother (Betty Jane, whose name is also among the tattoos in a heart – but could be taken for any girl’s name, so it’s not too embarrassing for Parker) takes him to a revival session, he feels abhorred, flees and joins the navy. This way, he not only gets the physical training to become a strong man (leaving the habit of staring with an open mouth) but he also has the opportunity to collect new tattoos from all the parts of the earth. However, the satisfaction the new images provide him with is temporary: very soon

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Fear and Trembling,” translated by Walted Lowrie, in: *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert BRETALL, New York, Random House, 1943, 116–134.

<sup>6</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 513.

<sup>7</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 510.

<sup>8</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 517.

<sup>9</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 510.

<sup>10</sup> Richard GIANNONE: *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989, 221.

after getting a new picture, he feels discontent again. What seemed like an organic, colorful miracle on the body of the man in the fair, alive and in constant motion, is nothing more than a patchwork of botched images on his own body, loosely and haphazardly covering his skin. It is important to note that he wants to see all his tattoos in the mirror and this is why his back remains white – a kind of *tabula rasa* – for a long time. After being dishonorably discharged from the navy (since he attempted to run away without official leave), he decides to move to the country, buys a truck and tries to earn his living by selling apples. This is how he meets his future wife, Sarah Ruth.

The plot is not chronological, various reminiscences follow one another and we are told about his tattoos and fascination in the middle of the remembrance of the first conversation with his wife. Their relationship starts and seems to end with a broom: At the first encounter between them, when Parker only senses that a woman is watching him, he puts up a scene of pretending he had hurt his hand and starts cursing: “God dammit!, he hollered, Jesus Christ in hell! Jesus God Almighty Damm! God dammit to hell!”<sup>11</sup>. As a response to his mouthful of oaths, “a terrible bristly claw”<sup>12</sup> of Sarah Ruth’s broom hits him – foreshadowing the final scene when he is similarly swept out of his house. This cursing scene is the second time in the story when God’s name is mentioned (the first is a casual “God knew some paint would have improved it,”<sup>13</sup> in connection with his wife’s face). Both times, breaking the commandment, the name of the Lord is taken in vain – I intend to return to the other contexts of God’s name later in the paper.

Although the tattoos give him some confidence – they attract most of the women who see them – they fail to fascinate Sarah Ruth. Parker doesn’t understand why he keeps returning to the girl who doesn’t respect him and whose skinny kind he never liked, as later he is puzzled about why he had married her at all. She thinks only “a fool Indian”<sup>14</sup> would do such things to their skin and it is symbolic that she mistakes Parker’s first tattoo, the eagle for a chicken. What seems to win her heart, however, is his Biblical name (kept in secret and only whispered to her ear after she swore she wouldn’t tell anyone). Obadiah Elihue sounds like a magic spell for the girl – and they get married. Their marriage is unhappy – although fruitful: at the time of the story Sarah Ruth is pregnant. This circumstance only adds to Parker’s discontent: there is no future outlined for the new life in their family. Sarah Ruth spends most of her time talking to him about the “Judgement Seat of God,”<sup>15</sup> where he will have to account for his sins (this might bring into mind O’Connor’s next and very last story which bears the title “Judgement Day”). Parker, in turn, wants

<sup>11</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 511.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 510.

<sup>14</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 515.

<sup>15</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 519.

to make Sarah Ruth jealous by describing the old lady he works for as a “hefty blonde,”<sup>16</sup> who calls him a “walking panner-rammer.”<sup>17</sup>

