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The Subversion and Reconstruction of
Western Theology and Sexual Relationship
—A Feminist Re-reading of Flannery O'Connor

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——弗兰纳里·奥康纳作品的女性主义再解读

杨纪平 著



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Abstract

My dissertation is a feminist re-reading of Flannery O'Connor's fictional works. I am trying to argue that O'Connor attempts to use God-talk to question the patriarchal ideology so as to break the solidarity between the traditional religion and western sexism, and provide redemption for human beings, especially for women. O'Connor suggests that the change in women's thinking is the very root of their liberation. Worshipping the male God images or playing God themselves cannot bring redemption to them. They must realize that becoming women is becoming whole human beings. Therefore, O'Connor expresses the idea that the sexual hierarchy has to be subverted and an ideal androgynous mode of living, envisaged in terms of bi-sexuality, should be adopted to replace the sexual binary opposition, envisaged in terms of mono-sexuality.

O'Connor writes about the daily life in American South, the Bible Belt, and correlates the modern people's existential problems with the theological concerns. O'Connor subverts the different versions of male God images in theology and the Godlike images in society to reconstruct an ideal state between the divine and the human, which, in Mary Daly's words, is androgynous whole being embodied in the image of God the Verb in which both men and women can participate equally. In order to achieve her purpose, O'Connor does

not deny traditional theology directly. Instead, she characterizes different versions of the male God image to make the readers, especially women, see that these images are already misfit for modern society. This will lead naturally to the loss of the superiority of God and the male. Thereby, the fragmentation of the human psyche before God and the inferiority of women before men are overcome and the hierarchy set up upon the patriarchal theology and sexism is subverted. Meanwhile, O'Connor shows that the reversed hierarchy between the divine and the human is also destructive to human beings. Those characters who play God themselves are punished by the writer severely. Therefore, in terms of theology, O'Connor demonstrates that modern people, especially women, should not depend on the traditional God for their redemption out of their existential dilemma and they should not totally get rid of their faith, either. While subverting the inadequate images of God, human beings should build a new image to make it fit for modern society.

O'Connor subverts the hierarchical sexual relationship through breaking the sex role patterns in the Southern family romance to construct a bisexual state in which difference is accepted and subjectivity is maintained. Her characterization demonstrates that femininity and masculinity are only fabrications of the patriarchal ideology. In her works, the qualities assigned to each sex do not belong to the one sex naturally and exclusively. To counteract the aphasia of the female sex, O'Connor deprives her male images of the power of discourse. While criticizing the male domination, O'Connor criticizes the women who urge a new hierarchy to replace the old one and try to set up a reversed binary opposition between the two sexes.

Thus, the images of “God the Father” in theology and “father the God” in family lose their absolute authority. The subversion of the male authority and male superiority in both religion and society will not only restore women’s subjectivity but also liberate men because the patriarchal ideology produces not one but two victims. The emergence of whole human beings in whom divinity and humanity are combined and who can accept the differences in classes, sexes, races is the way of redemption for modern people, because this can bring the ontological liberation not only for women but also for men. Only by spiritual liberation can human beings achieve a truly harmonic relationship with God and with themselves.

To combine the study in the areas of both theology and sexual relationship, this dissertation attempts to discuss O’Connor’s works with the theories of Mary Daly and Helene Cixous. I try to argue that O’Connor is striving for an ideal state of Cixous’ theory of the other bisexuality, which echoes Daly’s theory of God the Verb: “a liberation which consists of refusing to be ‘the Other’ and asserting instead ‘I am’—without making another ‘the Other’.”

Key Words: subversion reconstruction theology sexual relationship
God the Verb the other bisexuality

内容摘要

本论文拟对弗兰纳里·奥康纳的作品进行女性主义再解读，旨在论证奥康纳试图运用上帝话语来质疑父权制的意识形态，从而打破传统宗教和西方性别歧视的联盟，为人类，尤其是女性，提供一种救赎方式。奥康纳的作品表明女性思想上的转变是她们获得解放的根本所在，而崇拜男性的上帝形象或者自身来充当上帝都是行不通的，她们必须认识到成为完整的人类的必要性。因此，奥康纳表达了推翻性别等级制度并且采用双性视角下雌雄共体的理想生存模式来取代单一性别视角下性别二元对立的思想。

奥康纳描写了美国南方“圣经地带”的日常生活，将现代人的存在和宗教关注点结合在一起。奥康纳颠覆了神学中的“上帝父亲”形象和社会中的“父亲上帝”形象的不同版本，从而重构了人和神之间的理想状态，即玛丽·戴利所提出的“动词性上帝”。这一新的上帝形象中体现了雌雄共体的完整人类，男性和女性能够真正平等地参与到这一形象中。奥康纳并非直接否定传统神学，而是通过不同男性上帝形象的塑造来使读者，尤其是女性，看到这些形象在现代社会的不合时宜性。这样就顺其自然地剥夺了上帝在人类面前和男性在女性面前的优越性，从而克服了由于上帝而产生的人类心理的断裂和女性面对男性的劣等地位，颠覆了父权制神学和性别歧视观念所产生的等级制度。同时奥康纳表明把人和神颠倒过来的等级制度对人类同样具有破坏性。那些试图自己充当上帝的人物受到了作者的严厉惩罚。因此，在神