The next existential conflict, which can be seen as the second spiritual experience, happens on the tenth page of the twenty-page story: because of trying to think of an appropriate tattoo on his back which would please his wife as well and which would have to be “better even than the Bible,”<sup>18</sup> Parker absent-mindedly drives his tractor on the old lady’s field into a tree, thereby setting it on fire. In his shock of being propelled out of his seat barefoot, seeing the burning tree and his own burning shoes, he hears himself crying out: “GOD ABOVE!”<sup>19</sup> Many critics (Richard Giannone and Jordan Coher, for example) have pointed out the Biblical allusion to Moses’ burning bush in this scene – except that Parker cannot comprehend what has happened and, true to his habit, he runs away from the place, to the town where he could immediately get a new tattoo. The artist gives him a cold and distrustful welcome but Parker pays in cash and after asking for “pictures of God,”<sup>20</sup> selects the image of “a flat, stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes”<sup>21</sup> to be put on his back. It is the eyes that capture him, and he wants the work to be elaborate, with all the “little red and blue and ivory and saffron squares.”<sup>22</sup> He is naturally dissatisfied when, at the end of the day, the image is not yet ready and it is just the eyes that are still missing. On his cot at the shelter at night, he envisions the burning tree again as well as the eyes of his tattoo – and the latter seem to him much more horrifying than the “icepick”<sup>23</sup> eyes of Sarah Ruth. When he is asked by the artist next day whether he is “saved,”<sup>24</sup> he denies all connections to religion, saying: “A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he don’t deserve none of my sympathy”<sup>25</sup> – but he barely dares to look at his back in the two mirrors. When he sees the image, he “turn[s] white and move[s] away.”<sup>26</sup> He goes to a pool hall where he meets some old acquaintances who greet him painfully with a slap on the back, so he has to tell them about having a fresh tattoo. When the shirt is pulled up, the company falls silent and the shirt, “like a veil”, falls back “over the face.”<sup>27</sup> Being at a loss how to explain the image, he gets into a fight and flees: he wishes to see his wife and her surprise. (Earlier, to the artist, he had said: “She can’t

<sup>16</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 511.

<sup>17</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 519.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 520.

<sup>20</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 521.

<sup>21</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 522.

<sup>22</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 523.

<sup>23</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 510, 524.

<sup>24</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 524.

<sup>25</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 525.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 526.

say she don't like the looks of God."<sup>28</sup>) On the way home he realizes that "all along that was what he wanted, to please her."<sup>29</sup> The tattoo seems to have brought about a change: he feels "not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night."<sup>30</sup> Upon arrival, he finds the front door barred, and Sarah Ruth asks four times "Who's there?"<sup>31</sup> before letting him in. As the day breaks, he sees streaks of light in the sky, and as he utters his magic password, "Obadiah Elihue,"<sup>32</sup> he has a new spiritual sensation: "all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts."<sup>33</sup> The magic is gone as soon as he enters: Sarah Ruth (who had heard about the tractor accident from the old lady and is angry about having to pay for the damage) doesn't want to look at his back. When she finally does, she first doesn't recognize the image. And when Parker tells her "It's him. God!"<sup>34</sup> she starts screaming "Idolatry!"<sup>35</sup> and picks up the broom and beats him so hard that large welts begin to form on the face of Christ in the fresh tattoo. Being swept out of the house, the last image we get of him is leaning against the pecan tree, "crying like a baby."<sup>36</sup>

The word "idolatry" comes up twice in the text: first, when their wedding at the County Ordinary's office is described: Sarah Ruth had rejected to go to a church because she "thought churches were idolatrous"<sup>37</sup> and at the end, when she accuses her husband. If we accept some Christian theologians' view according to which the absolutization of an idea may count as idolatry,<sup>38</sup> Sarah Ruth's behavior could just as well count as idolatrous. Her obsession with keeping intact from all the sins she sniffs causes a blindness to her own way of spiritually tattooing herself with (and thus hiding behind) abusable Bible quotations: her absolute certainty in her righteousness hardens her heart and her eyes to the extent that she flogs the image of Christ so that the freshly tattooed image may seem to start weeping.

The idol, in Parker's case, could be seen as his dependence on demanding and commanding eyes: first, the eyes of his mother; then, the eyes of his officers in the navy; next, the piercing ice-pick eyes of Sarah Ruth as well as the eyes of his employer, the watchful old lady; finally the "superior"<sup>39</sup> eyes of the tattoo artist

<sup>28</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 525.

<sup>29</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 527.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 528.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 529.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 530.

<sup>37</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 518.

<sup>38</sup> John MACQUARRIE, *Principles of Christian Theology*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, 145.