学领域，奥康纳说明了现代人类，尤其是女性，既不应该依靠传统的上帝来获得救赎，也不能完全抛弃信仰。在颠覆旧的不合时宜的上帝形象的同时，人类应该建立一个新的上帝形象使之适合现代社会。

奥康纳通过打破南方家庭罗曼史中的性别角色模式颠覆了两性关系中的等级制度，并且建构了一种接受差异、维护主体性的雌雄共体状态。奥康纳的人物塑造表明女性特质和男性特质都仅仅是父权制意识形态的虚构而已。在她的作品里，对一个性别所规定的品质并非仅仅属于这个性别，更不是天生属于这个性别。为了消解传统文化中女性的失语状态，奥康纳剥夺了男性人物的话语权。在批评男性中心的同时，奥康纳坚决批判了试图用一种新的二元对立来取代旧的二元对立的女权主义观点。

对于宗教和世俗社会中男性权威和男性优越性的颠覆不仅使女性的主体性得以恢复，同时也是对男性的解放，因为父权制下所产生的不是一个而是两个受害者。完整人类这一状态能够使神性和人性有机结合在一起，并且接受包括不同阶级、性别和肤色之间的差异，这才是现代人类获得救赎的途径，因为这不仅为女性而且也为男性带来本体论上的解放。只有精神上的解放才能使人类和上帝以及自我之间达成一种真正的默契和谐关系。

为了达成在神学和两性关系两个领域研究的结合，本论文尝试采用玛丽·戴利和埃德娜·西苏的理论解读奥康纳小说文本，论证奥康纳试图达到戴利的“动词性上帝”理论和西苏“另一种两性性”理论所提出的理想状态，即：拒绝成为“他者”，强调“自我存在”，同时又不将另一方变为“他者”。

关键词：颠覆 重构 神学 两性关系 动词性上帝
另一种两性性

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Introduction

Take the snake, the fruit-tree and the woman from the tableau, and we have no fall, nor frowning Judge, no Inferno, no everlasting punishment—hence no need of a Savior. Thus the bottom falls out of the whole Christian theology.¹

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

I. The Critical Reception of Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, the only child of a Catholic family. At the age of 21, O'Connor published her first short story, but her career was cut short by an attack of lupus, which killed her at the age of 39. In her short writing career, O'Connor maintained a steady writing pace. Her first novel, *Wise Blood*, was published in 1952, followed by her first short story collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, in 1955, and her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in 1960. Even during her final illness, O'Connor wrote devotedly and finished her final story, "Parker's Back," several weeks before she died in 1964. Another short story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, came out in 1965 posthumously. All of O'Connor's fictional works, therefore, add up to two novels and 31 short stories. O'Connor's posthumously collected nonfiction, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional*

¹ Quoted in Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, p. 69.

Prose, was presented to the readers in 1969 and the collection of her letters, *The Habit of Being*, in 1979. Finally, *The Complete Stories* was published in 1986. In spite of her relatively small amount of publication, O'Connor received impressive awards and honors such as three O. Henry Awards¹ and two honorary doctoral degrees.² In 1972, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* won her the National Book Award. In the same year, an annual, *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, was established. In 1982, the "Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction" was set up and has since become a significant proving ground for newcomers. O'Connor's works have been frequently anthologized and appear in such periodicals as *Accent*, *Mademoiselle*, *Critic*, *Esquire*. O'Connor's papers are part of the permanent collection of the Georgia College Library.

Despite the brevity of her career, Flannery O'Connor is considered as one of the foremost short story writers in American literature. Lorine M. Getz claims O'Connor as "America's greatest post-World War II short story writer" (*Her Life, Library, and Book Reviews* x). Moreover, Getz reveals that many critics and scholars have begun to identify O'Connor as "American South's best fiction writer, William Faulkner not withstanding" and in 1992 O'Connor "was named among the nation's ten best women writers of all time" (*Literary Theologian* x). O'Connor is "the only writer of her generation so elevated as to be included in the Library of America, the youngest to have a volume next to such fixed stars as Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, James and Faulkner" (Asals 95).

1 She got the prizes in 1957 for "Greenleaf," in 1963 for "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and in 1965 for "Revelation."

2 One from St. Mary's College in 1962, and the other from Smith College in 1963.

O'Connor is an anomaly among post-World War II authors, "a complete original" (Hendin 1). At the Iowa Writers' Workshop, O'Connor studied fiction through the lens of the New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Fusing the lessons of the New Critics with her other intellectual interests—Catholic, Thomist,¹ Southern and feminist, O'Connor produced works unlike many other writers of her generation. As a Roman Catholic from the Bible-belt South, O'Connor proposes, "While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (*The Habit of Being* 517).² O'Connor defines her own "subject in fiction" as "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil," but, at the same time, believes that good writing begins in a concrete "experience, not an abstraction" (*Mystery and Manners* 118).³

What is most striking about O'Connor criticism is that her stories allow, or even invite, examination from very different points of view: they are at once perfect New Critical objects, explorations of the grotesque, typological works like medieval mystery plays, faithful portrayals of the landscape of a region, psychological studies, dramas of the action of grace, embodiments of philosophical and theological ideas, even dialogical interplays of voices, etc. In the following pages, I will mainly introduce and comment on O'Connor criticisms from the perspectives of theology and feminism.

1 Thomism refers to the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and its development particularly in the Catholic tradition. New Thomism as a movement took its starting-point from the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, confirming the place of Aquinas as the guardian of orthodox Catholic theology. Philosophers working in this tradition include the French scholar Etienne Gilson and Maritain (Blackburn 376 & 259).

2 Hereafter cited as *Habit* followed by the page number.

3 Hereafter cited as *Mystery* followed by the page number.

The early O'Connor criticisms are often directed "along New Critical and Christian lines" (Kreyling 3). In addition to wide-ranging studies of her style, structure, symbolism, tone, themes, and influences, critical discussion often centers on the theological aspects of O'Connor's works.

First, it is widely acknowledged that O'Connor is a religious writer and she produces a "world of the God-intoxicated" (Hendin 56). Disturbed by what she considers as the misreading of her stories, O'Connor explains her works in various letters and talks, extolling Christian virtues. She declares: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy" (*Mystery* 198). O'Connor's own critical writing is itself of great interest. Her declarations have attracted critics who agree that her works embody Catholic doctrines as well as those who firmly posit the opposite. In inquiries into the depth of her religious intent, critics usually try to find out whether O'Connor is the orthodox Christian that she adamantly insists herself. Her critics have developed, expanded, and sometimes rejected O'Connor's self-analysis.

Robert E. Golden identifies the foremost issue in O'Connor criticism as "the relation between O'Connor's stated religious intent and the realization of that intent within the fiction" (5). Marshall Bruce Gentry points out the extreme variance in O'Connor criticism in terms of her claimed Catholic belief and summarizes "four critical schools" of O'Connor criticism ranging from the degree (if any) of religious design in her fiction to a belief that her "artistry is demonic" (3).¹

¹ Gentry sums up these critical schools: the first of the four critical schools to appear denies the realization of theological intent; the second school considers O'Connor's outlook to be orthodoxy Catholic; the third school suspects O'Connor's religious outlook of being overly harsh; and the fourth one questions whether O'Connor's intent is actually religious (3).

Andre Bleikasten writes of the “heresy” of O’Connor and warns that “O’Connor’s public pronouncements on her art—on which most of her commentators have pounced so eagerly—are by no means the best guide to her fiction. ...Flannery O’Connor was a Catholic. She was not a Catholic writer” (qtd. in Milder 802).¹ Many critics, through examining the depiction of Christian ethics in O’Connor’s works, claim that O’Connor is against the human society and puts the hope of human redemption on God’s grace and religious belief (Folks 107).² In *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love*, guided by O’Connor’s commentary in letters, essays, and reviews, the ideas of the French philosopher and scientist Teilhard de Chardin, and the biblical texts which O’Connor draws upon, Richard Giannone argues that the God O’Connor portrays is a violent one who often imposes on the mortal a holy siege of terror and brutality intended to secure total human surrender. Thus he concludes that O’Connor’s fiction evokes the despotic Jehovah of the Old Testament, whose love “cuts like a cold wind” (153).

Another aspect that has been frequently discussed by the critics about O’Connor from religious perspective is her characterization of

1 Bleikasten argues that “Flannery O’Connor was returning not to the Catholic tradition but to the evangelical Protestantism of the Reformation and the seventeenth century, a Protestantism whose lineal, if shrunken, descendants were the backwoods prophets of the modern South” (qtd. in Milder 802-804).

2 They conclude that from within the tradition of classical-Christian thought, O’Connor views human nature and human society as innately corrupt, permeated with human selfishness, ignorance, and destructiveness, and believes that within this earthly wasteland, human systems of ethics are ultimately ineffectual. Human society can approach an ethical condition only through the redemption of individuals. They argue that O’Connor is skeptical concerning humanistic theories of ethics. She privileges other figures who undertake a vocation of the so-called prophecy that involves an unabashed assertion of self as an agent of divine will.