<sup>39</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 521.

and the all-demanding eyes of the Byzantine Christ. His own eyes, in turn are described first in the navy: “He stayed in the navy five years and seemed a natural part of the gray mechanical ship, except for his *eyes*, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea.”<sup>40</sup> These eyes, full of the capacity of wonder, turn gradually hollow as he cannot live up to anyone’s expectations and gets more and more dissatisfied. After he first sees the tattooed man at the fair, “a peculiar unease settle[s] in him. [...] as if a *blind* boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.”<sup>41</sup> When the old lady tells him how to drive the tractor around the tree, she explains things “*as if he didn’t have eyes*,”<sup>42</sup> and right before hitting the tree, “The sun, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front to behind him but he appeared to see it both places *as if he had eyes in the back of his head*.”<sup>43</sup> His *eyes* were *cavernous*<sup>44</sup> right after the accident. The artist doesn’t recognize Parker in the “*hollow-eyed* creature”<sup>45</sup> before him, and Parker’s “*eyes blared*, as if he were ready for a fight”<sup>46</sup> when the artist wanted to postpone the job. His eyes seem to lose their significance to the extent others’ eyes are fixed on him. The Byzantine Christ’s eyes, when he first flips through the pages of the book, “glanced at him swiftly,”<sup>47</sup> then it is his heart (mentioned only once) that “appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said plainly, as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK.”<sup>48</sup> When he remembers these all-demanding eyes at night, not yet having them on his back, “even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly.”<sup>49</sup> When the tattoo is ready and he finally looks at it in the mirror, “the reflected face continued to look at him – still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence.”<sup>50</sup> And when he sobers up after the fight in the pool hall, he feels that “The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed.”<sup>51</sup>

It is at this point that I would like to turn to Sartre for the explanation of the importance of differentiating between seeing and being seen. In *Being and Nothingness*, when discussing the third ontological dimension of the body, he states:

<sup>40</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 514.

<sup>41</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 513.

<sup>42</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 520.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* All emphases are mine.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 521.

<sup>46</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 523.

<sup>47</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 522.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 524.

<sup>50</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 526.

<sup>51</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 527.



I exist for myself as a body known by the Other. [...] The shock of the encounter with the Other is for me a revelation in emptiness of the existence of my body as an in-itself for the Other. Thus my body is not given merely as that which is purely and simply lived; rather this 'lived experience' becomes – in and through the contingent, absolute fact of the Other's existence – extended outside in a dimension of flight which escapes me. My body's depth of being is for me this perpetual 'outside' of my most intimate 'inside.'<sup>52</sup>

I think such a strange sensation can be described when Parker feels “as if he were himself but a stranger to himself.”<sup>53</sup> When talking about shyness and embarrassment, Sartre points out:

I cannot be embarrassed by my own body as I exist it. It is my body as it is for the Other which may embarrass me. Yet [...] I can be only embarrassed by a concrete thing which is presented inside my universe [...] Here the embarrassment is more subtle, for what constrains me is absent. [...] it is in principle out of reach, and all the acts which I perform in order to appropriate it to myself escape me in turn and are fixed at a distance from me as my body-for-the-Other. Thus I forever act 'blindly,' shoot at a venture without ever knowing the results of my shooting.<sup>54</sup>

Parker, in this sense, has the vague existential experience of his body-for-the-Other and acts 'blindly' throughout the story. He is dependent on the look of others until he is swept out of his house. One more last quotation from Sartre (from the chapter discussing concrete relations with others) might be elucidating here:

If we start with the first revelation of the Other as a *look*, we must recognize that we experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of a *possession*. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret – the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me, and this possession is nothing other than the consciousness of possessing me. I in the recognition of my object-state have proof that he has this consciousness. By virtue of this consciousness the Other is for me simultaneously the one who has stolen my being from me and the one who causes “there to be” a being which is my being.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Paul SARTRE: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl., intro.: Hazel BARNES, New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, 351–352.

<sup>53</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 527.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Paul SARTRE: op. cit. 353.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Paul SARTRE: op. cit. 364.



I would go so far as to say that Parker is in such an ambivalent relationship with Sarah Ruth until the very last scene when the Byzantine Christ is flogged on his back.

The secret of his being can also be approached from the point of view of the power of his name: *Obadiab* means “God’s servant” in Hebrew, and *Elibue*: “my God is He.” God’s name is used and abused several times in the text, in the formerly quoted casual expression “God knew,”<sup>56</sup> then in the cursing scene, then in another casual offside remark when Parker meets Sarah Ruth and wonders “Who in God’s name would marry her?”<sup>57</sup> When at the time of the accident he hears himself “yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, ‘GOD ABOVE!’”,<sup>58</sup> he is – to echo Sartre – both outside and inside of himself, and when he runs to the artist, wanting an image of “Just God.[...] Christ. I don’t care. Just so it’s God,”<sup>59</sup> it sounds almost like a desperate prayer, asking for immediate help. When finally he is told by Sarah Ruth that “God don’t look like that!”<sup>60</sup> and that “He don’t *look*. He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face,”<sup>61</sup> the reader might have the feeling that God indeed didn’t look at Parker, or looked some other way – that, in spite of (or precisely because of) the huge image of the Byzantine Christ, this is a godless story.

Of course, it is impossible to leave it at that. In spite of the quite direct prohibition against tattoos or cuts in the flesh in Leviticus 19:28, “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD,” we read in Deuteronomy 30:6: “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thine soul that thou mayest live.” Perhaps it is not blasphemous to make a connection between circumcision and tattoos: in this sense, the Almighty tattoo artist has the power to mark whom he loves, to carve his sign *inside*. The question is whether Parker is ever granted the moment of grace to recognize this. Whether in the piercing physical pain of getting the tattoo or in the even more piercing physical and spiritual pain of being swept out of the house with the broom, he ever becomes aware of any kind of freedom and care. Flannery O’Connor intended to bestow such a moment on most of her characters. Shall we find this moment before Parker enters the house, utters his own name and feels “light pouring through him”<sup>62</sup> recognizing for the first time in his soul “a perfect arabesque of colors”<sup>63</sup> Or shall we find it after he had literally turned his back to Sarah Ruth, offered his back to the blows and leans against the pecan tree, “crying like a baby”<sup>64</sup> Seemingly in this moment of absolute despair

<sup>56</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 510.

<sup>57</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 516.

<sup>58</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 520.

<sup>59</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 522.

<sup>60</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 529.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 528.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> O’CONNOR (1996): 530.

and failure, Flannery O'Connor abandons her hero without compassion. But in *Mystery and Manners*, in the essay entitled "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she points out the following:

It's considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion. Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps the author's compassion is shown in the last word of the story, the text ends on the note of "baby." Can we say or hope that in any sense, Parker in this moment is "reborn"? The title of the story, "Parker's Back," might also be read as the contracted form of the sentence "Parker is Back" at some place of origin (this reading might be strengthened by the sentence he utters to the keyhole stopped with paper, before whispering his magic password, his real name: "It's me, old O.E. I'm back").<sup>66</sup> Has he arrived at the start to start anew? This can only be suggested by extra-textual speculation. The text, however, exposes his vulnerability to the full and places the judgement in the hands of the reader. It must also be noticed that the word "baby" might have other meanings in light of Sarah Ruth's pregnancy: if she can be so cruel to her husband, how might she treat the future son or daughter she is expecting?

Parker's back is turned on his wife, as well as on the reader in the closing gesture of the text. Beside the exposure of vulnerability, the all-demanding eyes of the tattooed Christ are also turned on her and on us. This is the moment when Flannery O'Connor's sarcastic remark about the danger of religious writing turning into a "large body of pious trash" enters into a conversation with Sartre's existential "nakedness." It is as if the sentimental painted eyes on Parker's back returned "the gaze of the Other," demanding some kind of a response.

How then, are we supposed to take this gesture? I think we'd better take it to heart. Perhaps it is worth trying to experiment with the examination of various gestures that mark out a special pattern, a colorful arabesque in the text. One might even try to select colors arbitrarily to match the gestures: When Sarah Ruth's ruthlessness is mentioned, yellow could be used, when God's name turns up, maybe red. When Parker's eyes are described, blue would be the color, with a white spot over it whenever they are "hollow." When the warmth of emotion is evident, orange could signal it, when Parker is seen by others, perhaps dark green. Light green may be used for the "as if" images connected to sight and brown when the

<sup>65</sup> O'CONNOR (1969): 43.

<sup>66</sup> O'CONNOR (1996): 528.

word “look” gains special significance. Of course, a more thorough study of color-symbolism would be needed to make the selection less haphazard. One may write the quoted sentences of the gestures in brick-like colored blocks, one scene under the other, following the linearity of the text. And what would come out of this crazy painting, not much resembling the “little red and blue and ivory and saffron squares”? The pattern may not show much more than a shaky tower or edifice built without skill, a botched shanty of bricks. Perhaps two things might safely be stated: it would be colorful and it would be vulnerable. Could we accept it as a tattoo of a reading experience? And shall we put it on our backs, or under our pillows?

The bizarre complexity of the story may well be carved into the hearts of both fictive characters and living readers: the ironical representation of Bible-belt piety and the authentic expression of true devotion keep alternating in the text in a surprising and unpredictable, almost scriptural way.

Turning the pages of the Bible to the shortest, one-chapter book, the Book of Obadiah, we may read:

But upon Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions.<sup>67</sup>

And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.<sup>68</sup>

And if, inspired by the other magic name, we turn to Elihue's words in the Book of Job, we might as well read of the delivered man:

His flesh will be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth:

He shall pray unto God, and he will be favourable unto him: and he shall see his face with joy: for he will render unto man his righteousness.<sup>69</sup>

Although Elihue's words fail to comfort Job and although the reading experience can hardly end with a comfortable conclusion, I hope the words taken out of the strictly Biblical context as well as the offered vulnerability and humbleness of writer, character, and reader can open up new scopes for conversation.

<sup>67</sup> Obad 1:12

<sup>68</sup> Obad 1:21

<sup>69</sup> Job 33:25–26

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*Abstract*

"Parker's Back," Flannery O'Connor's penultimate short story shows how a simple and ordinary man with a Biblical name (Obadiah Elibu) wishes to prove his uniqueness by covering his skin with a mixed patchwork of tattoos. The last of these is a huge image of Christ with "all-demanding eyes" he wants to wear on his back in order to impress his simple but extremely pious wife. In this paper, I will focus on the recurring images of eyes in Flannery O'Connor's text, taking into consideration various possible interpretations of seeing and being seen. Sartre's ideas of "the gaze of the Other" will help my investigations – since I take the story as a study of existential questions. I will further discuss the occurrences of the word "God" and the meaning of the word "idolatry" in the story, as well as the question of tattoos as intended markers of belonging. In the end, I experiment with the presentation of a possible colorful patchwork based on the collection of paralleled phrases and gestures in the text. Can such an imaginary tattoo become the imprint of a reading experience?

**Keywords:** eyes, sight, Sartre, existentialism, tattoo, idolatry, faith, religion, irony, vulnerability

*Rezümé*

A Parker háta Flannery O'Connor utolsó előtti novellája. Címszereplője, egy egyszerű, ám biblikus nevű ember (Abdiás Elibú) azzal akarja bebizonyítani egyediségét, hogy színes képeket tetováltat a bőrére. Az utolsó kép egy mindent látó, ellenállhatatlan szemű Krisztust ábrázol, ezt a hátára szánja, hogy elkápráztassa vele szintén egyszerű, de bigott feleségét. Ebben a tanulmányban a szemek visszatérő motívumát szeretném vizsgálni a szövegben, különös tekintettel a látás aktív és passzív változataira, mit lát maga Parker és milyen érzés, hogy mások őt látják. Segítségemre lesz ebben az a jelenség, amire Sartre hívja fel a figyelmet, "a Másik tekintete." Úgy gondolom, a novella egzisztenciális kérdésekkel szembesíti az olvasót. A szemek mellett az "Isten" szó előfordulásait és a "bálványimádás" jelentőségét is elemezni szeretném, illetve azt, hogy a tetoválás mennyiben fejezi ki a valahová tartozás vágyát. A tanulmány utolsó részében megkísérlem magát az elemzést egyfajta párhuzamos kifejezésekkel és gesztusokkal álló színes tetoválásként bemutatni. Vajon meg lehet-e így jeleníteni egy olvasmányélmény lenyomatát?

**Kulcsszavak:** szem, látás, Sartre, egzisztencializmus, tetoválás, bálványimádás, hit, vallás, ironia, sebezhetőség